

# *From Survivalism to Smart Diplomacy: Albania's Foreign Policy Transformation*

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## **Abstract**

*This article explores how Albania's foreign policy has evolved from an ideology-driven strategy of regime survival to a multidimensional and adaptive diplomacy consistent with the behavior of a "smart but small" state. Drawing on document and historical analysis, it examines four key stages of Albania's external orientation: ideological survivalism during the communist era (1945–1990), strategic realignment in the post-communist transition (1991–2000), Euro-Atlantic consolidation through NATO and EU integration (2000–2020), and the emergence of smart diplomacy in the 2020s. The study argues that Albania's foreign policy trajectory reflects a gradual transformation from survivalist isolation toward multidimensional behavior that seeks security through alliance, institutional anchoring, and regional pragmatism. By situating Albania's experience within small-state foreign policy theory, the article highlights how systemic shifts, domestic fragility, and leadership agency have interacted to shape its strategic evolution. The findings suggest that Albania today exhibits the attributes of a "smart but small" model: flexible alignment, active multilateralism, and pragmatic regional engagement.*

**Keywords:** *Foreign Policy, Small States, Smart Diplomacy, Euro-Atlantic Integration, Regional Pragmatism, Multilateralism, Foreign Policy Transformation*

## Problem Statement

The foreign policy of Albania has undergone a profound transformation over the past eight decades—from the survivalist isolationism of the communist regime to the multidimensional and pragmatic diplomacy of the twenty-first century. During the Cold War, Albania’s foreign policy was primarily designed as a tool for regime preservation, marked by successive alliances and ruptures with Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, and China, reflecting both ideological rigidity and strategic calculation for autonomy. Following the collapse of communism, the country faced institutional fragility and economic dependence, prompting a reorientation toward Euro-Atlantic structures as a means of securing external legitimacy and internal stability. Since the early 2000s, Albania has consolidated its transatlantic identity and adopted an increasingly adaptive, pragmatic, and regionally engaged diplomacy (Beaudry, 2020). Despite this transformation, there remains limited systematic analysis connecting Albania’s evolving external behavior to small-state foreign policy theory. Existing scholarship often treats Albania’s foreign relations descriptively, without assessing the underlying behavioral logic of its strategic adaptation. This gap raises the central research question: *How has Albania’s foreign policy evolved from an ideology-driven strategy of regime survival to a multidimensional and adaptive diplomacy consistent with the behavior of a “smart but small” state?*

The article hypothesizes that Albania’s foreign policy trajectory reflects a gradual transformation from survivalist isolation—driven by regime preservation during the communist era—toward adaptive, multidimensional diplomacy aligned with the behavioral patterns of a small state seeking security through alliance, institutional embedding, and regional pragmatism. By combining document analysis and historical interpretation, the study aims to bridge empirical observation with theoretical insights on small-state adaptation, providing a structured account of how Albania’s strategic behavior has evolved from existential defensiveness to “smart” diplomacy.

## Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The study of small states in international relations has long oscillated between two dominant paradigms: realism, which emphasizes power asymmetries and survival in an anarchic system, and liberal institutionalism, which underscores cooperation, interdependence, and institutional embeddedness as compensatory mechanisms for small states. Albania’s foreign policy transformation—from isolationist survivalism to proactive Euro-Atlantic engagement—can be understood through the interplay between these two theoretical perspectives.

## *Realism and the Small-State Dilemma*

Classical and structural realist scholars argue that international politics are governed by the logic of survival within an anarchic system where power is the ultimate currency (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979). For small states, which lack military and economic capabilities, this environment imposes structural vulnerability and limited agency. Realism therefore views small states as *system-takers* rather than *system-shapers* (Wivel, 2014).

