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Beyond Bandwagoning: Small State Agency and Proactive Alignment in Emerging Multipolarity

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Abstract

Classical small state theory holds that states unable to secure themselves must either balance against a threatening power or bandwagon with a dominant protector. This dichotomy does not fit the behaviour of Central and Eastern European (CEE) states since 2022. Drawing on a structured comparison of Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states, set against a negative case (Georgia before 2008), this article develops the concept of proactive alignment: a strategy in which a small state actively invests in reshaping the security architecture around it rather than merely responding to structural pressure. Proactive alignment rests on three interconnected practices: anchoring, which embeds a major power through permanent physical and institutional infrastructure; norm building, which promotes alliance-wide spending and defence standards; and coalition structuring, which aggregates small-state influence through regional formats. Emerging multipolarity, the article argues, does not weaken small-state agency; it produces a specific structural condition — the credible but uncertain commitment of the dominant ally — that makes proactive strategies both necessary and possible. Three conditions determine when this logic, rather than balancing, bandwagoning, or hedging, should be expected to operate: existential threat perception, a precedent of allied abandonment, and sufficient material capacity. The article proposes a third small-state posture beyond the balancing/bandwagoning dyad, grounded in the credible-commitment and costly-signalling literatures. Empirically it is a theory-building exercise: the case comparison and negative case illustrate the concept's plausibility and specify the conditions under which it should and should not apply, not test it statistically. The cases suggest, without proving, that small states can act as producers as well as consumers of the international security orders they inhabit.

1. Introduction

Something unusual is happening in Central and Eastern Europe. Poland has committed over $100 billion to military modernisation since 2022, ordering 360 K2 battle tanks from South Korea, 32 F-35 fighter jets, and 250 M1A2 Abrams tanks from the United States — all while pressing Washington for a permanent military base on its territory (NATO, 2025; Notes from Poland, 2025). Romania has begun constructing what will become the largest NATO base in Europe at Mihail Kogălniceanu, covering 2,800 hectares at a cost of €2.5 billion — an investment initiated and financed by the Romanian government, not mandated by the Alliance (Balkan Insight, 2024). In January 2024, the defence ministers of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania jointly announced the Baltic Defence Line: a network of bunkers, anti-tank obstacles, and fortifications running along their borders with Russia and Belarus, a project complemented in December 2025 by the formal withdrawal of all three states from the Ottawa Convention on anti-personnel mines (Estonian Centre for Defence Investments, 2024; MAG International, 2025).

These behaviours do not fit neatly into the theoretical vocabulary available in classical small state studies. Bandwagoning — aligning with the source of danger to avoid destruction — does not describe what these states are doing; they are fortifying against Russia, not accommodating it. Balancing — aggregating capabilities to counter a threatening power — comes closer, but cannot explain why states already protected by the world's most powerful military alliance would invest this massively in

independent capabilities, nor why they would spend political and financial capital expanding American presence rather than simply relying on existing NATO commitments. Hedging — ambiguating alignment to preserve flexibility — is the mirror opposite: these states are staking their security explicitly on the United States and NATO, deliberately foreclosing the ambiguity hedging requires (Lim & Cooper, 2015; Kuik, 2021).

This article argues that the behaviour of CEE states reflects a distinct strategic logic existing theory has not adequately conceptualised: proactive alignment, a strategy by which a small state actively invests in shaping the physical, institutional, and normative conditions that determine whether its major-power ally remains committed, rather than passively responding to the distribution of power or threat. None of the three classical postures capture it: bandwagoning would mean accommodating the threat, not arming massively against it; balancing comes closer but aims to counterbalance the ally rather than embed it more deeply; hedging depends on preserving ambiguity these states are deliberately foreclosing. Shelter-seeking is the closest cognate concept, but shelter theory describes finding protection that already exists, where proactive alignment describes building it.

The argument is developed through a research design with three components. First, the theoretical framework draws not only on the small state literature but on the credible-commitment, costly-signalling, and ontological-security literatures, which supply causal mechanisms for why anchoring, norm building, and coalition structuring should reduce abandonment risk. Second, the empirical analysis pairs a positive-case comparison of Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states with a negative case — Georgia's failed anchoring attempt before 2008 — chosen to probe whether the enabling conditions specified by the theory actually distinguish successful proactive alignment from unsuccessful imitation. Third, the article engages recent, closely adjacent scholarship, including a study that independently arrives at the term “anchoring” to describe similar Black Sea dynamics (Lechner, 2025), to show that the gap identified here is not an artefact of an incomplete literature review but one other scholars have also begun to notice.

Together, these three elements anchor the concept in causal mechanisms rather than in a label applied after the fact to whatever CEE states happen to do. The claim that follows is simple: a small state facing an existential threat, a memory of past abandonment, and sufficient capacity need not wait passively on an uncertain guarantor; it can act to make that guarantor's commitment more credible, turning a structural vulnerability into leverage over the alliance on which its survival depends. What follows develops that claim, tests it against the case material, and sets out the limits of what that material can show.

2. Classical Small State Theory and Its Adjacent Literatures

2.1 The Foundational Framework

The systematic study of small states begins with the recognition that size and material capability generate structural vulnerabilities that constrain foreign policy choices. Rothstein (1968) offered the canonical definition: a small power is "a state which recognizes that it cannot obtain security primarily by the use of its own capabilities, and which recognizes that it must rely fundamentally on the aid of other states, institutions, processes or developments to do so" (p. 29). The definition is relational and perceptual rather than purely material, but it also inscribes passivity into the concept itself: agency — the capacity to shape rather than merely respond to the environment — is structurally crowded out.

Vital (1967) argued that size, resource endowment, economic development, geography, and military capacity render a small state either "resistant or vulnerable" and either "active or passive" (p. 9), yet his analysis ultimately reinforced the structural determinism it sought to qualify. The literature's implicit prescription — that small states should pursue low-profile diplomacy and non-provocative postures — followed directly from this vulnerability-centred ontology (Keohane, 1969).

Keohane's (1969) "Lilliputians' dilemmas" captured the paradox that small states had gained visibility through multilateral forums even as military asymmetry widened, but his definition of a small power as one whose "leaders consider that it can never, acting alone or in a small group, make a significant impact on the system" (p. 296) precludes by construction the possibility that a small state could seek to reshape the system. East's (1973) later comparative test found the relationship between size and foreign policy behaviour far weaker than structural theory implied — an early signal, not fully absorbed for a generation, that material smallness alone under-determines strategic conduct.

Katzenstein (1985) added an economic dimension: exposed to market forces they could not control, Western European small states developed "democratic corporatism," adaptive institutional bargains rather than passivity. That logic — vulnerability as a spur to creative response — is directly relevant to the security domain, but the transfer was never made in the original literature.

2.2 Alliance Theory and the Balancing–Bandwagoning Debate

The structural realist tradition, inaugurated by Waltz's (1979) Theory of International Politics, provides the systemic framework within which small-state security choices are most often theorised: anarchy compels states toward self-help and balance-of-power outcomes, since bandwagoning with the strongest power risks domination.

