

Small states, national identity, and globalization: A comparative analysis of Qatar, Iceland and Singapore

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Abstract: Small states in a world of increasing globalization find it difficult to maintain sovereignty and interact with global systems simultaneously. Traditional realist theories view small states as structurally weak and dependent, limited by resources, and a lack of strategic depth. Nevertheless, as seen in the cases of Qatar, Iceland, and Singapore, globalization may be used as a nation-building instrument instead of a risk to sovereignty. This study holds that globalization can be actively used by small states to build and strengthen national identity. By focusing on Qatar as the centre of the action, especially during and after the 2017 Gulf blockade, it demonstrates how energy diplomacy, soft power tools like Al Jazeera, and long-term strategies, such as Qatar National Vision 2030, contributed to enhancing national resilience. A comparative study between Iceland and Singapore also depicts some divergent strategies: Iceland was vulnerable due to its economic isolation, whereas Singapore took advantage of its openness and innovation to unify a coherent identity. Using a combination of realist and constructivist outlooks, the present study suggests that globalization, when wisely handled, may allow small states to establish agency, create national discourses, and increase their power in the international system.

Keywords: Comparative Politics, Globalization, Small States, Nation Building, Soft Power, Qatar, Singapore, Iceland

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Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, the dynamics between globalization and national identity in small states present a compelling area of investigation (Bunnell, 2002). While conventional wisdom often casts small states as inherently vulnerable within the international system because of their limited resources and influence, the experiences of several nations challenge this perception (Neemia, 1995). These states demonstrate the potential to strategically leverage globalization to safeguard and actively cultivate their national identity (Beck and Camiller, 2000). Qatar, Iceland, and Singapore serve as pertinent case studies, each navigating the forces of globalization in distinct ways and offering valuable insights into the complex interplay between global integration and national self-definition. Small states are often overlooked in international politics and are traditionally viewed as lacking the capacity to shape global events (Farha, 2010). The term "small" can be subjective and does not necessarily equate to inherent weakness (Thórhallsson and Steinsson, 2017). Instead, some small states strategically compensate for their limitations by forging alliances, actively participating in international institutions, and prioritizing specific sectors for development (Kristjánsson, 2022). It is important to note that the concept of "smallness" extends beyond mere physical size or population; it encompasses a range of factors such as economic output,

military strength, and diplomatic influence. Traditional realist theorists, such as Handel (1981), Jervis (1978), and Rothstein (1968), claim that small states are limited by their lack of resources and, therefore, must conform to the preferences of larger powers in the international system. These views tend to see small states as reactive rather than proactive in global politics. This paper disputes this idea by showing how certain small states – Qatar, Iceland, and Singapore – actively engage with globalization to assert their independence, build strong national identities, and in some cases, reshape their geopolitical position.

This study delves into the multifaceted relationship between small states, national identity, and globalization, using Qatar as a central case study and comparing it to Iceland and Singapore. This analysis seeks to understand how these states, despite their inherent size limitations, actively engage with globalization to reinforce their national identity and pursue their strategic interests. Globalization, characterized by increasing interconnectedness among states through trade, capital, information, and people, presents both opportunities and challenges for small states (Farha, 2010). While it offers access to larger markets, technological advancements, and diverse cultural influences, it also poses the risks of cultural homogenization, economic dependence, and vulnerability to external shocks. The central argument of this paper is that under certain conditions, small states can leverage globalization to strengthen their national identity and enhance their resilience in the international system, even though some scholars argue that small states lack the ability to develop independent policies in international affairs. This involves a delicate balancing act of embracing global integration while simultaneously preserving and promoting unique cultural heritage, values, and traditions.

This study begins by examining the case of Qatar, a small state that has undergone rapid transformation in recent decades, propelled by its vast energy resources and strategic geopolitical positioning. The 2017 blockade imposed by neighbouring Gulf states serves as a crucial turning point, highlighting Qatar's resilience and ability to assert its sovereignty in the face of external pressure. Finally, this study analyses how Qatar has utilized its natural resources, soft power initiatives, and international alliances to counteract isolation and project its influence on the global stage.

Qatar's national identity and strategy must be understood within the highly competitive Gulf security landscape. Large regional actors and asymmetric rivalries shape how Qatar perceives threats and how Qatar projects its identity. The 2017 blockade, as well as regional tensions, drove Qatar to pursue strategic hedging, external balancing, and rapid diversification, largely as a reaction to the regional order as opposed to a purely domestic choice (Khatib, 2013; Miller, 2020).

The analysis extends beyond Qatar to include Iceland and Singapore, two small states that have adopted contrasting strategies for navigating globalization. Through a comparative analysis, this study identifies key factors that contribute to the success or failure of small states in leveraging globalization to strengthen their national identity. The examination of Iceland reveals the vulnerabilities of an isolationist approach, particularly in the context of economic crises in the country. Conversely, Singapore exemplifies a model of globalization-driven success, effectively balancing economic pragmatism with the preservation of cultural heritage and social cohesion. This study contributes to the existing literature on small states and globalization by providing a nuanced understanding of the strategies they employ to navigate the complexities of the contemporary international system. By examining the experiences of Qatar, Iceland, and Singapore, this paper offers insights into how small states can leverage

globalization to reinforce their national identity, enhance their resilience, and pursue their strategic interests in an increasingly interconnected world.

The Qatari case highlights the state's proactive use of its resources and soft power to redefine its national narrative amid regional challenges. Iceland's experience serves as a cautionary tale, illustrating the potential pitfalls of economic isolation in a globalized world. While Singapore's success provides a contrasting example, showcasing the benefits of strategic integration into the global economy while maintaining a strong sense of national identity.

Qatar's approach involves strategically leveraging its energy wealth to pursue long-term strategic goals, even at the expense of short-term stability (Miller, 2020). The nation's investments in global assets and infrastructure reflect its ambitions to become a major player in international affairs (Tok, Koç, and D'Alessandro, 2020).

