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**Working Paper**

## Freedom of manoeuvre in Nordic bilateral diplomacy

DIIS Working Paper, No. 2020:08

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), Copenhagen

*Suggested Citation:* Mouritzen, Hans (2020) : Freedom of manoeuvre in Nordic bilateral diplomacy, DIIS Working Paper, No. 2020:08, ISBN 978-87-7236-023-2, Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), Copenhagen

This Version is available at:

<http://hdl.handle.net/10419/238131>

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# **FREEDOM OF MANOEUVRE IN NORDIC BILATERAL DIPLOMACY**

Hans Mouritzen

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ISBN 987-87-7236-023-2 (pdf)

DIIS publications can be downloaded free of charge from [www.diis.dk](http://www.diis.dk)

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# **FREEDOM OF MANOEUVRE IN NORDIC BILATERAL DIPLOMACY**

**Hans Mouritzen**

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## INTRODUCTION

Imagine a ship sailing through an archipelago on a regular basis: the fact that it will not take exactly the same route each time is of no particular importance. But one thing is certain: it must avoid running aground. There are, literally, outer limits to its course, and this leaves the captain with only limited freedom of manoeuvre.

Although the concept of freedom of manoeuvre (action space) is used by historians, as well as in the daily discourses of decision-makers, civil servants or commentators, it has been largely neglected in IR,<sup>1</sup> although it may constitute the missing link in a realist foreign-policy theory – a link between power polarity and national strategies. It has been hampered, mainly, by two widely different conceptions of international politics. On the one hand we see voluntaristic conceptions, according to which states are more or less free to choose their own destinies in interaction with others while neglecting any power deficits. There is no such thing as an objective action space from this perspective. On the other hand, and more surprisingly, some realists and neorealists have neglected the concept, probably due to a great power bias. Powerful states, especially superpowers, generally enjoy wider action space than others, thus making external constraints less noteworthy. This, however, is unsatisfactory from the viewpoint of *general* foreign policy theorizing.

In this Working Paper, the fruitfulness of the concept of external<sup>2</sup> action space for a realist foreign-policy theory will be demonstrated. Nordic countries testing the limits of their action space during multipolarity will be analysed, learning about it the 'hard way'. Finally, the contours of a theory are sketched, in which action space is the missing link between power polarity and states' foreign-policy strategy. First, however, the very concept of external action space should be presented.

<sup>1</sup> That is, the discipline of International Relations.

<sup>2</sup> In a realist foreign-policy framework like the present, the *external* action space has primacy over the internal action space (governments' domestic constraints). I We shall discuss the interaction of the two, however, in the section entitled 'The "chicken" fallacy.'

## THE CONCEPT OF ACTION SPACE

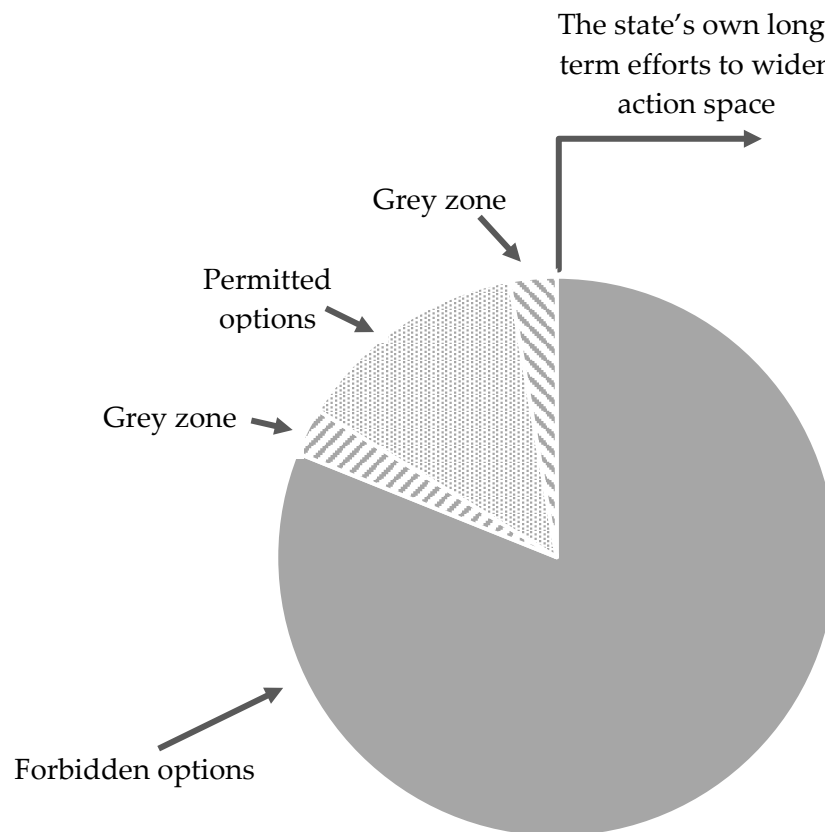
The assertion of constructivism in its opposition to realism is that anarchy and structure, to paraphrase Wendt, 'is what states make of it' (Wendt 1992, 1999). One valid criticism of Waltz (1979) is that process is often more important than structure, especially an allegedly overarching 'systemic structure'. However, the point is taken too far. Wendt shares Waltz' spatial blindness and thereby fails to understand the situation of the not-so-powerful, especially those in spheres of influence or squeezed between great powers. Particularly for them, freedom of manoeuvre is *not* what they make of it. There are limits to their freedom set by others. They feel it acutely, because it is a scarce commodity. It may be widened in a longer time perspective, sometimes even assisted by the smaller state's own efforts.<sup>3</sup> But it is a parameter for the short run; the state adapts its strategy and behaviour accordingly. By contrast, the US superpower for example – even as suffering waning influence in the world – can more easily afford the luxury of playing domestic politics or of following personal presidential whims on the international stage, should it wish to.