Walt (1987) refined this by shifting the unit of analysis from power to threat: states form alliances against the most threatening actor, not the most powerful one, and bandwagoning becomes more likely the weaker the state, since weak states have little to add to a balancing coalition and much to gain from accommodation. This captures aspects of Cold War CEE behaviour, but not why the same states, now embedded in the most powerful alliance in history, pursue what amounts to extreme balancing rather than free-riding. Mowle and Sacko's (2007) account of unipolarity "laundering" small-state

bandwagoning through NATO membership fits the pre-2022 baseline, but by the authors' own logic this mechanism should weaken, not intensify, as unipolarity erodes — the opposite of the observed trend.

Schweller's (1994) "bandwagoning for profit" opened conceptual space for alignment motivated by gain rather than fear, but retains classical theory's fundamental passivity: the state responds to the distribution of power rather than reshaping it. Carter's (2022) large-N re-examination finds only weak, inconsistent support for pure bandwagoning once alliance membership and regime type are controlled for — evidence that the anomaly analysed here is not idiosyncratic.

Mearsheimer's (2001) offensive realism radicalises the structural argument: great powers relentlessly maximise relative power because only hegemony guarantees survival. Small states feature mainly as objects of great-power competition, with limited scope for independent agency.

2.3 Beyond Neorealism: Shelter, Hedging, Entrapment, and Role

The post-Cold War literature diversified the theoretical toolkit for analysing small states, moving beyond the balancing/bandwagoning binary without arriving at a fully agentive framework. Hey (2003) documented that small states do not behave alike even under similar structural pressures, from active multilateral engagement to "low profile" postures, though the theoretical explanation for that variation remained underdeveloped.

Thorhallsson's (2019) Shelter Theory is the most systematic recent framework: small states seek "shelter" from larger powers or international organisations, which ameliorates political, economic, and societal vulnerabilities. Bailes, Thayer, and Thorhallsson (2016) make explicit that this bargain is asymmetric — small states "have to bear a high cost and benefit disproportionately," in a relationship "neither based solely on subordination or annexation nor on equality or autonomy" (Vaicekauskaitė, 2017). That even successful shelter-seeking is costly is the premise proactive alignment builds upon, but shelter theory in its classical form remains reactive: the small state seeks pre-existing shelter rather than constructing the conditions for shelter to be reliable and permanent. Pedersen (2023) refined the framework around the costs of entrapment and abandonment, but the foundational passivity remains.

Hedging theory supplies the sharpest conceptual foil to proactive alignment. Kuik's (2008) foundational typology defines hedging as insurance-seeking under high uncertainty — indirect balancing, dominance denial, economic pragmatism, binding engagement, and limited bandwagoning combined so that no single posture forecloses future options; Kuik's (2021) small-state refinement makes explicit that hedging is rational because it preserves ambiguity when the costs of committing are high and reversible. Judged against this definition, the CEE cases below are not hedges: a state that withdraws from a global arms-control treaty, commits to spending five percent of GDP on defence, and campaigns publicly for a permanent foreign base has eliminated ambiguity, not preserved it. Describing this as "hedging toward NATO" stretches the term past its own definition; it belongs to a different strategic family, oriented toward irreversibility rather than flexibility.

On entrapment, Kim (2011) showed empirically that alliances "entangle but seldom entrap" — junior allies rarely succeed in dragging reluctant patrons into unwanted wars. Banka's (2025) direct test on the Baltic states goes further, finding that the narrative of Baltic allies as entrapment-prone "does not hold up to empirical scrutiny." This matters directly here: if anchoring were simply a sophisticated attempt to manufacture entrapment, the concept would collapse into an existing, well-established pathology. Banka's finding lets the article specify that anchoring is oriented toward reducing abandonment risk without correspondingly raising entrapment risk — a claim testable independently of its success in deterring Russia.

The constructivist tradition adds further dimensions. Wehner and Thies (2014) showed that role theory can explain variation in small-state foreign policy through the cognitive roles leaders use to define their state's function; Thies (2009) showed these roles are socially constituted rather than structurally fixed, so states can actively pursue role redefinition. Pedersen and Reykers (2020) extend this empirically: small allies frequently over-contribute to coalition operations to accumulate reputational capital with a patron, a status-seeking mechanism that likely reinforces the anchoring and norm-building practices specified below. The ontological security literature (Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008) shows that states pursue stable self-identities through consistent relational routines; Mohammadpour and Saeidabadi (2023) demonstrate this even for materially secure states, pre-empting the objection that CEE anchoring is simply deterrence relabelled.

2.4 The Theoretical Gap

Despite these advances, a gap remains. The existing literature explains why small states join alliances (Rothstein, 1968; Walt, 1987), how they hedge under uncertainty (Kuik, 2008, 2021), how they specialise their foreign policies (Hey, 2003; Weiss & Fernandes, 2025), and why they value ontologically stable relationships with patrons (Thorhallsson, 2019; Mitzen, 2006; Mohammadpour & Saeidabadi, 2023). It cannot explain why some small states facing existential threats would invest massively in sovereign military capabilities despite alliance membership, spend political capital creating the structural conditions for expanded patron presence rather than relying on existing commitments, and act as initiators rather than consumers of alliance-wide security norms. Palavenis's (2025) test of alliance theory, shelter theory, and free-riding theory against the Baltic host-nation record is instructive: free-riding theory is simply "not relevant" once post-2022 Baltic spending is accounted for, and shelter theory explains "only partially" the observed cooperation. His conclusion, reached with different cases and data, points the same way as the argument here: existing frameworks capture parts of CEE behaviour but not the whole, and the pattern demands a new conceptual label.

The width of this gap is also suggested by research that did not set out to locate it. Section 2.2 already noted that Carter's (2022) large-N re-examination finds only weak support for pure bandwagoning, and that Mowle and Sacko's (2007) own logic implies their "laundered" bandwagoning mechanism should weaken, not strengthen, as unipolarity gives way to multipolarity. Kacziba and Hasan's (2022) study of "adaptive diplomacy" on the EU's eastern flank adds a third data point: analysing different cases with a different vocabulary, they find that small states blend balancing, bandwagoning, and hedging

simultaneously rather than choosing among them, suggesting the trichotomy is straining as an explanatory device. None of these three studies was designed to test the argument made here; together, though, they make it harder to treat the CEE pattern as a one-off anomaly.

A related, more specific overlap is developed fully in Section 5.2: Lechner (2025), working on Romanian Black Sea policy through a neoclassical realist lens quite different from the literature engaged here, uses the word “anchoring” for much the same pattern treated below as one of proactive alignment's three constitutive practices — a modest but useful corroborating observation, not independent proof.

Closing this gap is therefore not simply a matter of supplying a new label for the residual behaviour that balancing, bandwagoning, hedging, and shelter-seeking leave unexplained. As Section 3 develops, it requires an explicit synthesis of mechanisms — credible-commitment logic, costly signalling, and identity-based ontological security — that the existing literature addresses only separately, each accounting for part of the pattern examined here but none accounting for the whole.

3. Proactive Alignment: A Theoretical Framework

3.1 Multipolarity as a Structural Condition for Agency

The existing literature on small states was largely constructed during the Cold War bipolar order or the post-Cold War unipolar interlude. Unipolarity offered small states little strategic agency: the United States was omnipresent, the alliance framework settled, and the principal CEE challenge was accession to NATO and the EU, not persuading a wavering hegemon to stay engaged. Bipolarity constrained agency even more, wedging small states between two competing hegemonic orders.