Robert Keohane (1969), in his influential essay “*Lilliputians’ Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics*,” identified three behavioral models of small states in the realist tradition: adaptation, exploitation, and influence. Keohane argued that small states adapt to the preferences of larger powers and international institutions because their limited capabilities constrain independent action. In this sense, Albania’s Cold War strategy of shifting alliances—from Yugoslavia to the Soviet Union, and later to China—reflected realist imperatives of survival rather than ideological conviction. These alignments served as external *shelters* in the face of existential insecurity, consistent with the realist assumption that small states prioritize regime survival over normative objectives (Walt, 1987).

Realism also underscores the role of balancing and bandwagoning as key strategies of small states (Walt, 1987). According to Stephen Walt’s balance-of-threat theory, states align either against or with the source of threat depending on relative power, proximity, and perceived intentions. In the Albanian case, both strategies have been evident: *balancing* against Yugoslavia in 1948 and the Soviet Union in 1961, and *bandwagoning* with the United States and NATO after 1991. Each alignment responded to a changing threat perception rather than ideological preference. Thus, from a realist perspective, Albania’s foreign policy trajectory demonstrates how small states constantly adjust their external alignments to ensure survival within shifting regional and systemic power structures.

However, realism alone cannot fully account for Albania’s post-1990 behavior. While early post-communist policies reflected security-seeking alignment, the persistence of Euro-Atlantic integration—despite limited material returns—suggests a deeper logic of institutional socialization and identity formation, which is better captured by neoliberal institutionalism.

## *Liberal Institutionalism and the Logic of Adaptation*

Building on his earlier realist insights, Keohane (1984) later advanced a neoliberal institutionalist perspective, arguing that cooperation is possible even under anarchy when institutions reduce transaction costs, provide information, and enforce norms. For small states, institutions such as NATO, the European Union,

and the United Nations offer not only material benefits but also *predictability, legitimacy, and security through rules*.

In this framework, small states are not passive actors but rational institutionalists who leverage international regimes to compensate for their power deficits (Keohane, 1984; Keohane & Nye, 2012). Albania's steady integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions since the 1990s—culminating in NATO membership (2009) and EU candidate status (2014)—illustrates this adaptive strategy. Through institutional alignment, Albania has sought to transform structural dependence into strategic leverage, aligning with what Thorhallsson (2017) describes as “*shelter theory*.”

Shelter theory conceptualizes small states as entities that seek political, economic, and societal shelters within larger frameworks to mitigate external shocks and enhance resilience (Thorhallsson, 2012; Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2017). In this sense, NATO provides Albania with security shelter, while the EU offers economic and normative shelter. These arrangements enable small states to project stability and identity beyond their material constraints. Albania's participation in international missions and its alignment with Western sanctions and diplomatic initiatives further demonstrate how institutional commitment functions as both a security guarantee and a marker of international legitimacy.

Liberal institutionalism also helps explain the evolution of Albania's diplomacy into a more multilateral and proactive orientation. Rather than merely reacting to systemic pressures, Albania has learned to exploit institutional mechanisms to amplify its voice. Its tenure as Chair of the OSCE (2020) and non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (2022–2023) exemplifies the neoliberal argument that institutions can empower small states by providing platforms for visibility, coalition-building, and norm entrepreneurship.

### *Bridging Realism and Neoliberalism: The Smart-State Synthesis*

Contemporary small-state scholarship attempts to reconcile the realist concern for survival with the neoliberal emphasis on cooperation and agency. Authors such as Wivel (2014) and Thorhallsson (2018) emphasize that small states can act strategically by combining security-seeking alignment with flexible adaptation—a behavior often termed “smart state” diplomacy.

The *smart-state* model rests on three core assumptions:

- a. Strategic alignment with dominant powers or alliances ensures survival.
- b. Institutional engagement within regional and global frameworks enhances influence and legitimacy.
- c. Adaptive pragmatism allows small states to manage multiple relationships simultaneously.

Applied to Albania, this synthesis captures the trajectory from realist-driven survivalism to neoliberal-inspired adaptation. During the communist era, foreign policy served as a defensive shield for regime security; after 1991, it evolved into an instrument for integration, modernization, and regional activism. Albania's contemporary diplomacy—balancing U.S. alignment, EU integration, and pragmatic ties with Turkey, Italy, and Greece—illustrates the behavioral pattern of a *smart small state* navigating a complex multipolar environment.