Beyond its domestic initiatives, Qatar's sustained multi-directional diplomacy with the U.S., China, Russia, India, and key European states has been a significant component of Qatar's international profile and its negotiating power. As a primary supplier of LNG, Qatar has critical economic positionality vis-a-vis Asian energy markets, as energy-importing countries in Asia become economically dependent on Qatari LNG (Miller, 2020; Tok, Koç & D'Alessandro, 2020; Cochrane et al., 2024).

Qatar's ability to overcome the blockade underscores the importance of strategic alliances and diversification in mitigating external pressures. Furthermore, Qatar's use of soft power tools, such as Al Jazeera and its investments in education and cultural initiatives, plays a crucial role in shaping its national image and promoting its interests abroad (Hallaq, 2013). Analysing Qatar's nation-building efforts through the lens of Qatar National Vision 2030 reveals the intricate intersection between national development goals and global engagement strategies (Faghih and Sarfaraz, 2014). Qatar has strategically invested in the sports sector to achieve domestic and foreign policy objectives (Reiche, 2014).

Furthermore, by examining Iceland's experience with the 2008 financial crisis, this paper underscores the vulnerabilities of small states that rely heavily on specific sectors or markets. Iceland's experience serves as a reminder of the need for diversification and prudent financial management in an era of increasing global economic interconnectedness.

Conversely, Singapore's success story highlights the potential benefits of embracing globalization while maintaining a strong focus on education, innovation, and good governance (Farha, 2010). Singapore's ability to attract foreign investment, develop a skilled workforce, and foster a culture of innovation has enabled it to thrive in a highly competitive global environment. Singapore has thrived due to the Economic Development Board's absolute authority to develop and implement strategies (Edwards, 2003). The convergence of innovation policies and locational competitiveness has enabled Singapore to emerge as a crucial infrastructure node within global production networks (Ebner, 2004). Globalization has also assisted Singapore in growing its education system by attracting students and academics from all over the world. Qatar has invested in education, research, and technology to build a knowledge-based economy (Weber, 2014). The theoretical benefits of decentralization appeal to countries that desire social and economic development through advanced educational systems (Romanowski & Du, 2020). The Qatar Foundation has worked with FC Barcelona to promote Qatar's image worldwide using football as a country branding strategy (Portet and Vela, 2013). This research is crucial because it investigates how Qatar has changed its policies

to become a significant player in the international arena. This study emphasizes how Qatar has used its natural gas resources to establish itself as a major player in the global energy market. The combination of strategic hedging, resilience, and modernization forms the core of Qatar's national identity narrative. Qatar's investments in sports also enhance its soft power and global reputation (Reiche, 2014; Saberi, Paris, and Marochi, 2018; Reiche, 2014). The rise of Qatar has been attributed to the nexus of business and political elites that facilitates the networking of international sports organizations and global capital (Amara and Theodoraki, 2010).

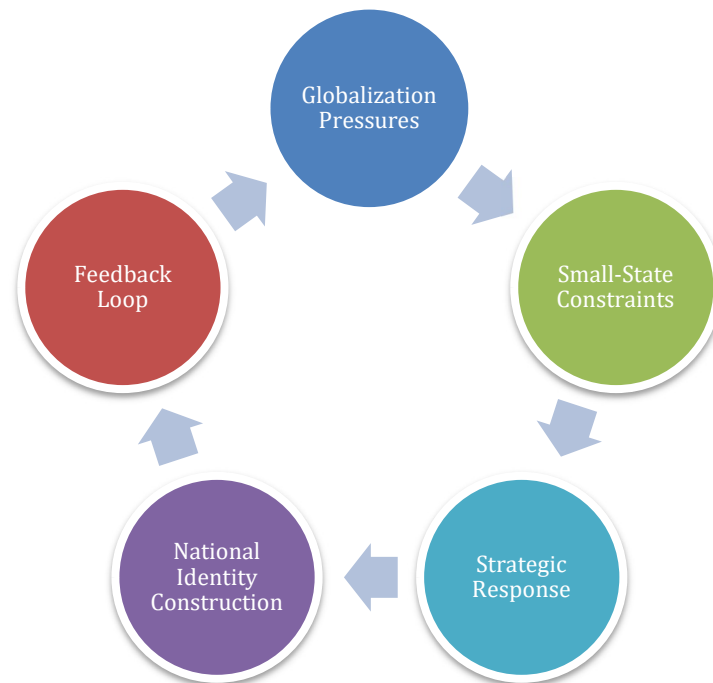
The comparative set (Qatar, Iceland, and Singapore) is selected not only for small size in land area and population but also because each exemplifies a different pathway of the small states using globalization for the construction of state identity: (a) a resource-endowed, state-directed model that uses energy and state branding (Qatar); (b) an economy-vulnerable, culture-anchored model that exemplifies crisis-induced identity reconfiguration (Iceland); and (c) a state-controlled openness model where the systemic framework of globalization is operationalized through a technocrat and social engineering (Singapore) (Þórhallsson & Steinsson, 2017; Menon, 2007; Miller, 2020). The common analytical threads such as strong state steering of identity, clear external dependency vectors, and a state-initiated national development blueprint make cross-case comparison analytically coherent and productive.

Literature review

The topic of small states in international relations has been a subject of scholarly inquiry for decades, with early studies often focusing on their vulnerabilities and limitations in the face of larger and more powerful actors. However, recent scholarship has challenged these assumptions, highlighting the agency and adaptability of small states in navigating the complexities of the global arena. Early research on small states emphasized their structural weaknesses, such as limited resources, small populations, and dependence on external actors. These studies often portray small states as passive recipients of global forces, with little capacity to shape their destinies. However, subsequent research has revealed a more nuanced picture, demonstrating how small states can leverage their unique characteristics and strategic advantages to exert influence and achieve their goals (Khatib, 2013). Several theoretical frameworks have been applied to the study of small states, including realism, liberalism, constructivism, and the concept of small statehood. Realist perspectives emphasize the importance of power and security in shaping small states' behaviour, while liberal approaches highlight the role of international institutions and cooperation. In contrast, constructivist perspectives focus on the role of ideas, norms, and identity in shaping the foreign policies of small states. Scholars have also examined the impact of globalization on small states, with some arguing that it poses a threat to their sovereignty and cultural identity; and others contending that it provides new opportunities for economic development and political clout.