Here external freedom of manoeuvre (synonym: action space)<sup>4</sup> in foreign policy is defined as the policy options permitted by the prevailing power structure in any given situation (Fig. 1). For the concept to be meaningful, there must be a distinct hierarchy of issues, at least one of which must constitute the risk of an 'unacceptable outcome'. A passenger spending time at an airport waiting to board his plane can do various pleasurable errands like buying duty-free, taking a sandwich, or the like, but one concern is more important: keeping track of the boarding time and the walking distance to the gate. He knows that the pilot will not wait; you don't negotiate over departure times. In other words, catching the plane is axiomatic (missing it is unacceptable), whereas doing errands is, in comparison, a luxury. Should the flight turn out to be delayed, the passenger suddenly acquires time for extra errands, but the point is that this is beyond his control. In other words, the flight's departure time is a parameter limiting his freedom of manoeuvre.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, by contributing to the gradual strengthening of multilateral diplomacy, or by small states' banding together. From a realist perspective, though, there are upper limits to the effects of these measures. In the long term rearmament is also an option, and the state can take other internal preparatory measures within its means to increase the number of buttons it can push in a hypothetical crisis situation.

<sup>4</sup> Other synonyms ([https://www.classicthesaurus.com/freedom\\_of\\_manoeuvre/synonyms](https://www.classicthesaurus.com/freedom_of_manoeuvre/synonyms)) include leeway, discretion, flexibility, autonomy or margin of manoeuvre. German has *Handlungsfreiheit* or *Spielraum*, French *liberté d'action* or *marge de manoeuvre*. For some conceptual deliberations, cf. Dunér 1979.

**Figure 1. A state's external action space (permitted options) in a given situation**



For states too, certain issue outcomes are unacceptable in a given situation: they simply must not happen. Only in extreme situations are we dealing with absolute issues like survival ('security'), territorial losses or economic disasters due to, e.g., epidemic diseases; the acceptability judgement is *relative* compared to other relevant issues in a situation. For example, losing its basic credibility must not happen for any political actor because it will take years to re-establish. That is why statements of intent are typically vague.<sup>5</sup>

Rather than following a vision showing a specific way forward (as in beautiful rhetoric), states seek *not* to go beyond their freedom of manoeuvre in order to avoid specified failures. The latter function as negative warning signs overruling other considerations.

However, there is generally a blurred boundary to freedom of manoeuvre (cf. the grey zones in Fig. 1). Freedom of manoeuvre presupposes *anticipated reaction*:<sup>6</sup> the smaller state anticipates the reactions of one or more powerful states to its various

<sup>5</sup> It should be remembered, of course, that 'bad things' may happen anyway for other reasons than states' overstepping their own borderlines.

<sup>6</sup> Anticipated reactions result from situations where B, who has less power than A, decides not to make a demand upon A in an effort to avoid confrontation, or out of the fear that such behaviour would result in A invoking sanctions against him or her. This concept was originally formulated by Carl Friedrich (1937: 16-18). Cf. also Bachrach and Baratz (1970).



behavioural alternatives, but these reactions cannot be known with any certainty. Moreover, anticipation of this often has a margin of safety based on 'worst case' reasoning (uncertainty avoidance).<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, the fact that a limit is blurred does not make the phenomenon – here freedom of manoeuvre – any less real or the concept less meaningful. Few historians or IR scholars would dispute the three below empirical assertions:

- The Scandinavian countries enjoyed wider freedom of manoeuvre during the Cold War than Finland.
- European countries gained a wider freedom of manoeuvre – some more, some less – as a result of the ending of the Cold War.
- Many states in Asia and Europe have experienced less freedom of manoeuvre vis à vis China since roughly the turn of the millennium.

In other words, the concept of freedom of manoeuvre is meaningful and its intersubjective use is possible, although it cannot be measured with any precision. Comparisons in rough outline can be made synchronically between several nations at the same time, or diachronically with reference to one nation at different times.

## **FROM SYSTEMIC UNIPOLARITY TO MULTIPOLARITY**

Waltz' definition of great powers constituting power polarity in the world stresses their *possession* of military and economic capabilities (which can be seen in IISS or SIPRI statistics, for instance). According to this definition, the world is still unipolar: the fact that US military expenditure is roughly ten times that of the number two power on the list makes it the sole superpower.<sup>8</sup>

If instead we define polarity in terms of the great powers' ability to *project* power, we arrive at a somewhat different picture. Military, economic and diplomatic power projection by great powers gives each of them their own sphere of influence, whereas grey zones develop in contested areas. Proximity is the main factor facilitating the projection of power, since 'power wanes with distance' (Boulding 1962), although economic power can sometimes be projected over longer distances. US power projection is handicapped by the two oceans on either side of it, although expensive military bases allow some extra projection.