Thus, Albania's foreign policy transformation embodies the convergence of realist constraints and neoliberal opportunities: from the necessity of survival to the strategic use of institutions for empowerment. Theoretically, this study situates Albania within the broader debate on small-state adaptation, arguing that its evolving behavior demonstrates how vulnerability, when coupled with institutional embedding and strategic flexibility, can produce resilience and influence disproportionate to material capacity.

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on document analysis and historical interpretation to examine the evolution of Albania's foreign policy from survivalist isolation to adaptive and multidimensional diplomacy. The objective is to assess whether the empirical trajectory of Albania's external behavior supports the central hypothesis: that Albania's foreign policy has gradually transformed from regime-preserving survivalism toward a “smart but small” model seeking security through alliance, institutional embedding, and regional pragmatism.

Qualitative analysis is appropriate because the research seeks to interpret *how* and *why* Albania's foreign-policy choices evolved over time rather than to measure causal effects statistically (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study employs an interpretive-historical approach, situating Albania's decisions within changing systemic and domestic contexts. By tracing continuity and change across distinct historical periods, the analysis identifies the strategic logic underlying each phase of Albania's external behavior.

The empirical basis of the research rests on document analysis, which allows systematic examination of both primary and secondary sources (Bowen, 2009). Primary sources include official policy documents such as the *National Security Strategy of Albania* (2014; 2021), government programs, speeches of political leaders, and records of Albania's participation in international organizations (NATO, OSCE, and the United Nations). Secondary materials consist of scholarly books, articles, and historical monographs addressing Albania's foreign relations during and after the Cold War. These sources collectively provide insights into the motivations, constraints, and outcomes of Albania's foreign-policy orientation.

## *Analytical Framework*

The analysis is organized chronologically into four periods corresponding to major systemic and domestic shifts:

- a. Ideological Survivalism (1945–1990) – regime preservation under communist isolation;
- b. Strategic Realignment (1991–2000) – transition and Western dependency;
- c. Euro-Atlantic Consolidation (2000–2020) – integration into NATO and the EU; and
- d. Smart Diplomacy (2020–2025) – multidimensional pragmatism under contemporary global conditions.

Each period is examined through the dual theoretical lenses of realism and liberal institutionalism. The analysis identifies how Albania’s strategic behavior—balancing, bandwagoning, shelter-seeking, or institutional adaptation—corresponds to the expectations of small-state theory.

## **Main Dimensions of Albania’s Current Foreign Policy**

Today, Albania’s Foreign Policy follows a multidimensional strategy, rooted in transatlantic alliances, regional pragmatism, and multilateral engagement. As a small state managing its own challenges in an anarchic world, Albania has assumed the role of a credible Euro-Atlantic actor (as mentioned above), while pragmatically balancing interests in an unstable regional environment.

*Relations with the United States* constitute a central dimension of Albania’s current Foreign Policy. This strategic alliance is built on shared values, the need for regional stability, and security cooperation. Albania has fully and consistently supported U.S. initiatives in the Balkans – contributing to NATO operations and participating in international peacekeeping missions (U.S. Department of State, 2022). At the bilateral level, the United States has provided military training, defense assistance, intelligence sharing, and political support – strengthening Albania’s security and international standing. The Strategic Partnership Agreement signed in 2015 further institutionalized cooperation in many sectors – including security, the rule of law, economic growth, energy sustainability, and educational-cultural ties – reflecting a mutual commitment to democratic governance and collective defense (Atlantic Council, 2016).

