

Edström, H., Gyllensporre, D., & Westberg, J. (2018). *Military strategy of small states: Responding to external shocks of the 21st century*. Routledge. 216pp. ISBN: 978-1-3510-5434-8. Pbk/eBook: US\$39.16; Hbk: US\$128.00

In recent years, scholars have dedicated immense effort to unveiling the military strategies and defence posture of various countries, according to their categorising idiosyncrasies: small states, middle powers, and great powers. Edström and Westberg are at the fore in this regard, having already published three books on this subject, each one focusing on a specific ‘category’ of state.

The idea behind the book might seem simple at first. The liberal order has been challenged on several occasions, creating disquieting uncertainties. This has bred a changing security environment, which is pressuring states to review their military strategies and defence postures towards unexpected events. Within this scenario, the authors set out to assess how four ‘small states’ (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden) have adjusted their military and defence strategies to respond to external strategic shocks. Based on Colin Gray’s work on defence planning, the authors define strategic shocks as unexpected events with deep consequences, demanding immediate countermeasures by the political authorities of a given country. Therefore, the main events analysed in the book involve: the 9/11 terrorist attacks (2001), the Russo-Georgian war (2008), the first Russian war against Ukraine (2013/14), and the rise of Islamic State (ISIS). The authors argue that these events have exerted large influence and change around their common external environment.

The book’s first chapter introduces its main arguments: which case study countries will be assessed; the shocks they will face; and a brief and limited discussion about continuity and change in small states’ strategies. The second chapter presents the research design of the book and engages with two main topics: the definition of small states (which I consider the most problematic issue of the book), and the conceptualization of strategic shocks. First, the approach chosen to define small states does not seem satisfactory – or even fair – when considering the robustness of the literature on small states. The material definitions deployed by the authors – conceiving of the size of these states solely on the basis of their military and economic capacity (in the vein of Rothstein’s work and Keohane’s Lilliputian dilemma) and data used by the World Bank to classify countries as ‘small’, without due consideration for perceptual and preferential factors (as offered by more recent theorists such as Thorhallsson), fails to give a comprehensive picture of the capabilities of small states in the current security environment. Moreover, the authors’ identification of small state scholarship focuses disproportionately on European countries; so it is not clear whether the lessons derived are more broadly applicable to states beyond the Western paradigm.

Nevertheless, the chapter does deserve credit for the straightforward definition of ‘strategic shocks’ established by the authors. In contrast to the vague definition initially purveyed in the first chapter, the authors build upon Colin Gray’s work, whereby he identifies that ‘shocks’ are partly dependent on the actor’s perceptions, evaluations and reactions. Therefore, perceiving of something as a strategic shock is rather arbitrary, since elites in different countries may not perceive of an incident as being something deeply consequential.

This subjective approach means that strategic shocks will affect individual states differently. Thus, whilst the four Nordic countries share various structural aspects related to strategic exposure, geography, military power and interdependence, and may thus be presumed to react similarly to changes in their strategic environment, Edström and Westberg disagree with this preconception. Indeed, chapters 3 to 6 offer empirical observations of how the four Nordic countries have responded to the four selected shocks at the political-strategic level. There are moments when they have acted in consonance; but they also manifest significant diversity in their strategies.

Chapters 4 and 5 offer a cross-country analysis of the four countries and their response to the 9/11 terrorist attack and Russo-Georgian war of 2008. The posture and response of the Nordic countries are systematically reviewed in light of neo-realist concepts of International Relations: *balancing*, *band wagoning*, *isolation and hedging*. Using realist approaches to analyse countries other than great powers can be tricky; however the authors excel in maintaining military strategy as the focal point, which is a critical asset for any realist assessment. Here, although the countries perceived a threatening environment mutually, their strategies varied according to historical experiences and geographical characteristics.

The rise of Islamic State and the Caliphate and the Russian annexation of Crimea both occurred in 2014; they are both analysed in chapter 6. Here, it was clear that the most urgent matter for the four Nordic countries was the aggressive Russian policy, which shifted attention from other issues in the Middle East. The four countries opted for *band wagoning* towards NATO and the EU, while adopting a stronger *balancing* posture towards Russia. This correlated both historical experiences and the degree of geographical proximity with the aggressor.

The book falls short in giving due consideration to small states that do not share the same capabilities as the four Nordic examples. Even though these selected countries lack systemic impact and capability resourcefulness, small advanced economies do not share most of the vulnerabilities faced by small developing states. To develop a deeper understanding of the factors that help or hinder the military strategies of small states, the book could have expanded its remit by offering comparative insights into small states that are more hamstrung militarily and economically than the relative success of the Nordics might suggest.

On the other hand, the key contribution of the book lies in the wider applicability of its lessons for small states in terms of how they can use coalitions and cooperation to gain more room to manoeuvre within the international system; reinforcing how history and geography continue to play an important role in defining these countries' strategies; and proving that small states have an array of options to define their posture, in alignment with the status quo or not.

The book is a worthy addition to the scholarly literature on small states. Its present findings are limited to the lessons from small advanced economies in the Western hemisphere; but the methodology applied and some features raised by the authors have extensive transfer potential. These can be used to further advance studies related to the military strategy and defence of small states and territories.

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