A conceptual framework is proposed, illustrating how globalization pressures, structural constraints, and strategic responses interact to shape small-state identity formation within realist and constructivist perspectives. The process by which small states deal with globalization is cyclical, as presented in [Figure 1](#), and converts pressure from the outside world into a strategic response and the consequence of identity building.

Figure 1: How small states deal with globalisation: a cyclical process



Realist perspectives have long dominated the discourse on small states in international relations (IR). Handel (1981) argues that small states lack strategic depth and must rely on alliances to ensure survival, while Rothstein (1968) defines smallness in relation to the extent to which a state can influence or is influenced by the balance of power. Similarly, Jervis (1978) emphasized that small states are particularly vulnerable in anarchic international systems, where larger powers shape the rules. These views tend to portray small states as reactive actors, structurally constrained by material limitations, and dependent on external patronage for survival. This paper challenges these assumptions by showing how certain small states—most notably Qatar—have developed creative strategies to assert their agency, resist dependency, and actively shape their national identities in the global order. According to constructivists, small states' foreign policy is influenced by how they understand what constitutes an acceptable human rights policy (Behraves, 2011).

The existing literature on small states tends to focus on their foreign policy orientations, security strategies, and economic development models. However, less attention has been paid to the ways in which small states construct and maintain their national identities in the face of globalization (Sutton, 2011). This study addresses this gap by examining how Qatar, Iceland, and Singapore have navigated the challenges and opportunities of globalization to shape their national narratives and reinforce their sense of collective identity. The experiences of these three states offer valuable insights into the diverse strategies that small states can employ to assert their sovereignty, promote their interests, and maintain their distinctiveness in an increasingly interconnected world. These states strategically position themselves as bridge builders in international relations.

Small states have been defined and categorized in various ways, often based on factors such as population size, economic output, and military capability. However, these quantitative measures often fail to capture the qualitative aspects of small statehood, such as unique vulnerabilities, strategic advantages, and foreign policy orientations. Some scholars have argued that small states should be defined not by their size but by their behavior, focusing on their tendency to pursue multilateralism, diplomacy, and niche diplomacy (Þórhallsson and Steinsson, 2017). These states are frequently nimble and adaptable to changes. Small states can cooperate with other states as strategies if they are universal. The importance of being small for small states relies not only on the concept of size but also on their asymmetrical relationship with powerful states (Kristjánsson, 2022). Small states may be unable to develop independent policies in international affairs because they lack influence, military size, or surplus capabilities. Small European states, such as Denmark, Norway, Luxembourg, Austria, the Netherlands, Latvia, Slovakia, and Iceland, can be defined by characteristics such as limited diplomatic resources, lack of military capacity, economic and territorial size, and image (Kristjánsson, 2022). Small states are impacted by their relationships with other states, particularly asymmetrical ones, which affect their international identities, the definition of their interests, and the options they have for achieving their goals. A small state's foreign policy cannot be properly examined without considering the fundamental disadvantages of being small, as these disadvantages influence both the results and decisions made regarding foreign policy (Þórhallsson and Steinsson 2017).

Case study: Qatar's national identity formation

Qatar presents a compelling case study of a small state actively shaping its national identity in the context of globalization. The strategic use of its abundant natural gas resources is central to the nation's economic prosperity and international influence. This wealth has enabled Qatar to invest heavily in infrastructure, education, and cultural initiatives, contributing to a rising standard of living and a sense of national pride among its citizens. From a realist perspective, one might expect a state like Qatar—small in territory and population—to operate under tight structural constraints, relying primarily on external alliances for protection and direction (Handel, 1981; Jervis, 1978). However, Qatar's post-2017 blockade response reveals a more complex reality: the state not only reinforced its strategic alliances but also expanded its cultural and political autonomy through soft power investments. Qatar has skilfully used soft power to negotiate the difficulties of globalization, in contrast to the notion that small states must always prioritize military power (Karki and Dhungana, 2020).

Qatar has invested substantially in cultural institutions, such as museums, galleries, and heritage sites, to preserve and promote its cultural traditions and showcase masterpieces of foreign art (Smith, Pace, and Lee, 2005). In addition, Qatar has emerged as a significant player in the global media landscape through the Al Jazeera Media Network, which has provided a platform for diverse voices and perspectives, while also promoting Qatar's own value and bolstering its soft power (Long, 2016). These investments in cultural production and media diplomacy challenge Rothstein's view of small states as system takers. Instead, Qatar positions itself as a system shaper, deploying narrative control to reframe its identity and legitimacy. Qatar's approach to national identity formation can be seen as a form of strategic nation-building, in which the state actively intervenes to shape the collective identity of its citizens. The Qatar National Vision 2030 outlines the country's long-term goals and aspirations, emphasizing the importance of sustainable development, human capital, and social progress. This vision provides a framework for nation-building efforts, guiding policies and initiatives

across various sectors (Faghih and Sarfaraz, 2014). The Qatar National Vision 2030 shows how nation building and globalization combine to create a distinct and adaptable national identity.

Qatar is aware of its reliance on fossil fuels and is proactively working to diversify its economy to achieve long-term viability. Qatar's economy has grown tremendously over the last decade owing to increased economic activity since the early 1970s and subsequent diversification through the development of downstream industries (Ferdrin, 1985). As part of its attempts to move away from its reliance on hydrocarbons, the nation has made significant investments in industries, including tourism, healthcare, education, and financial services. The nation is dedicated to encouraging innovation and technological breakthroughs to transform itself into a knowledge-based economy. Furthermore, the results of studies indicate that Qatar has made encouraging progress toward economic development in recent years, with excellent scores in areas such as research partnerships, domestic competition intensity, electricity output, general infrastructure, and political stability (Faghih and Sarfaraz, 2014).