*Albania’s accession to NATO* in 2009 marked a transformative step in its security architecture. NATO is considered not only a defensive mechanism, but also a

guarantor of Albania's sovereignty and regional role. In response to contemporary threats – such as Russia's aggression in Ukraine, hybrid attacks and terrorism – Albania has reaffirmed its commitment to NATO principles. It actively contributes troops to allied operations in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans, which has strengthened its image as a reliable partner in regional security (Ministry of Defense of Albania, 2023). NATO membership has significantly strengthened Albania's defense capabilities and integrated it within the framework of collective security.

*The European Union* is the other strategic axis of Albania's Foreign Policy. EU membership is widely defined not only as a political aspiration, but also as a necessity for the country's development. The domestic political discourse in Albania builds and reproduces a consolidated narrative, according to which membership in the European Union constitutes the country's natural and inevitable destination (Frashëri, 2016:60). Since receiving the status of candidate country in 2014, Albania has undertaken comprehensive reforms in governance, the justice system and public administration, in order to align itself with EU standards. The "National Plan for European Integration" underlines the sustained commitment in this direction (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2022). On the economic side, EU integration offers access to the common market, eliminates trade barriers and guarantees financial support. On the political side, integration consolidates democratic institutions and the rule of law. On the social side, integration facilitates free movement, educational and cultural exchanges (Institute for Democracy and Mediation, 2008).

Albania's *regional diplomacy* prioritizes cooperation, good neighborly relations and the resolution of bilateral problems through dialogue. Albania has fully supported multilateral initiatives such as the Berlin Process, while it also pursues active diplomacy – at the bilateral level – with Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. The Berlin Process is seen by Albania as an essential framework supported by the EU, with the aim of promoting regional cooperation, economic ties and institutional approximation to European standards (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2022). At the same time, Albania's participation in the "Open Balkans" initiative, despite its problems, essentially reflected an attempt to promote practical regional integration and free movement among the Western Balkan states (Rama, 2021). However, the impact of this initiative on the Albanian geopolitical space remained limited, partly due to the absence of Kosovo (Radio Free Europe, 2023). A distinctive feature of Albania's regional engagement under Rama has been the "quadrilateral partnership" with Italy, Greece, Turkey, and Austria (Gazeta Tema, 2017). This balancing strategy aims to maintain strategic flexibility: when relations with one actor become strained, others can help maintain diplomatic equilibrium.

*Multilateralism* is an important dimension of Albania's Foreign Policy. Engagement in multilateral institutions such as the UN, NATO, EU and OSCE

enhances its international status and its capacity to implement international norms. For example: during its mandate as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (2022–2023), Albania successfully defended principled positions on global crises, despite its limited capabilities (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania, nd). Within NATO, Albania contributes to collective defense and enhanced security guarantees as a full member since 2009. In EU forums, Albania engages proactively, despite its status as a candidate country, as it is involved in defining regional cooperation policies and aligns its positions with EU positions in Foreign Policy (European Parliament, 2025, para 60). Through the OSCE, Albania promotes regional stability, democratic governance, and conflict resolution, which was seen during its chairmanship of this organization in 2020 (OSCE, 2020). Albania's participation in multilateral forums reflects both a practical need to address its challenges through cooperative mechanisms, as well as a strategic choice to strengthen its national security.

During his tenure, Prime Minister Edi Rama has intensified the practice of *personal diplomacy*. Thanks to this diplomacy at the personal prime ministerial level, high-profile engagements, direct communication with various leaders, and active participation in global forums have significantly raised Albania's stature. This personalized style produces flexibility and the ability to react quickly to events, although it risks overlooking institutional diplomacy and long-term strategic coherence. However, thanks to this approach of Rama, Albania has significantly increased its profile in the international arena.

In conclusion, the current architecture of Albania's Foreign Policy reflects a pragmatic, multidimensional strategy, rooted in Euro-Atlanticism – in the form of a regional and multilateral engagement. By prioritizing its role in NATO, EU membership, transatlantic partnerships and strategic balancing in the region, Albania has managed to establish a role as a modest but proactive actor on the international stage. Despite challenges, particularly in managing regional disputes and institutional capacity, Albania's Foreign Policy demonstrates coherence, adaptability and a certain level of sophistication.