Even with this definition, we obtain a picture of US unipolarity during the 1990s and early 2000s, when there were the 'West and the rest'. A few smaller 'diehards' defied American power (like Serbia or Iraq), until they were crushed. Worldwide

<sup>7</sup> Cyert and March 1963: 118-120; McGowan and Shapiro 1973: 187.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Waltz (1979), Hansen (2011).

promotion of democracy was on the agenda of US neoconservatives, sometimes assisted by the EU's 'normative power'.<sup>9</sup>

By the autumn of 2008, however, it had become obvious that the picture had changed. Russia and China had gradually been building up their military and economic capabilities, while the US found itself subject to 'imperial overstretch' in unsuccessful wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. With the US half-hearted and pursuing ineffective diplomacy in the Russo-Georgian conflict, it was evident that, in being turned into a Russian sphere of influence, the southern Caucasus set an obvious precedent, especially for other former Soviet territories. Simultaneously China marked its newly won status with the successful Beijing Olympic games, and shortly thereafter followed the US financial meltdown in Wall Street.

Against this background, President Obama's two terms in office were characterized by realist restraint on the world stage. This was followed by President Trump's 'America first' weakening of US alliances and disciplining of its hemisphere ('Mexico should pay for the wall', for example). The three main great powers with spheres of influence of their own competed geopolitically and geoeconomically, but common to them was the absence of universal foreign-policy values. Multilateral diplomacy and agreements were weakened by spectacular US withdrawals. The importance of unilateralism, or at best bilateral diplomacy, grew. This infringed on the action spaces of the less powerful states, which were traditionally favoured by multilateral diplomacy.

## **SYSTEMIC MULTIPOLARITY AND BILATERAL DISCIPLININGS**

The systemic multipolarity of the 21st century initially entailed considerable unpredictability in inter-state relations. Assertive or value-based foreign policies were still tempting for some smaller or medium-sized countries, possibly in order to find out if their action space was still intact. But disciplining responses were equally tempting for emerging great powers wishing to flex their muscles. This has sometimes unexpectedly left smaller states alone in an asymmetrical bilateral relationship, with little help from friends or allies.

Even if we confine ourselves to Nordic states in the 21st century, there are several such cases where they have been exposed to (attempts at) 'disciplining' by emerging great powers (one of the so-called 'BRIC countries'):<sup>10</sup> Denmark in 2002-09, Sweden from 2008 and Norway from 2015 by Russia; Denmark in 2009, Norway in 2010-18 and Sweden from 2018 by China; and Denmark by India in 2010-18. Most of the cases pit Nordic universalism against the BRIC countries'

<sup>9</sup> Which is not to deny that there were occasional splits in the West. The European Iraq conflict (Mouritzen 2006) was between supporters and opponents of the US 2003 attack on the country despite not having a clear UN mandate.

<sup>10</sup> I.e. Brazil, Russia, India and China.

newly won prestige. To this could be added the US disciplining of Swedish nuclear diplomacy in 2017-19.

Their common denominator is that the Nordic country has overstepped its action space, as regarded *post hoc*, in relation to the great power. None of the Nordics has seen the resulting bilateral crises as desirable – quite the contrary. As a penalty, bilateral contacts have been frozen by the great power for a certain time span, in some cases for about a decade. Evidently, these have been ‘unacceptable outcomes’ for the Nordics, but nevertheless facts of life. Still, with one exception, the Nordic countries have not allowed themselves to be humiliated, despite being *de facto* disciplined to avoid future repetitions. Although the Scandinavian countries have been good at blurring these disciplinings, it is inconceivable that their experiences will not have long-term effects on their future bilateral behaviour.

### **In the Russian penalty box**

These cases will now be briefly analysed one by one. As Denmark prepared for a Russian state visit to Copenhagen in October 2002, it allowed a Chechnian World Congress to be held in the city less than a week after almost a thousand theatre-goers had been taken hostage by Chechens in Moscow (Mellander and Mouritzen 2016: 452-454). The Danish authorities refused to extradite General Ahmed Zakajev to Russia, the prime suspect in the attack. In response Russia cancelled the state visit, arguing that it would pose too great a risk of terrorist attacks against President Putin. According to Prime Minister Fogh Rasmussen, while comparing Russia with Germany of previous times, Denmark was no longer subservient to great powers. Also, it is likely that his statements that the episode demonstrated the Danish principles of freedom of assembly and freedom of speech and the virtues of the Danish legal system (in contrast to Russia, presumably)<sup>11</sup> were taken as an insult by the Russian side, leading to about seven years of frozen bilateral relations.

In 2008, as Danish-Russian relations were about to improve, the Swedish foreign minister, Carl Bildt, compared the Russian intervention in Georgia to Germany’s undermining of Czechoslovakia in 1938-39. Russia responded by putting Sweden, and especially Carl Bildt, in the freezer, where they remain to this day. Other mutual problems have maintained this state of affairs, such as the negative value statements made by Bildt’s follower Margot Wallström about Russia’s domestic political system. Minor improvements in recent years can nonetheless be noted.

