



## **Weekly Briefing**

**Lithuania external relations briefing:  
Lithuania's foreign relations according to the world system theory  
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## **Lithuania's foreign relations according to the world system theory**

Since about a year ago, global politics entered a turbulent period where the dormant animosities between the major powers have resurfaced with a new force, heralding a period of intense international rivalry for the world's political and economic world order. The resolute conclusions of the Munich Security Conference last October attest to that. Lithuania has not been left aside from these tensions – on the contrary, willingly brought into their epicentre. Being an active member of the Western defence and political alliances, Lithuania has followed the lead of its main members. It has readily realigned its foreign policies vis-a-vis major powers and has reoriented the foreign policy to reflect the changing balance within the international state system.

The country has firmly rallied behind the United States and its transatlantic allies in support of the US-led leadership in global affairs in contrast to the multi-polar world as perceived and pursued by the contenders to the US dominance since the end of the Cold War. Further, Lithuania took an unprecedented step to formulate, manifest and put into practice the value-based foreign policy principles applying them concerning the hotspots across Eurasia and the adjacent territories: from Belarus and Western Balkans to the Caucasus and even the South China Sea.

Below is a brief outline of Lithuania's current foreign policy relations from the perspective of the world state system theory. Using this theory it tries to explain the main drivers that influenced the country's foreign policy reorientation according to the global tectonic shifts in international affairs that have been taking place.

Lithuania's robust approach and even assertiveness in foreign policy on the issues hitherto rather secondary to the national interests (such as those related to Belarus, the Caucasus or the China South Sea region) came as a surprise to many observers. Some even questioned the rationale (puzzled by the tone and the style of new diplomacy), let alone the end-goals of such interests of a small state covering extensive jurisdictions worldwide. The analysts even considered whether the new foreign policy with a global outlook represents a break from the previous, less regionally-defined or more locally-informed foreign policy or whether it is a continuation of the previous foreign policy precepts only with a newfound focus – new wine in the old bottles.

Lithuania's foreign policy as is the case of any other contemporary state is a function of the role of the nation-state within the international state system. As conceptualized by Immanuel Wallerstein, the world system theory (firmly embedded in the field of International Relations) defines the world state system as consisting of the core states, the peripheral states, and the semi-peripheral states. Belonging to each type of the sub-system sets the operational limits and opens the possibilities for the projection of the state power concerning other state actors. The recent research has refined Wallerstein's theory, suggesting that the key role within the global state system is played by the semi-peripheral states, which are defined in two subcategories – the strong semi-periphery states (also referred to as the regional powers) and the weak semi-periphery states (referred to as secondary regional states).

A number of typologies have been produced and validated using the econometrical and socio-political data. They show that, for example, the Soviet Union was a strong semi-periphery with a superpower status and the unfulfilled aspirations for the global world order. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Lithuania re-emerged as a peripheral state which sought to politically and economically align and subsequently catch up with the advanced economies, represented by the core states. After the realisation of the double aim to join the EU and NATO in 2004, Lithuania started a decade-long process of deeper integration into the Western political, economic and defence alliances, thus effectively turning from a peripheral state to a semi-peripheral state. The latter was accomplished by 2015, when the country's application for membership in OECD was finally granted and the country joined the club of the most developed countries. Already prior to that, in 2013, the World Bank reclassified Lithuania along with Latvia and Estonia raising their status from the "upper middle income" states to that of "high-income countries" in terms of GDP per capita (over 12616 USD). In 2020 the GDP per capita in Lithuania stood at 19998 USD, clearly showing that the country has been firmly on the path of development of high-income countries with an ambition to join the most prosperous ones.

The rapid economic growth of the country during the years prior and even during the COVID period, at the time of the global recession, has contributed to a new quest of Lithuania of embarking on the way to overcome the so-called trap of middle income countries by transitioning from a semi-periphery into a semi-core country to be even more closely integrated into the advanced economies as is the case for the Visegrad countries (Poland, Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary) or Slovenia.