## Findings and Analysis

### *Ideological Survivalism (1945–1990)*

During the Cold War, Albania's foreign policy was primarily shaped by the imperative of regime survival within a bipolar system dominated by great powers. In realist terms, Albania functioned as a weak state navigating existential insecurity by attaching itself to stronger ideological patrons. The succession of alignments—with Yugoslavia (1945–1948), the Soviet Union (1948–1961), and

later China (1961–1978)—illustrated a continuous cycle of bandwagoning and balancing designed to safeguard autonomy while maintaining internal control.

Each alliance shift reflected structural pressures in the international system rather than ideological conviction. The alliance with Yugoslavia initially provided Albania with political legitimacy and material aid, but the rupture following Tito's break with Stalin exposed Albania's acute vulnerability. The subsequent orientation toward Moscow was a calculated realist response, ensuring military protection and economic assistance in exchange for ideological conformity. Similarly, the later pivot to Beijing was not an ideological leap but a defensive maneuver against Soviet coercion following Khrushchev's rapprochement with the West.

After the Chinese-Albanian split in 1978, Enver Hoxha institutionalized an extreme form of autarkic realism under the doctrine of "self-reliance." The pursuit of total isolation—rejection of both superpower blocs, withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact, and refusal to join the Helsinki process—underscored a survivalist rationality rooted in distrust of external dependence. Albania's diplomacy became a tool of internal consolidation rather than external engagement. As Beaudry (2020) notes, these policies prioritized the protection of regime sovereignty over national development, confirming the realist expectation that small, insecure states often equate survival with isolation.

In sum, Albania's Cold War foreign policy confirms the realist hypothesis: that small states under systemic pressure adopt alignment and withdrawal strategies to preserve autonomy. The pattern of alternating bandwagoning and self-isolation demonstrated Albania's perception of the international system as a constant threat to its survival.

### *Strategic Realignment (1991–2000)*

The collapse of communism in 1991 ushered Albania into an era of institutional fragility and external dependence. In realist terms, the state's survival again depended on securing external support, but unlike the Cold War period, this support now came from the Western liberal order. The early post-communist governments framed alignment with the United States and the European Union as a strategy for both legitimacy and protection.

The crises of the 1990s—economic collapse, mass emigration, and the 1997 civil unrest—exposed Albania's structural weakness. The intervention of an international peacekeeping force under Operation Alba (1997), led by Italy and authorized by the United Nations, symbolized the loss of autonomous control but also the beginning of a shelter-seeking adaptation. As Thorhallsson and Bailes (2017) argue, small states often compensate for domestic fragility through external shelters—political, economic, or security-based. Albania's dependency on Western aid, the IMF, and the World Bank epitomized this logic of reliance.

At the same time, the early 1990s marked a strategic realignment from ideological isolation to institutional integration. Albania applied for NATO membership in 1992, joined the Partnership for Peace in 1994, and signed initial agreements with the EU that paved the way for future accession. These steps demonstrate the emergence of a new behavioral pattern: seeking stability through multilateralism rather than self-reliance.

In this period, the country began to shift from defensive realism—focused on immediate regime security—to an embryonic form of liberal institutional adaptation, recognizing that international legitimacy could enhance rather than constrain sovereignty. The realignment of the 1990s thus marks the first stage of Albania's transformation from survivalist isolation to integrationist pragmatism.

### *Euro-Atlantic Consolidation (2000–2020)*

By the early 2000s, Albania had institutionalized its Western orientation and entered a phase of Euro-Atlantic consolidation. The defining features of this period—NATO membership (2009) and EU candidate status (2014)—represent not only foreign-policy achievements but also a profound shift in Albania's strategic logic.