Norwegian-Russian relations soured from 2015 (Mouritzen 2019). Norway had joined the EU sanctions against Russia in the wake of the Ukraine conflict, adding that its travel restrictions against certain Russian citizens also applied to the Svalbard archipelago. According to the Svalbard Treaty of 1925,<sup>12</sup> inhabitants of its signatories, including Russia, may travel freely to the archipelago (which is

<sup>11</sup> *Jyllandsposten* (Danish daily), 12 November 2002.

<sup>12</sup> <https://snl.no/Svalbardtraktaten>.

therefore outside Schengen rules) and engage in 'peaceful industry'. The Norwegian Svalbard restriction could not, in Russia's view, be seen in isolation, but would hurt mutual relations more broadly. Since 2015 a number of other incidents have occurred. For instance, when Norway hosted a meeting of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly on Svalbard in May 2017, Russia protested forcefully, claiming that it violated the spirit of the treaty (that the archipelago should only be utilized for peaceful purposes). Generally, Russia opposes NATO having a role in the Arctic, although a similar NATO meeting had been held in 2004 without Russian protests.

### **A letter from James Mattis**

In July 2017 the UN General Assembly, by an overwhelming majority, voted for a ban on nuclear weapons, the TPNW.<sup>13</sup> Like the bans on chemical or biological weapons, the idea was that the treaty should strengthen international norms against the possession or use of this type of weapon. The nuclear-armed states and all NATO countries apart from the Netherlands stayed away from the vote. Sweden had had an active role in the treaty negotiations and voted in favour, although with reservations. World opinion against nuclear weapons was further strengthened by ICAN<sup>14</sup> being awarded the Nobel peace prize in December 2017. It was expected that, given its idealist and anti-nuclear profile, Sweden would sign and ratify the treaty without concerns.

However, in September the same year the Swedish defence minister, Peter Hultqvist, had received a letter from his US colleague James Mattis, threatening to terminate Sweden's 'Enhanced Opportunity' partnership with NATO if the country signed and ratified the treaty. The American procedure is never to confirm or deny whether nuclear weapons are being carried by its military units. Sweden would therefore not be able to receive American reinforcements on its territory in case of war under the terms of 'Enhanced Opportunity'. This presented Sweden with a serious dilemma between its defence policy and its idealistic foreign policy. Hultqvist and foreign minister Wallström were on opposite sides in this issue.

Since there was strong popular support in favour of the treaty, the issue was postponed till after the 2018 election by means of a lengthy government inquiry.<sup>15</sup> In June 2019 Wallström announced, based on the inquiry's findings, that Sweden would 'refrain from signing or pursuing ratification of the [treaty] at the present time.' In other words, Sweden had revised its position due to the letter from Mattis in combination with the urgent need for reinforcements in case of a conflict in the Baltic Sea region. Sweden did not have the action space to fulfil its idealistic foreign-policy ambitions.

<sup>13</sup> Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

<sup>14</sup> International Campaign for the Abolishment of Nuclear Weapons, an NGO fighting for the elimination of nuclear weapons, is led by Swedish Beatrice Fihn.

<sup>15</sup> *Utredning av konsekvenserna av ett svenskt tillträde till konventionen om förbud mot kärnvapen*, Utrikesdepartementet 2019.

## Chinese 'internal affairs'

In 2009 the Danish prime minister, Løkke Rasmussen, hosted an unofficial meeting with the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan religious leader. China hinted that this would have consequences for Danish exports and specifically that it might boycott the prestigious upcoming climate summit, COP-15, in Copenhagen (Patey 2019). However, Danish diplomacy saved the situation promptly by issuing a 'non-paper' with the following formulations:<sup>16</sup> 'Denmark takes very seriously the Chinese opposition to meetings between members of the Danish government and the Dalai Lama, and has duly noted Chinese views that such meetings are against the core interest of China, and will handle such issue prudently. In this regard, Denmark reaffirms its One-China policy and its unchanged position that Tibet is an integral part of China. Denmark recognizes China's sovereignty over Tibet and accordingly opposes the independence of Tibet.' In other words, not only did Denmark affirm its One-China policy, it stated that it would actively 'oppose' Tibet's hypothetical independence. When this humiliating formulation was leaked, it caused severe NGO and other public criticism of the government.

In 2010, the Nobel peace prize was awarded to the Chinese human rights activist and jailed dissident Liu Xiaobo. As the award is decided by Norway's top politicians sitting as the parliamentary Nobel committee, the Chinese leadership interpreted this as an ideologically hostile act interfering in Chinese domestic affairs (Sverdrup-Thygeson 2018).<sup>17</sup> The result was a freezing of bilateral relations until late 2016, a conflict unprecedented in scope in the recent history of Chinese relations with any OECD country. Although the economic consequences turned out to be less harsh than expected, the ending of dialogue with the Chinese great power was highly problematic from the viewpoint of Norway's global political interests (especially as a non-EU member). Norwegian diplomacy tried to solve the issue with a non-paper along the lines of Denmark's Dalai Lama non-paper, but it leaked and was met with a chorus of domestic condemnation. Finally, however, the knot was untied in December 2016 after top secret negotiations led to a joint declaration by the two governments (Sverdrup-Thygeson 2018: 82-84). According to the highly ambiguous document, Norway 'will not support actions that undermine [China's core interests and major concerns].' But there was no explicit apology.