Qatar's strategy reveals a form of "asymmetric sovereignty" not anticipated by classical realist theory: one where material limitations are offset by symbolic capital and strategic narrative control. This approach suggests that small states can pursue "thick" sovereignty, not merely survival, in an increasingly interconnected world. Qatar is actively pursuing long-term strategies to reduce its reliance on fossil fuels and implement energy conservation measures as part of its National Vision 2030 (Ellabban, 2018). This initiative aligns with broader national development and branding ambitions despite challenges in renewable energy adoption (Cochrane et al., 2024).

Mediation diplomacy is a defining and enduring component of Qatari foreign policy and a primary way that Doha builds its international identity as a broker and interlocutor. Qatar has hosted negotiations, offered third-party mediation, and utilized shuttle diplomacy to settle or diminish regional and international conflicts; these mediation initiatives elevated Qatar's visibility and generated reputation that substantiates its narrative of responsible small state leadership (Peterson, 2006; Miller, 2020).

Over the years, Qatar has developed a unique brand of diplomacy called high-profile event diplomacy. Qatar has hosted the Taliban political office and has been negotiating with the United States and the Taliban since they signed the Doha Agreement in 2020 and has been supportive of continuing intra Afghan dialogue. Qatar was also engaged in shuttle diplomacy and quiet diplomacy during the 2017 – 2021 Gulf crisis and has been maintaining open lines of communication with the warring parties and aided the diplomacy that settled the Gulf crisis. All these examples show the Qatar style of mediation which includes the offer of venue, diplomatic pudding, and further diplomatic neutrality to promote Qatar as a leading actor in mediation of complex issues (Miller, 2020; Tok, Koç, and D'Alessandro, 2020).

Qatar has actively sought to mediate regional conflicts and promote dialogue, positioning itself as a neutral and constructive player in international affairs. This approach has allowed Qatar to build relationships with a wide range of countries, enhancing its diplomatic influence and contributing to its reputation as a reliable partner in the international arena. Qatar's engagement in sports diplomacy, exemplified by its successful bid to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup, has further enhanced its international profile and soft power (Mahmoud, 2017). The National Museum of Qatar has been designed to reflect and narrate the story, history, and ambition of the state and to become an icon of modern Doha (Al-Hammadi, 2020). Museums in Qatar are regarded as change and development agents, agents of political, economic, and

social change, and soft power instruments (Al-Hammadi, 2020). The museum is dedicated to the history of Qatar, which evokes the desert, its silent and eternal dimension, and the spirit of modernity and daring (Al-Harami and Furlan, 2019; Winterstetter et al., 2017). The museum is meant to show a single, homogenous identity because of the unification of Qatari people during the blockade (Winterstetter et al., 2017; Al-Hammadi, 2018; Mitchell and Al-Hammadi, 2020). Overall, Qatar's national identity formation is a multifaceted process shaped by the interplay between globalization, strategic nation-building, and proactive foreign policy (Winterstetter et al., 2017).

While Qatar demonstrates how small states can use resource-based globalization to project soft power and reinforce their national identity, not all small states have access to similar economic or geopolitical leverage. By contrast, Iceland offers a different trajectory, one defined less by strategic wealth and more by the pursuit of resilience within economic and cultural constraints. Examining Iceland's response to globalization, particularly in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, highlights how national identity can be rebuilt through institutional trust and cultural renewal rather than material power.

Comparative analysis: Iceland and Singapore

Iceland: Navigating economic independence

Iceland's experience offers a contrasting perspective on the challenges and opportunities of globalization for small states. Iceland's attempts to foster economic independence are reflected in its decision to remain outside the European Union and maintain its own currency. Iceland has historically relied on its fishing industry and natural resources to contribute to its economic volatility. Iceland has actively sought to diversify its economy by promoting the tourism, renewable energy, and technology sectors. Iceland's 2008 financial crisis exposed the vulnerabilities of its relatively small and concentrated financial sector, which was heavily exposed to global financial markets. The crisis led to a sharp contraction in the Icelandic economy, a banking collapse, and a loss of confidence in the country's financial system. Iceland's experience highlights the importance of prudent financial regulation, risk management, and diversification in mitigating the risks of globalization.

Iceland's recovery after the financial crisis of 2008 can be partially attributed to the introduction of certain policies such as the creation of emergency capital controls and temporary management of the exchange rate. These include targeted fiscal consolidation; restructuring with selective recapitalization of the banking sector; new laws with increased oversight; and strategies to promote tourism, add value to fisheries, and utilize renewable energy. Strong public debate and the restructuring of institutions were essential to the recovery and to reframe the national identity to focus on resilience and the reparation of institutions (Batt, Ríkharðsson & Karlsson, 2021; Krainer, 2017).

Singapore: A model of globalization-driven success

In contrast, Singapore represents a model of globalization-driven success. Singapore's strategic location, business-friendly environment, and proactive government policies have attracted significant foreign investment, transforming the country into a global hub for trade, finance, and technology (Shin, 2005). Singapore has embraced globalization as a means of achieving economic growth, social progress, and national security. Singapore's emphasis on education, innovation, and human capital development has enabled it to compete effectively in the global

economy. Singapore's experience shows that the concept of a developmental state can work in a globalized world by fostering economic dynamism and growth. Singapore has achieved remarkable economic growth, social development, and political stability, positioning it as a leading global city-state (Menon, 2007). The Singaporean government's strategy of encouraging international commerce to promote economic growth has been crucial to its success as one of the world's most open economies (Mazzarol, Choo, and Ramaseshan, 1996). Being a small nation without an economic hinterland, Singapore has developed as a hub for attracting international investment to support its export-oriented growth strategy (Hong 2017) (Wong, 1996). Moreover, Singapore's success has been attributed to its well-managed public sector, which has implemented business-oriented governance reforms to enhance efficiency and competitiveness (Menon, 2007).