Under the lens of liberal institutionalism, Albania's behavior aligns with the argument that small states can mitigate vulnerability through institutional embedding and cooperative security (Keohane, 1984). Integration into NATO provided a security shelter, while engagement with the EU offered economic and normative benefits. Albania's participation in regional initiatives such as the Stability Pact, the Regional Cooperation Council, and the Berlin Process further reflected its adaptation to rule-based multilateralism.

The persistence of pro-Western consensus across political changes indicates that this orientation was not merely elite-driven but became part of Albania's foreign-policy identity. The consolidation phase also marks Albania's emergence as a reliable contributor to collective defense and peacekeeping—participating in missions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Balkans. Such behavior mirrors the small-state strategy of enhancing reputation and influence through cooperative engagement (Wivel, 2014).

From a theoretical standpoint, this phase validates the neoliberal expectation that small states can achieve security and legitimacy not by isolating themselves, but by embedding within international institutions that constrain larger powers. Albania's Euro-Atlantic consolidation thus represents the maturation of its adaptive diplomacy—a shift from dependency to strategic participation.

## *Smart Diplomacy and Regional Pragmatism (2020–2025)*

The most recent period reveals Albania's attempt to transition from reactive alignment to proactive "smart" diplomacy. Under Prime Minister Edi Rama (2013–present), foreign policy has combined firm Euro-Atlantic alignment with pragmatic engagement in the Western Balkans and beyond. This multidimensional approach—balancing relations with the United States, the EU, Turkey, Italy, and Greece—reflects a sophisticated form of smart-state behavior (Thorhallsson, 2018; Wivel, 2014). Rama's government has conceptualized Albania's diplomacy through a flexible "strategic triangle," and later "quadrilateral," linking partnerships with key regional and European actors. The goal has been to attract investment, mediate regional tensions, and expand Albania's diplomatic profile. Initiatives such as participation in the *Open Balkan* framework and leadership roles in multilateral institutions—the OSCE Chairmanship (2020) and the UN Security Council seat (2022–2023)—demonstrate Albania's ability to leverage institutions for visibility and influence disproportionate to its size.

While maintaining its foundational alignment with the United States and NATO, Albania has also pursued balanced relations with Turkey and Greece, showcasing its diplomatic agility. Such behavior aligns with Thorhallsson's (2012) notion of *strategic flexibility*, where small states maintain autonomy by diversifying their partnerships. This phase epitomizes the culmination of Albania's foreign-policy transformation: from survivalist reactivity to adaptive proactivity. By combining realist alignment with neoliberal institutional participation, Albania now acts as a "smart small state" capable of navigating competing pressures through coordination, credibility, and multilateral activism.

## **Discussion**

The findings confirm the central hypothesis that Albania's foreign policy trajectory represents a gradual shift from survivalist isolation to adaptive and multidimensional diplomacy. This evolution encapsulates the hybrid logic of small-state behavior: constrained by structural realities but empowered through strategic adaptation.

From a realist perspective, Albania's Cold War foreign policy aligns with the classic model of small-state survival under anarchy. Its shifting alliances and autarkic withdrawal reflect Walt's (1987) balance-of-threat logic, where survival depends on either bandwagoning with or balancing against stronger powers. The post-1991 phase, however, demonstrates the limits of realism: as systemic constraints eased, Albania sought not mere survival but legitimacy and agency through Western integration.

From a liberal institutionalist perspective, Albania's participation in NATO, the EU, and regional frameworks demonstrates how small states exploit institutional mechanisms to offset power asymmetries. By embedding itself within rule-based orders, Albania gained security "shelters" and enhanced its international reputation. This confirms Keohane's (1984) claim that institutions can reduce uncertainty and empower weaker actors.

Finally, within the smart-state framework, Albania's contemporary diplomacy exemplifies strategic flexibility. It has learned to navigate asymmetry through reputation, multilateralism, and leadership in niche areas. Initiatives such as the OSCE chairmanship and UN Security Council membership signal an attempt to project influence through diplomacy rather than material power.