Emerging multipolarity changes this calculus. As the Munich Security Report (2025) documents, the international system is moving toward co-existing ordering poles that do not agree on shared rules: a Russian-led revisionist order in Eurasia, a Chinese-led order in East Asia, and a Western liberal order whose leading power is increasingly selective in its commitments. The United States under both Republican and Democratic administrations has signalled a desire to reduce its European engagement and refocus on the Indo-Pacific (OSW Centre for Eastern Studies, 2025). Acharya, Estevadeordal, and Goodman’s (2023) empirical measure of “interaction capacity” corroborates this trajectory, finding a systemic shift away from U.S.-centred leadership toward a more de-centred, “multiplex” distribution of order-making capacity, and Richmond and Pogodda (2025) frame the same shift as a move from “alignment under hegemony” to “multipolar misalignment.” This produces a committed but credibly uncertain hegemon: the United States remains the most powerful actor and retains formal commitments to European allies, but the reliability of those commitments has become genuinely uncertain in ways not true of the Cold War or immediate post-Cold War period.

This structural condition generates incentives for small-state agency absent in earlier periods. A small state facing an existential threat whose principal guarantor is becoming selectively engaged faces a stark choice: accept the uncertainty passively (classic shelter-seeking) or invest actively in reducing it

(proactive alignment); the latter becomes more rational as the cost of abandonment becomes more existential. This is the logic formalised in the credible-commitment literature: Benson and Smith (2023) show alliance value is systematically discounted whenever a partner cannot bind its own future behaviour, and Smith (2024) extends this to explain why commitment ambiguity contributed to the failure of deterrence before Russia's 2022 invasion. Johnson and Joiner (2021) further show that extended-deterrence credibility, eroded by shifts in relative power, can be partially restored through structural mechanisms — geographic proximity, basing arrangements, institutional design — that raise the cost of non-intervention. Anchoring, developed below, is the small-state-driven construction of exactly these credibility-restoring structures.

At the same time, the small state's value to the uncertain hegemon increases in a multipolar environment: a retrenching power needs reliable, capable partners more than free-riders on collective goods. Multipolarity thus creates a two-sided dynamic, heightening abandonment risk while simultaneously creating opportunities for small states to raise their strategic value by investing in the alliance.

3.2 The Concept of Proactive Alignment

Proactive alignment is defined here as a strategic posture in which a small state, facing a credible but uncertain commitment from a major power ally, actively invests in reshaping the physical, institutional, and normative conditions that determine whether that ally remains engaged. Proactive alignment is constituted by three interconnected practices:

Anchoring refers to the creation of permanent physical and institutional infrastructure that increases the major power's sunk costs in the alliance relationship. Bases, pre-positioned equipment, command structures, and bilateral security agreements that require ongoing American or NATO investment create what might be called structural lock-in: the harder it is to disengage without significant operational, financial, and reputational costs, the more credible the commitment becomes. Anchoring transforms a nominal commitment into an embedded one. Béraud-Sudreau and Schmitt (2024) supply a defence-economics mechanism for this practice: liberal, asymmetric alliances such as NATO structurally incentivise small-state investment in interoperable capability, because interoperability requirements bind small-state procurement choices to the patron's equipment standards, creating a durable, costly-to-reverse dependency of the kind anchoring theory predicts.

Norm building refers to the active promotion of alliance-wide standards — particularly defence spending targets, burden-sharing norms, and threat assessment frameworks — that raise the bar for all allies and position the proactive aligner as a model of responsible membership. By consistently exceeding NATO's 2% GDP spending benchmark and publicly advocating for higher thresholds, small states on the eastern flank force the question of burden-sharing onto the alliance agenda in ways that simultaneously legitimise their own investments and delegitimise free-riding by wealthier Western allies. Fidelis's (2026) signalling model gives this practice an explicit mechanism: defence spending, in his account, functions as a costly signal directed simultaneously at the anchor state (conveying reliability), at alliance peers

(conveying seriousness), and at domestic constituencies (conveying resolve). Norm building is, on this reading, the public, comparative deployment of that signal to reshape the alliance's collective standard of appropriate behaviour, not merely an individual state's signalling act.

Coalition structuring refers to the aggregation of small state influence through regional formats that give the proactive aligner's preferences greater weight in alliance decision-making than any single small state could achieve alone. By constructing and leading coalitions of like-minded allies, small states transform individual vulnerability into collective leverage.

A reputational logic reinforces these three practices without amounting to a fourth: Pedersen and Reykers's (2020) finding that small allies over-contribute to coalition operations to accumulate reputational capital with a patron, and Wehner's (2026) analysis of status narration in populist foreign policy, together suggest that anchoring, norm building, and coalition structuring each also signal a claimed identity — indispensable ally, responsible alliance member, regional leader — that the proactive aligner seeks recognised by patron and peers alike. This logic is reinforcing rather than constitutive: unlike the three practices, it does not by itself generate the structures that raise the hegemon's cost of disengagement.

3.3 Distinguishing Proactive Alignment from Cognate Concepts

Proactive alignment must be distinguished from five conceptually adjacent strategies. First, it differs from classic bandwagoning (Walt, 1987; Schweller, 1994), which involves alignment to avoid punishment from or profit from the dominant power. Proactive alignment does not change the direction of alignment — CEE states have been aligned with NATO for decades — but the intensity and agency with which they pursue it, deepening and institutionalising a choice already made to make it irreversible for the major power. This also separates it from the "offensive bandwagoning" concept Jureńczyk (2022) applies to Polish-American relations under the first Trump administration, which describes deepening asymmetric dependence for ideological reasons rather than acting on the patron's own structural incentives.

Second, it differs from hedging (Lim & Cooper, 2015; Kuik, 2008, 2021): hedging preserves strategic ambiguity to maintain optionality, while proactive alignment deliberately eliminates ambiguity through costly signalling. The Baltic states' withdrawal from the Ottawa Treaty, Poland's five-percent-of-GDP defence budget, and Romania's €2.5 billion base construction are costly, highly visible, and strategically unambiguous — they foreclose optionality rather than preserving it.

Third, it differs from Thorhallsson's (2019) shelter-seeking, and the closely related alliance-shelter framework (Bailes, Thayer, & Thorhallsson, 2016), in the dimension of agency: shelter theory conceptualises the small state as seeking accommodation within pre-existing structures, at a cost asymmetrically borne by the small state, whereas proactive alignment involves the active construction and modification of those structures — the difference between finding shelter and building it.

Fourth, it differs from foreign policy specialisation (Weiss & Fernandes, 2025) in scope: specialisation concentrates diplomatic resources on a chosen region or theme, whereas proactive alignment is a security-architecture strategy affecting the state's entire military and political posture.

Fifth, it differs from entrapment-seeking (Kim, 2011; Banka, 2025). A small state pursuing entrapment would manufacture crises or commitments that bind the patron into unwanted military action; anchoring instead aims to bind the patron's peacetime commitment — basing, procurement, standing infrastructure — without altering its decision calculus in an actual crisis. Banka's (2025) finding that Baltic behaviour does not exhibit entrapment dynamics supports this reading, though it rests on a single study and should be treated as suggestive rather than conclusive.