Singapore's transborder industrialization model has been one of the hallmarks of the city-state's regionalization program (Yeoh, How, and Sim, 2005). For example, Singapore has a strong family centered social safety net that encourages self-sufficiency, as seen by its highly regulated social policies that seek to optimize economic instrumentality and social harmony (Hwang, 2018). Its multiculturalism is guided by pragmatic realism and market fundamentals associated with the needs of a global city (Noor and Leong, 2013). Furthermore, Singapore's flexibility to embrace emerging modes of governance beyond its traditional UN-centric focus is a relatively overlooked feature (Heng and Aljunied, 2015). Singapore has a strong state capacity and long-standing ties with China and has implemented effective policies and coordinated mutually reinforcing institutions (Rahim & Barr 2019). Singapore's long-term success has been attributed to its commitment to good governance, including an efficient bureaucracy, the rule of law, and a corruption-free environment. Also, Singapore's progress can be attributed to ASEAN, which has helped to promote regional stability and economic integration (McGregor, Law, and Miller, 2017). Singapore's interest in signing bilateral FTAs was partly born out of the fear of its survival as a nation relying heavily on trade for its growth, and also because FTAs were expected to help Singapore overcome its innate inability to effectively call for diplomatic and economic changes in Southeast Asia to promote trade liberalization in the region and beyond (Terada, 2009).

Leadership is a mediating variable that influences how small states respond to the pressures of globalization by reshaping their identity narratives. Transformative and strategic leadership (which includes policy design, a long-term vision, and narrative management) is particularly evident in the cases of statecraft. For example, Lee Kuan Yew's statecraft and institutional reforms anchored the developmental identity of Singapore (Menon, 2007), and the energy diplomacy and national branding led by the ruling family of Qatar and state leadership (Sheikh Hamad; Sheikh Tamim) since the 1990s have been influential (Khatib, 2013; Miller, 2020). Leadership is influential in setting the agenda (national plans such as Qatar National Vision 2030), state capacity mobilization (EDB in Singapore), and the use of diplomatic means to imprint identity of a state externally (Peterson, 2006; Rahim & Barr, 2019).

This study addresses the gap in the literature regarding how globalization affects small states' national identities by investigating Qatar, Iceland, and Singapore. Most research focuses on the economic or political effects of globalization, while this paper goes deeper into the ways in which these countries strategically use globalization to preserve and improve their distinct national identities (Selvaraj et al., 2021; Sijabat, 2023). The study of Qatar illuminates how a small state can use its natural resources and soft power to strengthen its national identity despite political obstacles. The evaluation of Iceland offers a cautionary lesson about the perils of economic isolation and the necessity of diversification, while Singapore's experience

emphasizes the advantages of openness and adaptation in a globalized world (Seik, 1996) (Chan, 2016; Tan, Puchniak, and Varottil, 2015). This study advances our understanding of the complex relationship between national identity and globalization and adds to the literature on small-state strategy and foreign policy.

In conclusion, small states such as Qatar, Iceland, and Singapore offer valuable insights into the complex relationship between globalization and national identity. Qatar's experience demonstrates how a small state can leverage globalization to strengthen its national identity in the face of external pressures (Goode, Kim, and Deng, 2023). Singapore's success highlights the potential of globalization as it drives economic growth and social entrepreneurship but also underscores the importance of managing associated risks and challenges (Prasanna et al., 2019) (Wong, 2001). Iceland's experience shows that the creation and recreation of heritage are essential to modern-day Singapore, as is public planning and policy to create a national identity (Saunders, 2004). All three cases illustrate the diverse strategies that small states can employ to navigate globalization and shape their national destinies. These cases demonstrate the importance of context-specific approaches and the need to adapt to the evolving dynamics of the global order (Hobson & Ramesh, 2002). The experiences of Qatar, Iceland, and Singapore challenge traditional assumptions about the vulnerability of small states in the face of globalization, demonstrating their agency and resilience in shaping their national identities and pursuing strategic interests.

State-managed multiculturalism can serve as a deliberate nation-branding tool that reinforces Singaporean identity amid globalization. After all, globalization presents both opportunities and challenges for small states, requiring them to adopt proactive strategies to safeguard their interests and promote their national identities (Bruner, 2024). Small states can harness globalization to foster economic growth, enhance their international profile, and strengthen their national identity (Ivanov, 2013). To overcome these inherent limitations, small states often prioritize multilateralism, seeking to amplify their voices and influence within international organizations. Small states often leverage their diplomatic agility and adaptability to navigate complex geopolitical landscapes and forge strategic alliances (Conrad and Cassar, 2014).

Qatar: National identity in the face of globalization

An examination of Qatar's engagement with globalization reveals how the nation has actively molded and reinforced its national identity amidst the currents of global integration. Qatar's strategic utilization of its abundant energy resources, strategic deployment of soft power instruments, and adept navigation of international alliances are central to understanding this phenomenon (Weber, 2014). Qatar's National Vision 2030 is a vital component in understanding how a country's nation-building goals and globalization are related. Qatar has strategically invested in establishing itself as a prominent hub for international events, cultural initiatives, and diplomatic engagements, which has helped enhance its global reputation and visibility (Zeineddine, 2017). Qatar has been able to communicate its distinctive national identity and values to a global audience because of its investments in media, education, and cultural institutions. For example, the Qatar Museums Authority has played a crucial role in preserving and promoting Qatar's cultural heritage and fostering cross-cultural dialogue and exchange. Furthermore, Qatar's investments in education, research, and technology have contributed to the development of a knowledge-based economy and the cultivation of a skilled workforce, which are essential for sustaining its long-term competitiveness and prosperity in the global arena (Babar, 2015).