Swedish-Chinese relations have suffered since 2015, when the Hong Kong publisher Gui Minhai, a Swedish citizen, was kidnapped by the Chinese authorities while on vacation in Thailand and subsequently imprisoned. Gui was known for publishing books critical of the Chinese leadership. Although he admitted to 'illegal business operations' on Chinese state TV, Sweden has continued to demand his release (with EU support). In 2019 the Swedish Minister of Culture awarded Gui Minhai, in his absence, a prize on behalf of Swedish PEN. As the Chinese ambassador threatened 'counter measures', Prime Minister Löfven

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.tibetkomite.dk/verbalnoten-om-tibet/61-verbalnoten/7-verbalnoten-om-tibet>

<sup>17</sup> Norway had actually been warned beforehand of the negative consequences any such award would have for Sino-Norwegian relations. Norway's then foreign minister, Jonas Gahr Støre, tried to dissuade the committee from making this choice. Cf. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34277960>.

declared that ‘we have no intention of yielding to these sorts of threats. Ever. We have freedom of expression in Sweden, and that is what applies here. Full stop.’<sup>18</sup> The embassy replied on its homepage that ‘the serious mistake from the Swedish side [i.e. the minister’s role in the award] entails unavoidably serious difficulties to maintain friendly exchanges and cooperation between China and Sweden.’ Planned trips by business delegations to Sweden were cancelled.

In February 2020, Gui Minhai was convicted to ten years in prison for ‘illegally providing intelligence abroad’; according to the Chinese court, he had had his Chinese citizenship reinstated in 2018. Moreover, Gui had pleaded guilty and would not be appealing against the verdict. Sweden continues to demand his release, although he has previously declared on Chinese TV that Sweden had ‘tricked him’, and he also rejected Swedish involvement in his case.

### **India insulted**

After a period of heightened diplomatic activity and agreements between Denmark and India, bilateral relations were frozen by the latter in 2011 (Kaur 2013). The Danish High Court had rejected a plea to extradite the Danish citizen Niels Holck (alias Kim Davy), the prime defendant in the Purulia arms-drop case, to stand trial in India on the grounds that he risked being tortured (in spite of Indian reassurances to the opposite). The Danish Attorney General did not appeal the case to the Supreme Court. This angered the Indian government. According to Kaur (2013), alleged racism in the Danish media towards the Indian court system also played a role. The standoff was the first breach in the long history of diplomatic relations between the two countries and was regretted in Denmark, since India as a BRIC country and a ‘sleeping giant’ was seen as a partner of strategic significance to trade and investment. After gradual normalization during the course of 2018, diplomatic relations were fully normalized in 2019 with a visit by Prime Minister Løkke Rasmussen to his Indian opposite number Narendra Modi, accompanied by large delegations from Danish industry and agriculture. The Holck issue has apparently been mothballed, but it may resurge at any time.

### **Summing up: ambiguity and misjudgements**

With the demise of unipolarity and the emergence of multipolarity, including self-conscious BRIC states, the Scandinavian states – used to the privilege of high foreign policy value profiles – misjudged their action space.<sup>19</sup> They did not realize the temptation for (emerging) great powers to flex their muscles. In most of the cases described above Scandinavians applied allegedly universal values to the great powers’ ‘internal affairs’ or behaviour (although the Svalbard issue was about details in international law). The Scandinavians could hardly welcome the sanctions directed against them by the emerging great powers.

<sup>18</sup> Svt Agenda, 10 November 2019. <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/statsminister-stefan-lofven-s-vi-tanker-inte-falla-for-den-har-typen-av-hot>.

<sup>19</sup> Sweden could hardly have acted differently, though, in the Gui Minhai case, since he is (was) a Swedish citizen (but the Minister of Culture could have stayed away from the prize ceremony).

To get the proportions right, however, we should realize that their freedoms had been narrowed somewhat from their almost *unprecedented* level in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War (enjoyed in virtue of the US hegemony and the EU's normative power). They still had, and continue to have, a wider action space than during the Cold War or previously. Its narrowing mainly amounts to a restraint vis à vis criticism of great powers' internal political systems.<sup>20</sup> It is noteworthy here that Finland, due to its low-key and pragmatist foreign policy, has avoided penalties like those targeted at its Scandinavian neighbours.<sup>21</sup>

These cases have been asymmetric in two regards. First, one party was overwhelmingly more powerful than the other. Secondly (and paradoxically), the smaller party had criticised the great power and its domestic affairs, not the other way round – in other words, there was a behavioural asymmetry as well. In most cases, this moralizing profile was brought to a halt by the disciplinings that took place. The reasons behind the misjudgments may be manifold, but cognitive inertia (e.g. Welch 2005) from the favourable 1990s or early 2000s among politicians may have played a role. Also, public opinion and NGOs influenced the behaviour of politicians in several cases.