3.4 Enabling Conditions

Proactive alignment does not emerge in all small states that face external threats. Three enabling conditions appear necessary. First, existential threat perception: the threatening actor must be perceived as posing a genuine challenge to sovereignty or survival, not merely to interests; the more existential the threat, the higher the rational maximum investment in securing the ally's commitment, since the cost of abandonment is total rather than partial. Second, abandonment precedent: proactive alignment becomes more likely where small states have direct historical or recent experience of allied abandonment or defection — 1938, 1939, and the 2021 US withdrawal from Afghanistan are reference points that make CEE leaders unwilling to rely on assurances alone. Third, sufficient material capacity: the Baltic states, Poland, and Romania all have economies and institutional capacities large enough to sustain the investment proactive alignment demands. Not all threatened small states have these resources, which explains why proactive alignment is a strategy of relatively prosperous threatened small states, not a universal response. Section 6 tests this directly through the negative case of Georgia, whose material capacity in 2008 fell well short of the threshold the theory specifies.

3.5 Testable Propositions and Scope

To move beyond a purely descriptive typology, the framework yields four propositions that can, in principle, be evaluated against evidence independent of the cases used to generate the theory. **Proposition 1**: anchoring intensity (basing agreements, permanent infrastructure spending, procurement interoperability with the patron's equipment standards) should correlate positively with existential threat perception and abandonment precedent, and negatively with material capacity constraints. **Proposition 2**: states engaged in anchoring should show defence-spending patterns consistent with costly signalling — concentrated in visible, hard-to-reverse capital investment rather than recurrent costs — as predicted by Fidelis (2026) and by the equipment-share data reported for Poland and Romania. **Proposition 3**: coalition structuring should appear as regional formats whose membership tracks shared threat perception rather than shared material capability, distinguishing it from purely capability-pooling arrangements. **Proposition 4**, following from the Banka (2025) distinction above, is scope-limiting: proactive alignment should not correlate with entrapment-risk indicators even as it correlates with anchoring intensity; a positive correlation between the two would falsify the claim that they are

analytically and empirically distinct. These propositions are not tested exhaustively here — that would require a large-N design beyond a structured comparison of three cases and one negative case — but specifying them in advance guards against defining “proactive alignment” so loosely that it could not, even in principle, be shown wrong. The case material below checks them for basic plausibility; it cannot substitute for that larger test.

3.6 The Research Model

Figure 1 consolidates Sections 3.1 through 3.5 into a single research model, tracing the causal chain from the structural context of emerging multipolarity, through the three jointly necessary scope conditions (Section 3.4), into the three constitutive practices and the distinct causal mechanism each draws on (credible-commitment and sunk-cost logic for anchoring, costly-signalling theory for norm building, aggregated-leverage and status-seeking logic for coalition structuring), to the predicted outcome in Propositions 1–3 and the Proposition 4 boundary condition, closing with the reinforcing loop through which successful anchoring raises a small state’s strategic value to the hegemon. The five discriminant boundaries of Section 3.3 serve as a visual check against conceptual overreach: a case that better fits bandwagoning, hedging, shelter-seeking, entrapment-seeking, or foreign policy specialisation than it fits this model falls outside the theory’s scope by design.

4. Research Design

This section states plainly what kind of empirical exercise follows, since the propositions in Section 3.5 could otherwise be mistaken for hypotheses this design tests. The analysis is a theory-building exercise: a structured, focused comparison (George & Bennett, 2005) used to establish that proactive alignment is a coherent, empirically identifiable pattern and to probe, not confirm, its scope conditions. It proceeds through three most-likely cases — Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states — selected because each satisfies the three enabling conditions specified in Section 3.4 while varying in the configuration of anchoring, norm building, and coalition-structuring practices pursued: Poland's anchoring centres on bilateral basing and procurement dependency, Romania's on unilaterally financed infrastructure and chokepoint control, and the Baltic states' on territorial fortification and treaty exit — three different instruments plausibly serving the same structural function.

Each case is analysed against indicators derived from Section 3.5: basing and infrastructure agreements and their financing source; defence expenditure as a share of GDP and its allocation between equipment and recurrent costs; procurement interoperability with the patron’s equipment standards; participation in and leadership of regional security formats; and public advocacy for alliance-wide norms. Data are drawn from official NATO expenditure statistics (NATO, 2025), national defence ministry announcements, treaty texts, and the literature identified in Section 2, including Palavenis (2025) and Lechner (2025), used as a cross-check on the Baltic and Romanian coding rather than as primary evidence generated by this article.

The design also incorporates a negative case, Georgia prior to 2008, which satisfies two of the three enabling conditions — existential threat perception and abandonment precedent — while failing the third,

material capacity. Comparing a positive case set against a negative case that varies on the theorised scope condition guards against the tautology risk flagged in Section 7.4: without a case where anchoring was attempted but did not produce durable commitment, the theory would be unfalsifiable by construction. The Georgia comparison is necessarily more limited in evidentiary depth than the three primary cases and is used to test the material-capacity scope condition specifically, not to generalise about anchoring in the Caucasus.

5. Proactive Alignment in Practice: Three Case Studies

This section examines Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states through the three constitutive practices, using the structured focused comparison specified in Section 4.

5.1 Poland: The Architecture of Indispensability

Poland offers perhaps the clearest illustration of proactive alignment in operation. Since 2022, Warsaw has embarked on what Polish officials describe as the largest rearmament programme in Europe since the Second World War, investing far beyond what NATO membership structurally requires or a simple threat-response logic would predict. Reeves's (2021) analysis of Poland's 2020 National Security Strategy situates this within a longer strategic-cultural continuity rather than a sudden post-2022 reaction: Polish strategic culture has, across governments of different ideological orientation, consistently regarded Russia as an existential threat and Euro-Atlantic integration as the only adequate response. This continuity matters because it indicates that anchoring in the Polish case is a durable strategic orientation rather than an artefact of one government's preferences.

In terms of anchoring, Poland has pursued the institutionalisation of American military presence with extraordinary persistence. The campaign for a permanent US military base — initially floated by President Duda in 2018 under the label "Fort Trump," with a $2 billion offer to the United States (Newsweek, 2018) — represents the clearest expression of anchoring logic: not merely rotational troop presence, but a permanent installation whose dismantling would require explicit political decisions. Though not yet formally established, Poland secured the permanent stationing of the V Corps headquarters in Poznań in 2022, the first US Army Corps headquarters in Europe, and continues to press for expanded American presence (Brussels Signal, 2026). Poland also committed to purchasing 32 F-35 stealth fighters and 250 M1A2 Abrams tanks from the United States, creating deep interoperability dependencies (Poland Defense Industry Report, 2025) — not militarily optimal in isolation, since comparable South Korean equipment costs less, but serving the anchoring function by creating supply chains, maintenance networks, and doctrinal dependencies linking the Polish military to its American counterpart, exactly the incentive structure Béraud-Sudreau and Schmitt (2024) identify as characteristic of liberal, asymmetric alliances.

In norm building, Poland has positioned itself as the standard-bearer of burden-sharing responsibility within the Alliance. Poland's defence expenditure reached 4.48% of GDP in 2025, the highest in the

alliance, with the Defence Minister publicly setting a target of 5% for 2026, a figure unprecedented in peacetime NATO history (NATO, 2025; Reuters, 2025). Poland also devotes 54.4% of its defence budget to equipment acquisition, the highest share in NATO, signalling genuine capability building rather than recurrent costs (NATO, 2025), consistent with Fidelis's (2026) prediction that costly signalling concentrates in visible capital investment. By consistently outspending every other NATO member, Poland generates reputational pressure on Western European allies who fall short of the 2% threshold, delegitimising accusations that Eastern European members free-ride on American power.