The blockade imposed on Qatar in 2017 by neighboring Gulf states served as a catalyst for the nation to reaffirm its sovereignty and to reinforce its national identity. This crisis prompted Qatar to strengthen its self-reliance, diversify its economy, and forge new alliances with countries beyond the Gulf. Qatar's response to the blockade highlights its resilience, adaptability, and determination to chart its own course in the international arena. Qatar's ability to withstand the blockade and emerge stronger underscored its strategic autonomy and commitment to defending its national interests. In response, Qatar reasserted a national narrative rooted in modernization, strategic hedging, and resilience. Moreover, Qatar's proactive engagement in mediation and conflict resolution efforts in the region has further enhanced its reputation as a responsible and influential actor in international affairs (Peterson, 2006; Miller, 2020).

Identity strategies from Qatar must be understood through a regional lens. Owing to a volatile regional security structure, Qatar's choice of policy — hedging, alliance diversification, and quick diplomatic outreach — is a direct reaction to bordering, larger states with more aggressive postures (Khatib, 2013; Miller, 2020). The 2017 blockade of Qatar accelerated changes to both a narrative consolidation and external reorientation of the country, demonstrating that state identity narratives can be a reaction to instability in the surrounding region.

Qatar has emerged as a significant player in higher education, pursuing a strategy to transform itself into a "knowledge society" (Powell, 2014). This vision is reflected in the country's substantial investments in educational institutions, research facilities, and collaborations with leading universities worldwide (Brewer et al., 2007). The Qatar Foundation, established in 1995, has been instrumental in advancing this agenda with initiatives such as Education City, which hosts branch campuses of renowned universities such as Carnegie Mellon, Georgetown, and Texas A&M (Brewer et al., 2007). These institutions offer a diverse range of academic programs and research opportunities, attracting students and faculty from around the world. In addition, Qatar has implemented educational reforms aimed at enhancing teaching quality, promoting critical thinking, and fostering innovation. These reforms align with Qatar's broader national development goals, as outlined in Qatar National Vision 2030, which emphasizes the importance of human capital development and the creation of a knowledge-based economy. However, it has been noted that despite high per capita income, investment in education was initially small, with issues such as low teacher pay and inadequate infrastructure (Brewer et al. 2007). These investments in education, research, and technology have contributed to the development of a knowledge-based economy and cultivation of a skilled workforce, which are essential for sustaining long-term competitiveness and prosperity in the global arena (Zellman et al. 2010). Qatar University has taken steps to improve the quality of the educational services it offers (Attiyah and Khalifa, 2009). All these initiatives have promoted Qatar's national development and its global brand (Luomi et al., 2013).

Qatar's dedication to fostering national human capital development through education is consistent with its national vision, which emphasizes the significance of student motivation (Lee, 2016). Qatar's educational system includes all levels, from kindergarten to university (Alshaboul et al., 2024). School attendance is mandatory for children starting at the age of five, and it is offered free of charge (Alshaban et al., 2019). Qatar is dedicated to providing its citizens with a top-notch education so they may succeed in the global economy (Anderson, Alnaimi, and Alhajri, 2010). Qatar places a high priority on drawing and retaining talented instructors and provides a number of benefits and opportunities for professional development

to do so. A nation that consistently scores high on PISA assessments ensures that the theory and selection processes are highly competitive (AlKaabi et al., 2022). Most instructors in Qatar are from other countries; less than 30% of those employed in public schools are citizens (AlKaabi et al. 2022). Over the past ten years, the development of Qatar's educational system has had a substantial impact on student demographics, gender roles, and the number of schools. The State of Qatar is undergoing a comprehensive and integrated development system for all aspects of life, including the educational system, which enjoys unlimited attention and support (Alsheeb, Nasir, and Awae, 2022).

Iceland: economic independence and vulnerabilities

The case of Iceland presents a contrasting approach to navigating globalization, emphasizing economic independence while exposing vulnerabilities. Iceland, with its small population and remote location, has historically prioritized self-sufficiency and autonomy in economic policies. This involves protecting its natural resources, particularly its fishing industry, and maintaining control over its financial sector. Iceland's experience demonstrates the complex interplay between national identity, economic policy, and global integration, offering valuable lessons for other small states navigating the challenges and opportunities of an interconnected world. Iceland's pursuit of economic independence was severely tested during the 2008 financial crisis, which resulted in the collapse of its banking system and a deep recession. This crisis revealed the risks associated with excessive financial deregulation and reliance on foreign capital, highlighting the potential vulnerabilities of an isolationist approach to globalization.

Iceland, a Nordic nation with a population of around 360,000, has historically relied on its natural resources, particularly the fishing industry, to drive its economy. However, in the years leading up to the 2008 financial crisis, Iceland experienced rapid economic growth, fueled by the expansion of its financial sector. This growth was accompanied by a surge in foreign investment and loosening of financial regulations, which created a highly leveraged and interconnected banking system. Iceland's economic policies have also been shaped by its unique cultural identity and desire to preserve its traditions and values. Iceland's pursuit of economic independence is also reflected in its cautious approach to European integration. While Iceland is a member of the European Economic Area, it has opted to remain outside the European Union to maintain control over its fisheries and other key sectors. Arts and cultural education are held in high regard in Iceland.

The 2008 financial crisis exposed the weaknesses of Iceland's economic model, revealing the risks associated with excessive financialization and dependence on foreign capital. The crisis led to a sharp contraction in economic activity, a surge in unemployment, and a loss of confidence in the Icelandic Króna. In the aftermath of the crisis, Iceland implemented a series of measures to stabilize its economy, including capital control, fiscal austerity, and debt restructuring. Paradoxically, credit-rating agencies, which were once in the vanguard of calls for austerity, are now downgrading Italian banks explicitly because of concerns that austerity is choking off growth (McKee et al., 2012). The crisis also prompted a national debate about the country's economic policies and its relationship with the global economy (Batt, Ríkharðsson, and Karlsson 2021). Despite the severity of the crisis, Iceland has demonstrated remarkable resilience in recovering from it. Iceland has implemented structural reforms, strengthened financial regulations, and diversified its economy, thereby reducing its reliance on the financial sector. Iceland is currently considering banking reforms (Krainer, 2017).