Over the recent years, Lithuania's foreign policy, including its focused economic diplomacy, has aligned with the country's changing position and ambition within the international state system. According to the latest research, Lithuania stands out within a group

of weak semi-periphery state which includes Romania, Cyprus, Iceland, the Persian Gulf states (Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman), Malaysia, Brunei, Uruguay, Chile, the Bahamas. Those states (except for Chile and Malaysia) comprise relatively small national territories. The difference between this group of countries and the strong semi-peripheral countries (regional powers) lies in material capacities. The weak semi-peripheral states lack the military-economic power of the strong semi-peripheral countries. However, in terms of socio-economic advancement, these militarily weaker countries have more developed socio-institutional powers, providing better quality of life and social welfare.

However, structurally, the smaller semi-peripheral countries, though lacking robustness in material and immaterial capacities compared to the states closer to the core of the world state system, have more scope for operation semi-independently. To quote one of the authors, “they have a fairly broad margin of self-determination in the conduct of their internal business and an appreciable capacity for independent international action”. Hence, the smaller active states in the semi-periphery (such as Lithuania, Iceland) derive their mandate for conducting international affairs from the idea of national unity and its international projection. Lithuania’s foreign policy is built upon two concepts – the idea of global Lithuania (“Globali Lietuva” in Lithuanian) and the idea of “the might of Lithuania” (“Lietuvos galia” in Lithuanian); the latter is based on civil society and the promotion of the values as enshrined in the Constitution.

The diaspora diplomacy has pursued the idea of global Lithuania with no efforts spared for closer integration of Lithuanian diaspora with the nation-state through activities aiming to sustain educating the diaspora and involving in the political processes, for example, by having a specially designated mandate for a seat in the parliament allocated in single-mandate constituency for citizens residing and voting abroad. Concomitantly, the promotion of value-based diplomacy has pursued the idea of the might of Lithuania by supporting democracies around the world. The pursuit of this idea is done primarily through maintaining direct contacts between Lithuania's parliamentary groups and their counterparts in other countries.

Since the foreign policy is based on the projection of national unity and democratic values it depends on the parliament's political representation. It is increasingly informed by partisan opinions, even if the foreign policy principles are agreed upon on a by-partisan principle. Thus, it makes it easy for the Executive branch of power to refocus the foreign policy scope ad hoc, unless there is a direct conflict between the governing majority and the President’s office. However, according to the current political alignment, both the President (whose emphasis on the national unity has become a signature of his presidency) and the governing majority (emphasizing the projection of national unity globally through value-based foreign policy

actions) in the Parliament are aligned on foreign policy. Thus, the idea of the national unity fully reinforces its international projection and vice versa.

Thus, Lithuania's foreign relation with the core states within the Western political and defence alliance are aligned according, but not exclusively, to the current security arrangements within NATO for protecting the country. Their scope is further aligned with the national threat assessment done by the security services and made public to the public annually. Within the EU Lithuania's foreign policy focused on deepening the contacts with the governments of the countries that extend the military capabilities of Lithuania, namely, Belgium, the Czech Republic and Germany, the Netherlands, Norway as part of the NATO enhanced Forward Presence and the US that provide additional mechanised infantry support on a rotational basis. The foreign policy then acts as an instrument to operationalize the national threats assessment at an international level.

Additional emphasis is based on becoming an international donor to the peripheral countries, first of all, the EU Eastern Partnership quartet (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Armenia) and the Western Balkan countries aspiring to join the EU with the next wave of enlargement, namely, North Macedonia and Albania. Here, Lithuania aims to support the integration of those countries into the European Community and bringing the most prominent ones (Ukraine and Georgia are at the top of the list) into a closer arrangement with NATO.

These activities contribute to immaterial capacities of Lithuania, including raising political, communicative and cultural attraction of the country to these countries that are on the periphery in between weak and strong semi-peripheral states. This type of power, which Lithuania's foreign policy has been exerting with a maximum effort, is defined in literature as the soft power. Yet, the soft power depends to a large extent on the material capacities, including the military-economical capacities, and the immaterial capacities such as the socio-economic level of attainment and the role model. By focusing on putting the defence and security concerns and the promotion of the democratic values Lithuania follows a behaviour of the semi-peripheral state which is determined and influenced by core processes within the advanced economies in the same way that it is affected and intervened by the processes in the peripheral state through EU neighbourhood policy.

The efforts to upgrade Lithuania's position to the semi-core of the Western world would unmistakably bring a number of challenges of aligning the core and peripheral processes to keep the foreign policy on a steady course. Hence, Lithuania's foreign relations may fluctuate due the circumstances that are beyond its reach.

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