For coalition structuring, Poland has been the principal architect of the Bucharest Nine (B9) format, a consultative mechanism established in 2015 with Romania that brings together nine Central and Eastern European NATO members to coordinate positions on eastern flank security ahead of NATO summits (German Marshall Fund, 2024). Lewkowicz's (2020) and Crețu's (2018) accounts of the parallel Three Seas Initiative situate both formats within a longer regional tradition, describing them as a revival of the interwar Intermarium concept of Central European coordination — a genealogy that gives Polish-led coalition structuring a deeper historical basis than its 2015 founding date suggests. The B9 includes the top four defence spenders in NATO by GDP share, and its joint statements have progressively shifted the alliance's strategic centre of gravity eastward: the May 2026 Bucharest B9 summit endorsed a "NATO 3.0" strategy describing Russia as the Alliance's "most significant, long-term and direct threat" (Romania Insider, 2026). Poland's "East Shield" programme, launched alongside the Baltic Defence Line, creates joint CEE infrastructure for denial and deterrence that further institutionalises the eastern flank as a coherent strategic sub-system within NATO (Atlantic Council, 2024).

5.2 Romania: The Strategic Value of Infrastructure

Romania's proactive alignment strategy follows a different but structurally equivalent logic. Whereas Poland's approach centres on rearmament and bilateral anchoring of American ground forces, Romania leverages geography and physical infrastructure to establish itself as the indispensable hub of NATO's southeastern flank. Lechner's (2025) neoclassical realist analysis of Romanian Black Sea policy uses the term "anchoring" for much the same strategy, arrived at through a different theoretical apparatus and comparative frame (Romania–Turkey); this article treats it as one of three constitutive, generalisable practices derived from the credible-commitment literature, where Lechner treats it as country-specific. Lechner's treatment of Turkey's contrasting "regional ownership" doctrine — limiting rather than encouraging extra-regional NATO presence in the Black Sea despite a materially similar environment, a lower threat perception, and a different domestic consensus — supports the claim that enabling conditions, not geographic exposure alone, drive the choice of strategy (Section 3.4).

The centrepiece of Romania's anchoring strategy is the transformation of Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base near Constanța into what will be the largest NATO military installation in Europe: approximately 2,800 hectares, financed entirely by the Romanian government at a cost of €2.5 billion over twenty years (Balkan Insight, 2024; War Zone, 2024), and accommodating up to 10,000 NATO personnel and their families upon completion. Critically, this is an investment chosen by Romania, not a facility imposed by NATO planning: Romania is creating physical facts on the ground that will make it extraordinarily difficult

for any future American administration to reduce its commitment without explicitly abandoning a multi-billion-euro facility. Romania also hosts the Aegis Ashore ballistic missile defence facility at Deveselu, operational since 2016, further embedding Romania into American strategic architecture at the level of nuclear deterrence planning.

Romania's norm building operates through a different mechanism than Poland's: rather than spending records, Romania has invested in institutional entrepreneurship, co-founding and sustaining the B9 format, which has served as a key vehicle for shifting NATO's threat assessment and resource allocation priorities. Romania's defence spending reached 2.5% of GDP as of 2025 (NATO, 2025), above the Alliance benchmark, and the Ministry of National Defence has consistently aligned Romania with the "high ambition" group on eastern flank reinforcement.

On coalition structuring, Romania's role as co-founder of B9 alongside Poland is the most visible expression, alongside bilateral security cooperation with the United States through the US Army Garrison Black Sea umbrella and active participation in the Three Seas Initiative, an infrastructure and energy connectivity format linking twelve CEE EU members from the Baltic to the Adriatic and Black Seas — primarily economic, but building the connectivity infrastructure on which military logistics depend.

5.3 The Baltic States: Deterrence by Denial and Normative Exit

The Baltic states — Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — represent the most radical expression of proactive alignment, driven by the smallest strategic depth of any NATO member, the most immediate historical experience of Soviet occupation, and the highest threat perception in the alliance. Palavenis's (2025) examination of the enhanced Forward Presence host-nation/framework-nation nexus, starting from alliance-shelter and free-riding theory rather than the framework developed here, reaches a compatible conclusion: free-riding theory is “not relevant” to the Baltic case once post-2022 defence spending is accounted for, and shelter theory explains the observed UK–Estonia and Germany–Lithuania cooperation patterns only partially. As with Palavenis's Baltic-wide finding noted in Section 2.4, this is one study rather than confirmation, but it points the same way: existing small-state frameworks under-explain Baltic behaviour.

Their strategy has increasingly moved beyond conventional alignment toward deterrence by denial: not merely deterring attack through the prospect of costly retaliation, but making physical occupation of their territory sufficiently costly to be prohibitive even against a determined adversary.

The centrepiece of anchoring in the Baltic case is the Baltic Defence Line, announced on 19 January 2024 by the Defence Ministers of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (Estonian Centre for Defence Investments, 2024): a layered system of fortifications along the eastern borders of all three states with Russia and Belarus. Estonia plans 600 concrete bunkers for defence force units and volunteer corps; Latvia has allocated €303 million over five years for anti-tank ditches, pre-positioned ammunition depots, and dragon's teeth obstacles (Latvian Ministry of Defence, 2024); Lithuania's segment extends up to 50

kilometres from the frontier. Estonia's parallel "East Shield" initiative deliberately echoes Poland's terminology, signalling a coherent regional security architecture rather than three separate national responses.

This represents anchoring of a different type than basing agreements: the Baltic states anchor the alliance through infrastructure that NATO forces would need to defend, and that abandonment would therefore render militarily meaningless. Vaicekauskaitė's (2017) description of the small-state–patron relationship as “neither subordination nor equality” captures the resulting bargain: an ally that has helped finance, train for, and operationally integrate its forces with the Baltic Defence Line cannot simply declare non-engagement without admitting the worthlessness of that integration.

The norm-building dimension is most dramatically illustrated by the decision, announced on 18 March 2025, of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland to withdraw from the 1997 Ottawa Convention on Anti-Personnel Mines, citing "the declining security situation in Europe" and the need to "provide our defence forces flexibility and freedom of choice to potentially use new weapons systems" (Lithuanian Ministry of National Defence, 2025; MAG International, 2025); withdrawal was completed on 27 December 2025 (Volterra Fietta, 2025). By exiting a global humanitarian treaty most of the international community regards as foundational, Baltic and Polish officials made an explicit normative statement about the hierarchy of security obligations in existential threat environments.

For coalition structuring, the Baltic states have invested heavily in bilateral security formats with Nordic partners, the United Kingdom, Germany, and the United States through the multinational enhanced Forward Presence battlegroup arrangements. The Baltic Defence Line itself is a trilateral structure transforming three individually tiny defence spaces into a coherent regional system, and the regular invocation of "NATO’s eastern flank" as a unified strategic concept rather than three separate small-state problems is itself a norm-building and coalition-structuring investment.