## THE 'CHICKEN' FALLACY

Overplaying one's hand is, of course, a fallacy. But so is the opposite: if a state's decision-makers are overcautious ('chickens'), the state in question may endanger its general standing in the world, at worst giving the impression that it is just someone else's satellite. This also exposes decision-makers to domestic criticism. In most of the above cases, decision-makers anticipated domestic views; in the case of the Nobel prize in Norway we saw sharp media criticism, as rumours of a non-paper were leaked.

In Hanrieder's words (1967), decision-makers should identify the common ground between 'compatibility and consensus'. A given policy should both find a domestic consensus and be compatible with external conditions (here: the external action space). From the viewpoint of the government, therefore, its policy/strategy should find common ground between external and internal (domestic) action space (cf. also Putnam 1988 or Moravscik 1999). From a realist viewpoint, though, the external action space has *primacy*, as we shall see below.

In order not to underperform, however, decision-makers must sometimes challenge the state's presumed external action space, just to identify its limits.<sup>22</sup> The cases analysed above are examples of 'learning the hard way', that is, testing

<sup>20</sup> On such small power assertion and its measurement, cf. Mellander and Mouritzen (2016).

<sup>21</sup> Although less dependent on external reinforcements than Sweden, Finland did not vote in favour of the TPNW at the UN General Assembly.

<sup>22</sup> In the view of Nikolaj Petersen, to know exactly when to try to widen a state's action space actually requires greater skills on behalf of decision-makers than routine adaptation (Petersen 2006).

the limits of the action space by actually taking controversial steps *and* being punished for them subsequently. These were natural scale experiments.

## **AD HOC LEARNING ABOUT ACTION SPACE**

However, there are more subtle ways of learning about action space. One is to fly a trial balloon. This means that decision-makers test the limits of their freedom of manoeuvre in a small-scale experiment. The response of the relevant great power is elicited with reference to a minor issue with few observers, where little prestige is at stake: no one loses face.

Another method is to learn from what other 'similar' states are doing to face a roughly similar challenge (parallel action). This would typically involve other states in the same informal 'group' (e.g. the Visegrad states or the Nordics). Thirdly, instead of looking over their shoulder, decision-makers may look in the rear mirror and reflect upon their own state's previous historical experience with a corresponding challenge (the 'shadow of the past') and ask: 'What did we do the last time?'

Even better than these *ad hoc* methods, however, would be to deduce from a proper IR theory of action space. I shall finish by sketching the contours of such a realist theory.

## **TOWARDS A REALIST FOREIGN POLICY THEORY: ACTION SPACE IS KEY**

Whereas it is almost impossible to predict specific foreign-policy decisions or events ('What will happen next Tuesday', to use Waltz's *ad absurdum* formulation (Waltz 1979; also Wivel 2005), it is much more realistic to delineate the foreign policy freedom of manoeuvre of states (their action space).

### **From polarity to action space**

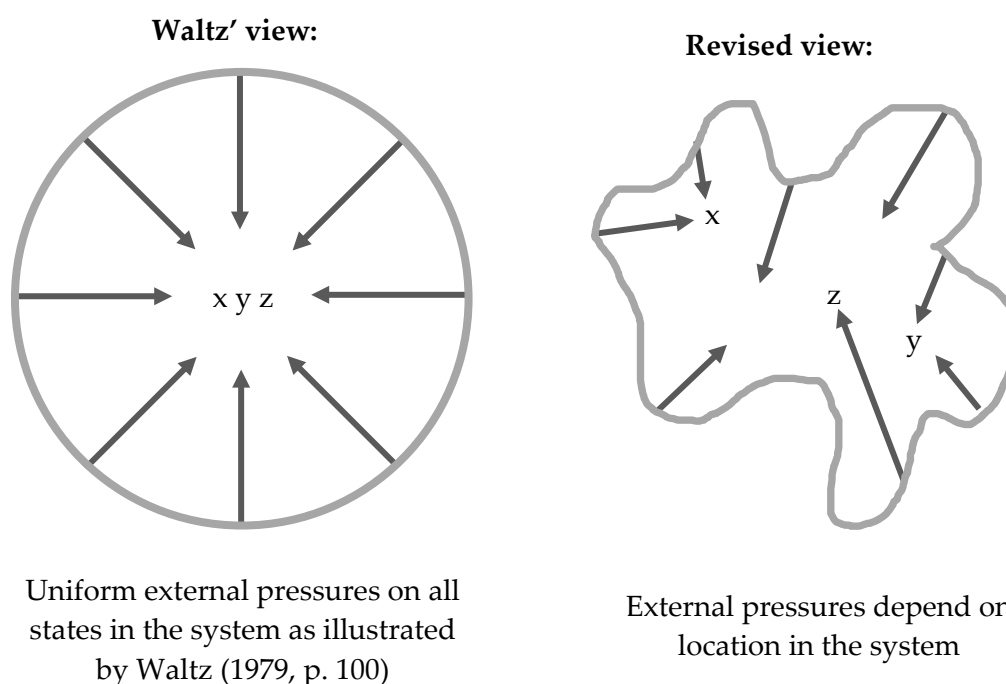
A realist theory must respect inequalities of power, that is, huge differences in states' *possession* of power assets. But secondly, it must also take power *projection* abilities into account, including countries' locational polarity. The latter concept turns the tables and views polarity from the 'receiving end': how many states are able to project power to (significantly affect) a country's territory/economy through positive or negative sanctions? It makes a huge difference to its action



space if one, two or even three countries are able to do that. This is a more precise determinant of its action space than systemic polarity.<sup>23</sup>