Singapore: globalization, neutrality, and national identity

Singapore can be viewed as a paradigmatic example of how one small state can turn globalization, which would be a threat to that state, into a springboard towards sustainable national identity. Singapore formed during independence in 1965, amid ethnic fragmentation and a lack of natural resources, based its survival strategy on pragmatic governance, meritocratic institutions, and disciplined openness to global capital and talent. Its leaders, led by Lee Kuan Yew, saw globalization not as an economic necessity but as a strategic ideology that could bring together a multicultural society by creating common prosperity and civic nationalism (Menon, 2007; Hwang, 2018). Lee Kuan Yew's early vision 'institutionalized meritocratic governance and a disciplined developmental state that actively constructed a civic identity congruent with globalization — a national project of design rather than default (Menon, 2007).

The association of Singapore with globalization can be termed one of controlled openness. The state was the first to welcome international trade and investment, and it developed the image of being a neutral and rule-based place that multinational firms would love to invest in (Mazzarol et al., 1996). This strategic interaction made Singapore one of the most globalized economies in the world and had strong political and social unity. Through the entrenchment of globalization in a system of state regulation, Singapore escaped the social dislocation that sometimes accompanies high-speed economic liberalization (Shin, 2005; Heng and Aljunied, 2015).

Singapore is a small country that lacks natural resources in contrast to the resource-rich Qatar or geographically remote Iceland, and human capital is the most essential export. Education was the priority of the government because it is an economic activity and a tool of nation building. Centralized planning and international benchmarking resulted in the establishment of a knowledge-driven economy that is harmonious with both competitiveness and social harmony in Singapore (Tan, Puchniak, and Varottil, 2015; Wong, 2001). The country was made a regional technology and financial hub by innovation policies (Ebner, 2004) and an efficient bureaucracy (Rahim & Barr, 2019).

The fact that Singapore is a so-called neutral participant in global and regional politics is both practical and symbolic. Singapore, as an ASEAN state, tends to mediate regional conflicts and give a friendly, yet, at the same time, cordial relations with the world superpowers, the United States, China, and India (Terada, 2009; McGregor, Law, and Miller, 2017). Its non-aligned yet mutually dependent position is an example of a balancing act of strategic neutrality participating intensively in the process of globalization, but not depending on any of the power blocks in particular.

This impartiality is also carried over to Singapore's nation-branding strategy, which focuses on the reliability, integrity, and coexistence of different cultures. Singapore's brand as a global city supports its soft power as it connects economic effectiveness with political stability (Heng and Aljunied, 2015). The diplomatic dexterity and reputation of the city-state that is impartial has seen it host international negotiations, such as U.S.–North Korea negotiations to ASEAN economic discussions, making it have greater global validity than its size.

However, multiculturalism in Singapore is not an accident, but rather an organic phenomenon to a degree, as it is a state-created ideology that aims to make diversity a pillar of nationhood (Noor & Leong, 2013). The state cultivates a story of harmony in the face of diversity by placing ethnic quotas in housing, bilingualism in education, and stressing racial

harmony in civic education. This system enables the government to balance the cosmopolitan forces of globalization with local population customs.

This is a sort of ‘soft power’ in which Singapore is projected to be a model of coexistence in a globalised, multiethnic world (Saunders, 2004). Singaporean identity is therefore no longer bound by ethnicity, but is rather based on meritocracy, efficiency, and social order, which are also the same values as the logic of globalization itself. It is the outcome which Rahim and Barr (2019) define as a managed pluralism, in which pursuit of cultural diversity is accompanied by political stability and economic sanity.

Leadership in Singapore has been keen to ensure that globalization does not destroy cultural foundations. The National Heritage Board, the Esplanade Arts Center, state-sponsored heritage districts, and others are attempts to package a contemporary, but national, narrative. According to Saunders (2004), Singaporean public heritage programs are meant to generate and recreate a feeling of belonging that is easily eroded by globalization.

The arts and creative industries do not merely exist as aesthetic endeavors but are also tactical for the preservation of identity in a global market economy. Singapore has managed to reconcile cosmopolitanism and conservatism through cultural policy to promote global exposure and retain its national ethos. It is this two-sided, international outward-looking but pegged to values, which is the core of postmodern nationalism in Singapore.

Singapore’s capability to introduce global innovation to national systems of governance is at the heart of its resilience. The Economic Development Board (EDB) is a typical example of the institutionalization of foresight and adaptability (Edwards, 2003). With the EDB, Singapore continues to realign its policies towards appealing to high-value industries, which over the 1980s were manufacturing and logistics, and in the 2020s were AI and green technologies (Goode, Kim, and Deng, 2023).

In addition, Singapore’s national identity as a model state is supported by a strong anti-corruption culture, an effective legal framework, and a predictable regulatory climate. This national identity based on governance attracts national pride as well as international confidence that national divisiveness can be coupled with a thorough acculturation to the global capitalism. In this regard, globalization has neither weakened the sovereignty of Singapore; it has enhanced its image as a high achieving, disciplined microstate.

The case of Singapore highlights how globalization can strengthen national identity when it is managed in terms of strategic neutrality. The attribution of competence and credibility through the incorporation of multicultural harmony, economic pragmatism, and policy innovation show an example of a Singaporean sovereignty that has a thick nature. Its nationalism is founded not on exclusion, but on disciplined engagement in global systems.