6. A Negative Case: Georgia and the Limits of Attempted Anchoring

The three cases above were selected because they satisfy all three enabling conditions specified in Section 3.4. A theory that only ever examines cases satisfying its own scope conditions risks the tautology identified in Section 7.4: if proactive alignment is defined as successful small-state agency, finding it wherever small states have been effective merely confirms the definition without testing it. Georgia before 2008 provides a useful negative case because it satisfies two of the three conditions — existential threat perception and abandonment precedent — while diverging sharply on the third, material capacity.

Georgia’s pre-2008 foreign policy exhibited behaviours that, on the surface, resemble anchoring: intensive military cooperation with the United States, aspirations toward a NATO Membership Action Plan, and vocal advocacy for Western engagement in the Caucasus. Yet Georgia lacked the resources to translate this into the durable, sunk-cost infrastructure anchoring requires: it could not finance a Kogălniceanu-scale base, sustain NATO-benchmark spending over multiple budget cycles, or build

fortification infrastructure comparable to the Baltic Defence Line. Its 2008 war with Russia was precipitated by a crisis in South Ossetia in which Georgian military action outran both Georgian material capacity and the actual depth of American and NATO commitment — an outcome closer to entrapment risk than to anchoring, which Proposition 4 (Section 3.5) predicts should be observationally distinct from the CEE cases. Where Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states converted uncertainty about allied commitment into patient, resourced, multi-year infrastructure investment, Georgia's 2008 experience reflects an attempt to force clarification of an ambiguous commitment through crisis rather than sustained capability-building — a strategy closer to attempted entrapment than to proactive alignment, consistent with the theory's claim that material capacity is a binding scope condition.

The comparison should not be overstated: the Georgian case is analysed here at lower resolution than the three primary cases, and a fuller test would require the same structured, indicator-based coding applied in Section 4. What it does establish is that proactive alignment is not simply a redescription of any small state's attempt to secure a great-power commitment; it is a resource-intensive strategy unavailable below a material capacity threshold, and states lacking this capacity who attempt to force allied commitment through crisis or unilateral escalation face a materially different risk profile — closer to entrapment than to anchoring.

7. Discussion: Theoretical Implications and Limitations

7.1 What Proactive Alignment Adds to Small State Theory

The concept of proactive alignment makes four contributions. First, it establishes a conceptually distinct third posture in the small-state strategic repertoire, occupying the space between the passivity of bandwagoning and the counterproductive ambiguity of hedging (Kuik, 2008, 2021), opening a comparative research agenda: which small states adopt it, under what conditions, and with what effects.

Second, it challenges the structural determinism that pervades the small-state literature: the received view treats the international system as imposing constraints that leave small states minimal strategic choice, but the CEE cases suggest that structural uncertainty — the same feature of multipolarity that in standard accounts increases small-state vulnerability — can become a resource, as a state that understands why the hegemon's commitment is uncertain invests in reducing it, by building bases that create sunk costs, demonstrating capability, and constructing coalitions that raise the political cost of disengagement.

Third, the concept extends Katzenstein's (1985) insight from the economic to the security domain: just as economically exposed small states developed corporatist institutions to manage market vulnerability, security-exposed small states in a multipolar environment are developing strategic institutions — regional formats, unprecedented spending levels, deterrence-by-denial architectures — to manage alliance vulnerability. Vulnerability produces institutional creativity, not passivity.

Fourth, proactive alignment supplies a causal mechanism, grounded in the credible-commitment literature (Benson & Smith, 2023; Johnson & Joiner, 2021) and costly-signalling theory (Fidelis, 2026; Béraud-Sudreau & Schmitt, 2024), for why the three constitutive practices should reduce abandonment probability rather than simply asserting that they do: not only a new label for observed behaviour, but an account of the mechanism, expressed in propositions that could be tested against cases beyond those examined here.

7.2 Proactive Alignment, Middle Powers, and Order-Making

Proactive alignment also speaks to the broader debate about the future of the liberal international order, dominantly narrated as decline or contestation from without — by Russia, China, or revisionist middle powers (Bakumbayev, 2025). The CEE cases illustrate that small states embedded within the liberal order can function as order-makers as well as order-takers, shoring up the foundations of the order from which they benefit most. This aligns with Bakumbayev's (2025) argument that small states can act as order-makers, while extending it: proactive alignment operates in the presence of a credibly uncertain great power, arguably the more common and consequential condition, rather than in its absence. Richmond and Pogodda's (2025) distinction between hegemonic alignment and multipolar misalignment situates this within a wider literature: proactive alignment can be read as a small-state strategy for preventing multipolar misalignment by unilaterally supplying the coordination a weakening hegemon can no longer guarantee alone.

It is important, however, to distinguish proactive alignment from middle-power agency. Efstathopoulos (2023) and Hynd (2025) characterise middle-power agency as autonomous agenda-setting across multiple, often unrelated issue areas, oriented toward reshaping global governance institutions rather than a single alliance relationship. CEE proactive aligners exercise no comparable autonomy: their agency is expressed entirely inside, and in service of, a single alliance relationship, oriented toward preserving rather than reshaping the broader order. The comparison with Hassid and Matania's (2024) account of states ascending through civilian knowledge industries, or Jordan's niche diplomacy in mediation and water governance (World, 2026), sharpens the point: those pathways rest on specialised civilian capital deployed across diversified relationships, whereas proactive alignment rests on hard-security architecture-building concentrated in one existentially important relationship. The theoretical claim is correspondingly narrower: not that small states generally are becoming order-makers, but that a specific subset of threatened, resourced small states are becoming order-makers within their own alliance.

7.3 The Ontological Security Dimension

The ontological security literature also gains a new application. Mitzen (2006) and Steele (2008) showed that states pursue stable relational routines to anchor their identities; proactive alignment can be read as the security-architecture equivalent, converting a contingent, transactional relationship with an uncertain hegemon into a structural and routine one that provides both military deterrence and ontological

stability. Mohammadpour and Saeidabadi's (2023) finding that even the materially secure United Kingdom pursued relationship-routinisation with the United States for identity reasons, and Tsintsadze-Maass's (2025) argument that state "survival" is constructed through national narrative rather than given by material capability, together suggest this dimension is a driver operating alongside the material strategy, not a secondary rationalisation. The base at Mihail Kogălniceanu, the Baltic Defence Line, and the V Corps headquarters in Poznań are not merely military assets; they are relational structures giving their builders a stable international identity as "indispensable flank allies," consistent with Pedersen and Reykers' (2020) findings on small-state status-seeking.

7.4 Limitations and Scope Conditions

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the concept is derived from a regionally specific set of cases — CEE states facing a revisionist nuclear power, embedded in a Western alliance with an uncertain American commitment — and its generalisability is limited; small states elsewhere face different structural configurations and are unlikely to deploy the same strategy. The framework specifies enabling conditions precisely to avoid overgeneralisation, and the Georgia comparison illustrates the material-capacity condition binding even within the same region.

Second, proactive alignment carries strategic risks the concept as stated does not fully address. Massive investment in NATO infrastructure and exit from arms control treaties can be interpreted by Russia as escalatory rather than defensive, potentially contributing to spiral dynamics (Jervis, 1978; Snyder, 1984; Mitzen, 2006). The Baltic withdrawal from the Ottawa Convention drew precisely this criticism from humanitarian organisations and some Western European allies, who argued the normative damage outweighs the military benefit (CEPA, 2024). The framework describes a strategy; it does not evaluate whether that strategy ultimately increases or decreases security.