We can conceive of widely different *locational* polarities in one and the same international system (systemic polarity). Consider Fig. 2. As we have seen, the current international system may be considered ‘multipolar’. However, that does not tell us much about countries’ respective action spaces. For instance, Mexico is subject to US locational *unipolarity*. Mexico will not be exposed to great-power conflict, since the other great powers are too far away. Only the US great power can expose it to significant negative or positive sanctions, making Mexico unilaterally dependent on it. Mexico’s action space is therefore narrow.<sup>24</sup> By contrast, ASEAN countries are subject to locational *bipolarity*: although they can be caught up in dangerous Sino-US rivalry, they can also exploit it to their advantage and thus enjoy a wider action space.<sup>25</sup>

**Figure 2. Systemic polarity versus locational polarity**



At the same time, the Danish Kingdom (consisting of Denmark, the Faroe Islands, and Greenland) is subject to locational *tripolarity*. Three great powers can project

<sup>23</sup> This becomes complicated, though, if we distinguish between issue-areas. High interdependence in a given issue-area makes it more reasonable to operate with systemic conditions proper, thereby blurring the distinction between systemic polarity and locational polarity.

<sup>24</sup> For instance, Mexico had to go along with President Trump’s wish to renegotiate NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) and replace it with an agreement more favourable to the US.

<sup>25</sup> For instance, the US left the emerging TPP (The Trans-Pacific Partnership) in 2017, but could not – as with NAFTA – force the other parties to renegotiate the partnership.

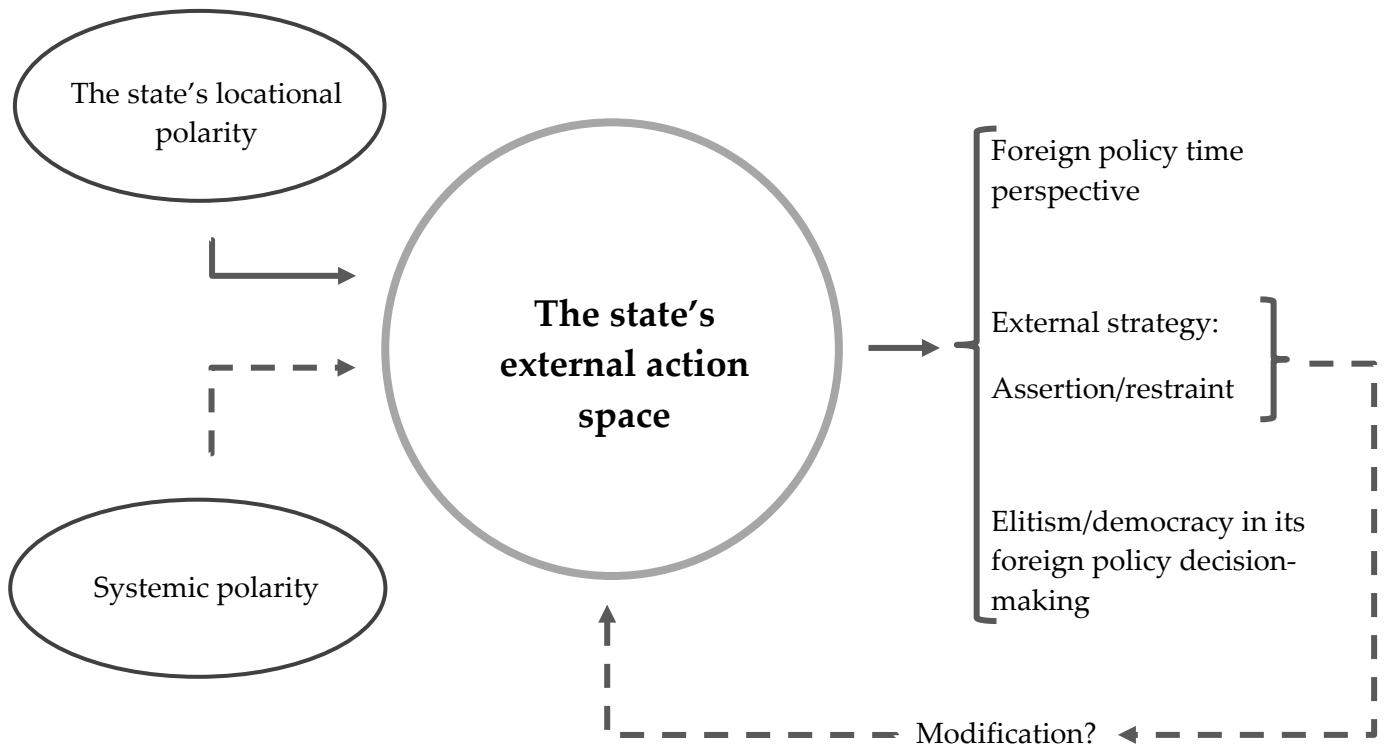
significant power on to Greenland's territory and economy: the US, Russia and China. Seen from Copenhagen, the 'unacceptable outcome' that must be avoided is a dissolution of the Kingdom, meaning that Denmark would lose its considerable influence on Arctic affairs, as well as more broadly.<sup>26</sup> China, the US ally or their mutual competition might inadvertently undermine the cohesion of the Kingdom. Copenhagen may be pressured by Washington to refuse 'security-related' Chinese investments in Greenland, in turn creating Greenlandic frustration over Danish rule and thereby endangering the future of the Kingdom. So although the Arctic hype in recent years has entailed Danish advantages, Copenhagen also increasingly risks being squeezed between the great powers. Whether locational bipolarity or tripolarity is the most dangerous from this point of view depends on the specific circumstances. Other things being equal, however, a situation involving *three* power-projecting great powers would be more unpredictable and risky than only two.