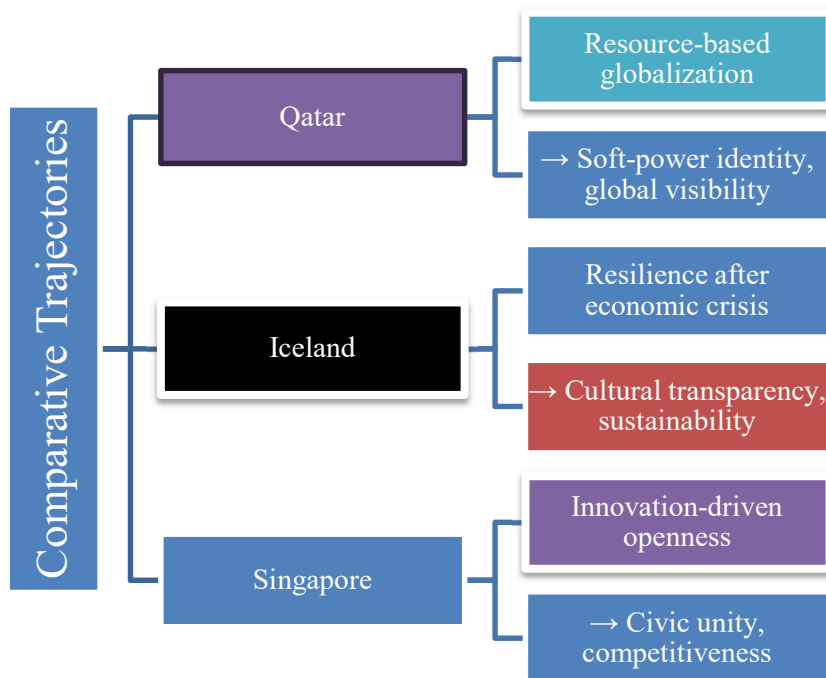
Finally, Singapore illustrates how the external exposure of the state can be transformed by the state into inner unity, and the state into openness into a state-making process. This model is an alternative to the soft power diplomacy of Qatar and Iceland of post-crisis self-reflection. Third, identity is based on efficiency, harmony, and trust in the government. Singapore’s success demonstrates that small states are not bound to decide between globalization and nationhood; in the hands of visionary leadership and flexibility, the two can be used as positive reinforcement.

Comparative analysis

A comparative analysis of Qatar, Iceland, and Singapore reveals the diverse strategies employed by small states to navigate globalization and shape their national identities. Globalization is intricately encapsulated in the composition of the sovereign nation-state (Charsmar 2020). Small states display their agency and resilience in influencing their national identities and pursuing their strategic goals, which challenges conventional beliefs regarding their vulnerability in the context of globalization (Hearn, 2015).

As [Figure 2](#) demonstrates, in both cases, a characteristic channel has been used by small states to turn globalization into a possible limitation, as a tool for enhancing national identity.

Figure 2: The comparative trajectory of Qatar, Iceland, and Singapore shows distinct globalization strategies and identity outcomes.



To summarize, the distinct pathways taken by each state, the following table highlights the key dimensions through which Qatar, Iceland, and Singapore have navigated globalization while shaping their national identity ([Table 1](#)).

These comparisons reinforce the central argument of this study: small states, while constrained by structural limitations, exhibit diverse strategies in their engagement with globalization. National identity formation is not a passive byproduct of global forces but rather a deliberate, often state-led endeavour. Taken together, these cases offer a rebuttal to the more deterministic views of Handel, Jervis, and Rothstein. While their work captures the vulnerabilities of small states in structural terms, it overlooks the adaptive capacity and agency that globalization enables these states to develop. Small states can utilize manufacturing as an extension of their services to overcome the limitations imposed by the architecture of global capitalism and colonialism (Baldacchino, 1998).

Table 1: Comparative table between Qatar, Iceland & Singapore for different dimensions

Dimension	Qatar	Iceland	Singapore
Economic Model	Hydrocarbon-based, diversifying via education and soft power	Resource-based (fisheries, tourism), post-crisis restructuring in	Trade- and investment-driven, knowledge economy
National Identity Strategy	State-crafted narrative via media, museums, education; framed through resilience and modernity	Emphasis on cultural preservation, language, independence	Pragmatic multiculturalism: harmony framed as national value
Response to Global Crisis	2017 Blockade → Strategic hedging, alliance-building (Turkey, Iran)	2008 Financial Crisis → Exposed isolation, led to reforms	Survived crises via diversification and proactive planning
Use of Soft Power	Al Jazeera, Education City, sports diplomacy (FIFA, museums)	Limited global soft power: cultural exports minor	Strong branding via global education, innovation, diplomacy
Engagement with Globalization	Selective openness; resists regional dominance while inviting foreign expertise	Cautious globalization; resists EU integration	Embraces globalization fully; regional hub with global outlook

Combined, these cases illustrate a more active role for small states, contrary to the realist position of small states as passive actors, which is evident in the Narrative Agency Cycle (see [Figure 3](#)) which shows the transformation of globalization pressures into identity-building strategies through leadership, policy, and institutional changes.

According to [Figure 3](#), the Narrative Agency Cycle shows how the small states keep on re-telling globalization and how the pressure on the external world can be turned into identity renewal and positioning. They show what can be called *narrative agency*: the intentionality behind global engagement to create identity, project stability, and strengthen sovereignty. When managed properly, globalization is not an enemy of national identity, but it serves as a stimulus in its constant re-discovery.

Figure 3: The Narrative Agency Cycle: A conceptual model illustrating how small states reinterpret globalization to construct and reinforce national identity.



Conclusion

This study demonstrates that smallness is not a uniform handicap, but a conditional constraint mediated by four interacting mechanisms: (1) leadership and long-horizon vision, (2) economic base and resource endowments, (3) regional security environment, and (4) strategic use of soft power and mediation. Qatar, Iceland, and Singapore each convert globalization pressures into identity resources through distinct mixes of these mechanisms: Qatar pairs energy leverage with mediation and multi-vector diplomacy; Iceland used post-crisis institutional repair and sectoral pivoting; Singapore institutionalized leadership and managed openness. [Figure 3](#) summarizes the Narrative Agency Cycle that links external pressure to domestic identity work via these mechanisms. Policy implications follow: small states should align institutions to leadership vision, diversify economic exposure, and invest in credible external roles (mediation, niche diplomacy) to convert vulnerability into agency (Pórhallsson & Steinsson, 2017; Miller, 2020).

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