Third, a residual risk of circularity remains even after the Georgia negative case and the propositions in Section 3.5: because anchoring, norm building, and coalition structuring are partly defined by their intended function, a sceptical reader could still classify any costly small-state security investment as "anchoring" after the fact. The falsifiable claim that anchoring intensity should not correlate with entrapment-risk indicators is offered as a partial remedy, but future research applying the same coding scheme to cases not selected by the present author — ideally including failed attempts at proactive alignment despite adequate capacity — would strengthen the framework's claim to explanatory, rather than merely descriptive, status.

7.5 Applying the Model to the Case-Study Data

The propositions in Section 3.5 can be illustrated, if not fully tested, against the real expenditure data in Fig. 2. Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia occupy three of the four highest positions in the alliance by GDP share, with Estonia close behind, while several considerably wealthier members — Spain, Belgium, Luxembourg — remain clustered at the 2% floor in both years, consistent with Proposition 1's prediction that anchoring intensity tracks threat perception and abandonment precedent rather than wealth. Figure 3 maps the three constitutive practices onto the sourced indicators reported for the case studies

in Section 5. Poland's combination of the highest GDP share and the highest equipment share is the joint pattern Fidelis's (2026) signalling model predicts for Proposition 2; the Bucharest Nine's membership, spanning the alliance's highest and more modest spenders, tracks shared threat perception rather than capability, consistent with Proposition 3. Read together, the figures illustrate rather than statistically test the propositions — the case-selection caveat from Section 4 applies here as elsewhere — but they rule out the simplest rival account, in which eastern-flank investment is read as a generic response to wealth or size: Poland outspends Germany, the alliance's largest European economy, by nearly two to one on a GDP-share basis. Underlying figures, sources, and an extended discussion (including a data-quality note on Germany's 2025 figure) are provided in the Supplementary Material.

8. Conclusion

This article has argued that the behaviour of Central and Eastern European small states in the post-2022 security environment cannot be adequately explained by existing theoretical frameworks. The balancing/bandwagoning dichotomy, hedging theory, shelter theory, and entrapment theory each capture partial features of small-state strategic logic but none captures the full phenomenon: states simultaneously investing massively in sovereign military capacity, creating permanent physical infrastructure to embed their major-power ally, setting new alliance-wide spending norms, and building regional coalitions to amplify their collective influence. The concept of proactive alignment names this phenomenon, specifies its internal logic, grounds that logic in the credible-commitment and costly-signalling literatures, and tests its scope conditions against both a three-case positive comparison and a negative case.

The theoretical contribution is fourfold: a new posture in the small-state strategic repertoire distinct from hedging and entrapment-seeking; a challenge to the structural determinism of classical small-state theory, showing multipolar uncertainty can become a resource for agency rather than merely a constraint; a connection to broader IR debates about order-making, middle-power agency, and ontological security, positioning small states as potential contributors to international order rather than only passive recipients; and a set of testable propositions and a negative case that together reduce, without fully eliminating, the risk of tautology inherent in any framework built from cases selected because they fit it.

The empirical cases — Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states — collectively illustrate the three constitutive practices: anchoring through bases, fortifications, and procurement dependencies; norm building through spending precedents and arms control exits; and coalition structuring through regional formats whose genealogy (Lewkowicz, 2020; Crețu, 2018) extends further into the twentieth century than their formal 2015 founding dates suggest. Each case manifests these practices differently, reflecting national capacity, threat geography, and historical memory, but all three share the characteristic that distinguishes proactive from reactive small-state behaviour: they are not adapting to a security environment, they are trying to change it. The Georgia comparison shows that this capacity is not universally available even to similarly threatened small states, but depends on the material capacity the theory specifies as a binding scope condition.

Future research should address several open questions: whether proactive alignment effectively reduces the probability of major-power abandonment and through what causal mechanisms; whether the propositions in Section 3.5 hold against a larger sample of small states, including cases outside the CEE region, using the coding scheme proposed in Section 4; under what conditions it risks triggering escalation rather than deterrence; and whether there are analogues in other regions and periods — the Gulf states' relationship with the United States, or Finland and Sweden's accession diplomacy — or whether this is a specifically post-Cold War, threatened-democratic-small-state phenomenon. The answers will determine whether the concept generalises beyond the CEE context or remains a theoretically useful but geographically bounded tool.

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Data Availability Statement

This is a theory-building, qualitative study. All data supporting the analysis are publicly available secondary sources — official NATO and government publications, international organisation reports, treaty texts, and news media — cited in the reference list. No primary data were collected and no restrictions apply. The NATO/SIPRI defence-expenditure figures underlying Figures 2–3, with sources and a methodological note, are in the Supplementary Material (Supplementary Data File, defence_spending_data.xlsx).

Ethical Approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed Consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Author Contribution

This is a single-authored manuscript. Mihai Marcel Marcovici (M.M.M.) is responsible for all aspects of the work, including conceptualization, literature review, theory development, case selection and analysis, writing of the original draft, and revision and editing of the manuscript. M.M.M. has read and approved the final version of the manuscript and takes full responsibility for its content.

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Figures

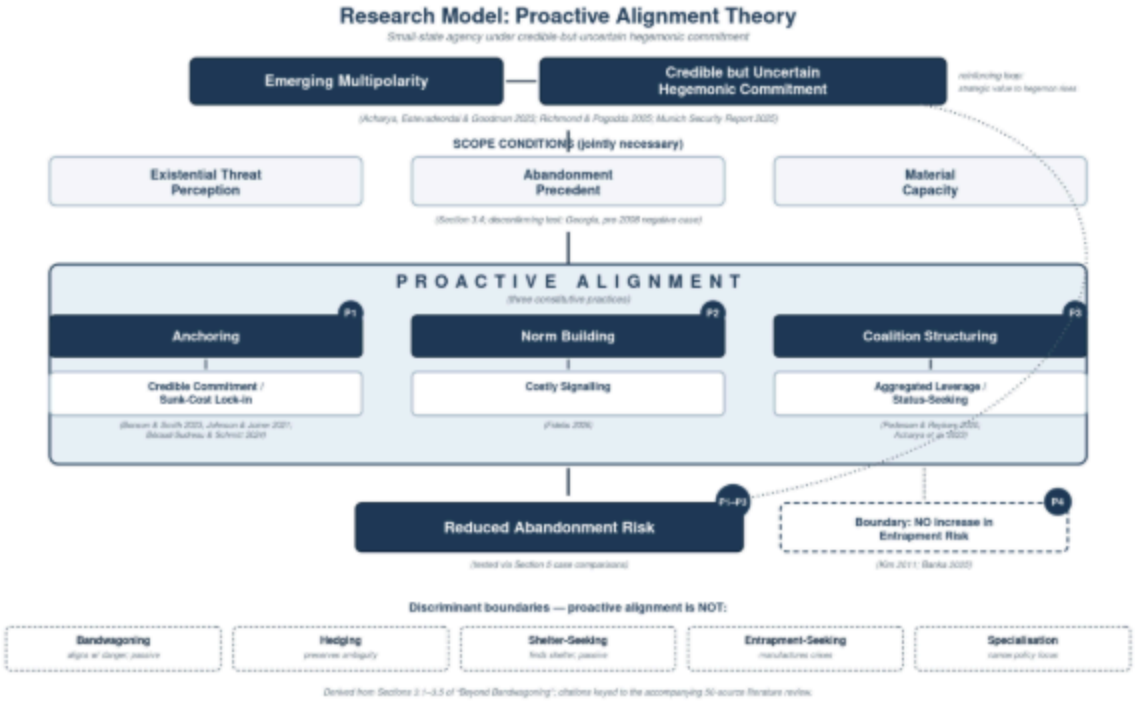


Figure 1

Research model diagram of proactive alignment theory

Figure 1. Research model of proactive alignment theory: structural context, scope conditions, constitutive practices and mechanisms, predicted outcome, boundary condition, and discriminant boundaries.

