

Bernard F. W. Loo (2022). *Strategy and defense policy for small states*. World Scientific. 188pp, ebk. ISBN: 978-981-124-430-8. US\$62.00.

This volume, as its editor posits, seeks to lay out the understanding of strategic studies within the context of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore. To that end, the book fulfils the particularistic aim of delving into strategic studies within this specific context. Additionally, the central theme of the book rests on the notion that, despite the logic of strategic studies being universal, the manner by which concepts are translated into defence policy and strategy depends on numerous factors, such as history, geography, culture, and technology. Against this backdrop, this volume also seeks to operationalize concepts within strategic studies for small states.

The overarching theme across the seven constituent chapters of this book is the translation of the “grammar” of strategic studies for small states, in order to inform their overall defence policies and strategies. While the introduction mentions the utility of this exercise for small states as a collective category, the succeeding chapters largely focus on the implications and experiences for Singapore, and on state strategy, broadly defined.

In the first chapter, Loo presents a rich discussion of the role of geography in influencing the defence policies and strategies of states, including setting the stage for their interests. The following chapter offers an equally substantial discussion on strategic culture and strategy. Loo argues that strategic culture is a mindset that is focused on specific strategic preferences for the state. This strategic culture is used by the state’s policymakers to gauge their strategic environment. Taken together, the first two chapters provide foundational discussions on strategic studies and illuminate the role that strategic culture and geography can play in a state’s perception of its own international political environment.

In the third chapter, Weichong Ong presents a comprehensive historical account of Singapore’s military and its evolution from an institution with strong colonial and “vulnerability survival” focus, to one that is dynamic and modern. Ong argues that the “vulnerability survival” emphasis was rooted in the Singaporean military’s emphasis on addressing structural vulnerabilities resulting from the country’s small size and geographic location. By the 1990s, the Singaporean military had transformed into a more dynamic institution, focused not only on the country’s structural vulnerabilities, but one that is confident in its operational capabilities and willing to develop multinational partnerships. In the succeeding chapter, Loo extends the emphasis on militaries of small states by discussing the modernization efforts by small military organizations. This chapter emphasizes the empirical cases covering ten Southeast Asian states and offers insights on the dual dynamics of the lag in the adoption of technology by states such as Singapore and Indonesia, and the development of new military technology by states that dominate production of global military technology, such as Russia and the United States. Thus, chapters 3 and 4 cover the challenges and peculiarities of the militaries of small states and the need to address challenges that emanate from the limited capabilities of such states.

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The last three chapters of the volume discuss the evolving nature of security threats and the need for adaptability of modern military forces. In the fifth chapter, Loo discusses the changing character of war, which targets public opinion and emphasizes the denial of political legitimacy to opponents. The author uses the example of ISIS to illustrate the truly “global” nature of that organization, which appealed to individuals from across a wide range of societies and states. In the sixth chapter, Alistair Cook argues that humanitarian military engagement by armed forces offers them experience in active operational environments and opportunities to showcase military capacity and force projection, which have implications for both domestic and international audiences. In the seventh chapter, Hikaru Yamashita sketches the future landscape of international peace operations. He argues that it is likely to include a combination of Cold War-type traditional peace operations in interstate conflicts, peace operations driven by strategic rivalries, and peace operations as “enlightened” cooperation between strategic rivals. Overall, these three chapters provide detailed accounts of the evolving strategic space with the advent of new technologies, and both the challenges and opportunities that such a development presents to small states.

As a whole, the book provides a rich account of strategic studies in a modern context. Specifically, the chapters effectively cover and cogently deliberate upon strategic studies as understood at the IDSS. Furthermore, the authors parse the translation of the language associated with strategic studies very well by highlighting the evolving nature of threats, threat perception, and international military engagements. However, and in spite of its title, the majority of the chapters cover the overarching subfield of strategic studies and largely apply to *all* states. The peculiar contexts of small states are only directly discussed in Chapters 3 and 4; but even the content of these two chapters suggests that such discussions could be applicable to states that are not small.

This foregrounds a broader question about the intended audience and applicability of this edited volume. One of the book’s stated objectives is the development of strategic studies to address the conditions that are faced by small states. While there is some discussion of the sub-field within the context of small states, as illustrated by Chapters 2 and 3, overall the book contributes more to the general study of strategic studies as a sub-field, rather than advancing the literature on small states specifically. There is a burgeoning literature on the defence policies and strategies of small states as they pertain to state security and interests, as evidenced by recent works from Tom Long (2022), Tomáš Weiss and Geoffrey Edwards (2022), Anne-Marie Brady and Baldur Thorhallsson (2021) and Sarina Theys (2022). However, the book is not contextualized within that particular body of literature. Thus, the volume offers a rich set of introspections for strategic studies as a whole, but more work needs to be done in future to marry the sub-field with the literature pertaining specifically to small states. In this way, more significant lessons for small state defence policy can be gleaned in the years ahead.

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