### **From action space to strategy**

Freedom of manoeuvre (action space) is in turn the *permissive cause* of specific foreign-policy decisions: it permits certain decisions and rules out others (and some decisions may fall into a twilight zone between the two). What the specific decisions will be depends on what concrete stimuli – *efficient causes* – will present themselves. These can profitably be analysed in hindsight to produce a full explanation of decisions, of course. To use an analogy from soccer: a competent commentator can reasonably predict the percentage distribution of ball possession in a coming game, as well as the team strategies. It is much more difficult to predict the specific result of the game, let alone how the goals will be scored. However, this can be fully explained *post-hoc* by referring to all the specific circumstances that played a role, including good and bad luck for the teams.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Runge Olesen (2020). On China-US rivalry generally in the Arctic, cf. Heurlin (2019).

**Figure 3. A state's action space is the missing link between polarity and its foreign policy**



Action space has implications, first, for the kind of *time perspective* the state can afford (Fig. 3). The narrower the space, the more short-term considerations will prevail, of the form: 'If we don't survive the short run, there will be no long run to bother about'; 'if we "stay in the game" in the short run, however, opportunities may present themselves later on'. With widening action space, by contrast, a longer time horizon becomes realistic and a certain amount of planning becomes meaningful.

Secondly, the wider the action space, the more *assertive* the foreign policy that can be afforded. And vice versa: the narrower the space, the more restraint must be mobilized. Thirdly, external action space can allow – or curtail – a role for *domestic* factors (public opinion, political parties, NGOs, etc.) in foreign policy-making. In favourable times these factors may bloom. During external crises, by contrast, their role is reduced. A narrow action space entails foreign-policy elitism. The more serious the situation, the fewer the people involved in decision-making.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Mouritzen (1999), theoretically based on Coser (1956). In the case of the Nobel prize in Norway, for instance, only three individuals were involved in the final stage: the prime minister, the foreign minister and a top civil servant.

The role of democracy in foreign policy-making, already limited in routine matters, will be even more curtailed in a crisis situation.<sup>28</sup>

As a diachronic illustration, Denmark has experienced its narrowest action space in times of its unilateral dependence on its southern neighbour: from 1870 till 1918, from about 1935 till 1940, and even more, of course, during the German occupation. The time perspective had to be short-sighted, restraint prevailed, and foreign-policy elitism was the order of the day. As a Cold War allied frontline state in circumstances of bipolarity, Denmark's action space was wider, entailing a longer time horizon, less foreign-policy restraint and less domestic elitism. And after the Cold War, these dimensions developed in an even more favourable direction.

## **POLICY ADVICE AND A CRITICAL STANCE**

The situations of great powers disciplining Nordic states in this working paper, have illustrated the grey zones in the latter's external action space. In all cases it was hard for decision-makers to identify the precise limits to their action space (freedom of manoeuvre). Instead of such 'learning the hard way', certain more subtle, but *ad hoc* ways of evaluating action space were suggested (e.g. flying a trial balloon, parallel action, the shadow of the past). Nonetheless, it would be preferable to deduce the limits from a proper *theory* of action space.

The contours of the theory presented here involve a medium 'explanatory leap', that is, distance from the alleged explanatory factors to the explanatory object. A distance from *systemic* polarity to state strategies is mostly too long for a systematic pattern to occur. By contrast, constructivist approaches entail too short a leap, making them almost truistic. To put it squarely, this or that happened at 12.00 because that was how decision-makers were thinking and talking at 11.55. Compared to these two extremes, the path from locational polarity via action space to state strategy implies a suitable medium-range leap.

Such a theory would be useful for prescriptive purposes. Rather than merely interpreting policy, it can offer policy advice to decision-makers. This will seldom be about the positive line of action to be chosen in any given situation, but rather about the outer limits of what they can do. By its very nature, a theory of action space also offers a platform of criticism against the rulers. If they fail, is it because they have overstepped the limits of their state's freedom of manoeuvre, or is the failure due to other causes? Alternatively, politicians may be criticised for failing to exploit their foreign-policy freedom to its full extent – in other words, for being too docile and cautious.

<sup>28</sup> This does not apply to transnational issues like EU policy that has a tangible effect on voters' everyday lives.

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