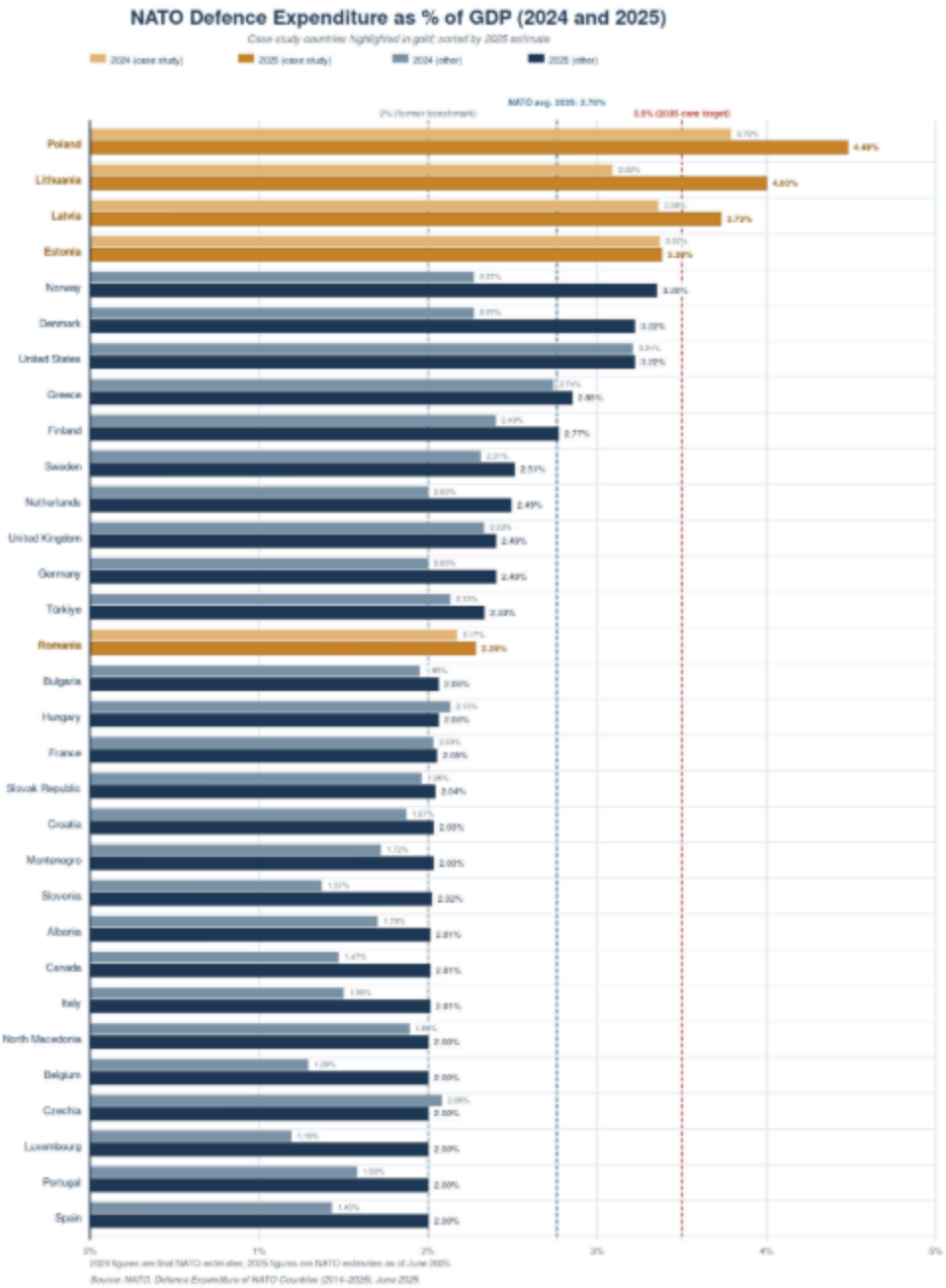


Figure 2

Bar chart of NATO defence expenditure as percent of GDP, 2024 and 2025 estimates

Figure 2. NATO defence expenditure as % of GDP, 2024 and 2025 estimates, all 31 reporting members. Case-study countries (Poland, Romania, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) highlighted in gold. Source: NATO (2025); full data in Supplementary Material.

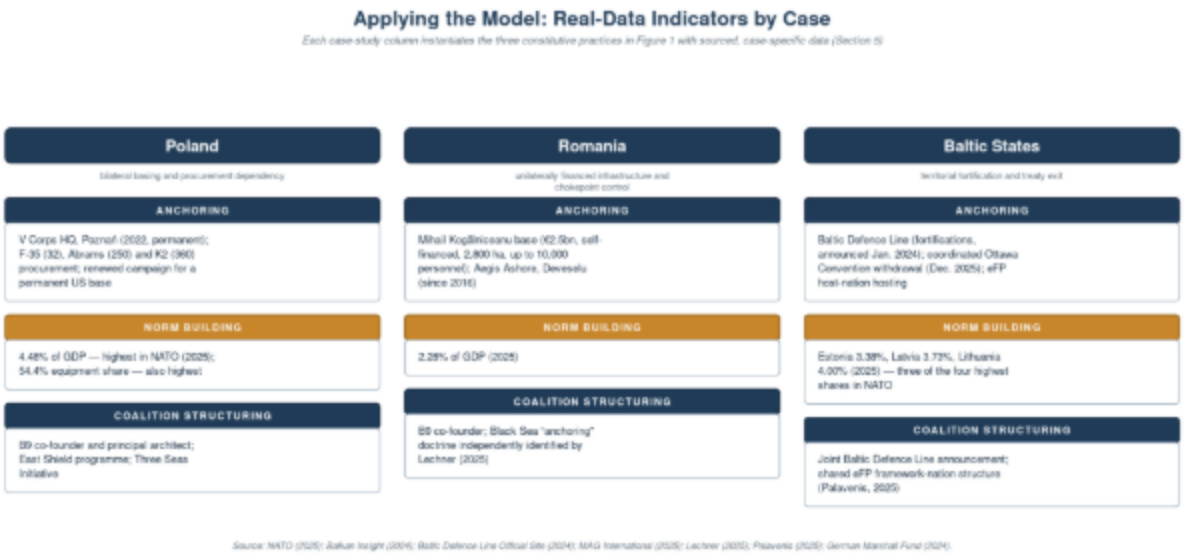


Figure 3

Diagram applying the proactive alignment research model to Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states with real data

Figure 3. Applying the research model in Figure 1 to real, sourced data for Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states. Source: NATO (2025); Balkan Insight (2024); Estonian Centre for Defence Investments (2024); MAG International (2025); Lechner (2025); Palavenis (2025); German Marshall Fund (2024).