Overall, the Albanian case contributes to small-state theory by illustrating how survival imperatives can evolve into strategic sophistication. The trajectory from ideological isolation to smart diplomacy underscores a broader theoretical point: that vulnerability can serve as a catalyst for adaptation. Albania's experience demonstrates that small states, when embedded in institutional networks and guided by pragmatic leadership, can transcend material weakness and emerge as credible, even influential, actors within the international system.

## Conclusion

Albania's foreign policy trajectory illustrates one of the most profound transformations among post-communist small states in Europe. From the rigid isolationism of the Cold War to the flexible, multidimensional diplomacy of the twenty-first century, Albania has evolved from a survival-driven regime to a proactive international actor embedded in Euro-Atlantic structures. This evolution validates the article's central hypothesis: that Albania's foreign policy reflects a gradual transition from *survivalist isolation*—focused on regime preservation and ideological autonomy—to *adaptive, multidimensional diplomacy* consistent with the behavior of a "smart but small" model in foreign policy.

The findings demonstrate that each historical phase of Albania's foreign policy corresponds to a distinct theoretical logic. During the Cold War (1945–1990), Albania embodied the realist model of small-state behavior: bandwagoning alternately with Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, and China to preserve regime security, and later resorting to autarky when alliances threatened sovereignty. This stage was characterized by the primacy of survival and autonomy within a hostile international system, confirming the realist assumption that small states seek protection by aligning with or withdrawing from dominant powers.

The post-communist period (1991–2000) represented a phase of strategic realignment and dependency, in which Albania shifted from ideological rigidity

to institutional shelter-seeking. The collapse of internal structures and the chaos of 1997 highlighted Albania's need for external support, leading to its reliance on Western institutions, financial assistance, and peacekeeping intervention. From a theoretical perspective, this phase marked a transition from defensive realism toward the logic of liberal institutionalism, as Albania recognized that participation in rule-based institutions could provide stability and legitimacy beyond traditional alliance politics.

The Euro-Atlantic consolidation phase (2000–2020) confirmed this institutional turn. Through NATO membership (2009) and EU candidate status (2014), Albania became fully integrated into Western security and governance structures. The consolidation of its transatlantic identity reflects the adaptive capacity of a small state to translate vulnerability into opportunity by embedding itself within cooperative regimes. These developments align with Keohane's (1984) argument that institutions not only constrain power but also empower smaller actors by reducing uncertainty and offering predictable frameworks for engagement.

In the most recent period (2020–2025), Albania's diplomacy under Prime Minister Edi Rama demonstrates a more sophisticated form of agency. By balancing strong Euro-Atlantic alignment with pragmatic regional engagement—particularly with Italy, Turkey and Greece—Albania has developed a flexible, multidimensional foreign policy. Its active role in multilateral forums, including the OSCE Chairmanship (2020) and its term on the UN Security Council (2022–2023), illustrates how small states can enhance their visibility and influence through diplomatic initiative rather than material power. This phase exemplifies the “smart state” logic described by Thorhallsson and Wivel: using strategic flexibility, multilateral activism, and reputation to offset material limitations.

Theoretically, the Albanian case reinforces the argument that small states are not passive objects of systemic constraints but adaptive agents capable of learning and repositioning. By combining realist alignment strategies with neoliberal institutional engagement, Albania demonstrates how small states can move from existential defensiveness to strategic innovation. Its trajectory reveals that the pursuit of survival can evolve into the pursuit of influence once institutional embedding and international credibility are achieved.

Looking forward, Albania's challenge lies in sustaining this balance between strategic dependence and diplomatic autonomy. As global and regional dynamics shift—with renewed great-power rivalry and uncertainty in the European integration process—Albania's success as a smart small state will depend on its ability to maintain flexibility, uphold credibility within NATO and the EU, and continue promoting stability in the Western Balkans. Ultimately, Albania's foreign policy evolution offers a broader lesson for small-state theory: vulnerability, when accompanied by institutional adaptation and pragmatic leadership, can become a foundation for strategic leverage in an uncertain international system.

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