

Thorhallsson, Baldur (Ed.) (2018) *Small states and shelter theory: Iceland's external affairs*. Part of book series on: *The New International Relations*. London and New York: Routledge. ISBN: 978-1-138-61537-3. xvii+213pp. hbk: £92.00stg; e-book: £20.00stg.

... Only

There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock)

T. S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*, 1922

When British poet T. S. Eliot wrote these lines in his epic poetic work, *The Wasteland*, in 1922, he was expressing his disappointment at the emptiness of a world – indeed, *a waste land* – a desert without culture, without guidance and without spiritual belief. There is, however, some solace, and a place of refuge. It comes in the guise of a red rock. The reference is possibly to the Old Testament Book of Isaiah XXXII(2), wherein the "righteous king" "shall be . . . as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land."

I found myself thinking of this passage as I was leafing through Baldur Thorhallsson's latest offering to the literature of small state studies. The throwback to the past is instructive: Thorhallsson's argument is precisely that it is not enough to look at the governance of small states by examining their impressive democratic credentials. They also need, or crave, what the Bible refers to as a "righteous king". Translated into 21st-century speak, this is an external power, benign and generous, perhaps even imperious, willing to extend its oversight, its security infrastructure, its favourable trading regime protocols, to small jurisdictions who cannot offer it much in return except perhaps gratitude, sympathy and loyalty. It is by this covenant that small states bolster their chances of survival in an uncertain world: after the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 and its wholesale annexation of Crimea in 2014, it seems to me that the world is indeed an increasingly uncertain place, especially for small countries. Hence, seeking "rivers of water" and "the shadow of a great rock" – what Thorhallsson describes as shelter – is an increasingly strategically smart and crucial policy choice for these smaller players. All the more so in a post-Cold War world where the architecture of the international system is frayed and characterised by multi-polarity. This increases the options for adventurism and raises the likelihood of getting away with such escapades, to the chagrin of the affected subject.

Shelter theory is the name of the game: a transactional, binary relationship that is clearly unequal but that provides symbolic or material benefits to either side.

But there are also costs and risks, especially for the smaller player. National 'sovereignty' and independence may be compromised by dependence on one country's largesse. After all, this is a relationship that risks becoming a suzerainty of sorts, a lord-vassal dynamic, if not handled properly. Shelter-providers may themselves be relative minnows in the grand scheme of things. Political rhetoric may repel and antagonise, rather than attract and massage, the general publics of shelter-seekers towards considering such liaisons positively. And long-standing shelter-providers may have a change of heart, may re-evaluate their regional or foreign policy positions, may have to come to terms with declining economic or imperial heft . . . all leading to a renegotiation, or possibly the abandonment, of their provision of shelter. But the alternative is not such a palatable option: left to their own devices, small states risk being overwhelmed by regional hegemonies, or swamped by environmental, economic or financial crises. For all the trappings of sovereignty, they remain so open and sensitive – some

would even say vulnerable – to events happening beyond their shores, and over which they have hardly any influence, let alone control. *Dare they risk it?*

Thorhallsson is an Icelander, and he never misses the opportunity to illustrate his argument is direct application to the history of Iceland, as it has unfolded since the Middle Ages and right up to the current historical moment. This is skilfully done in this book by means of six chapters, in each of which Baldur Thorhallsson is a co-author.

The policy dilemmas are stark, and these are at the core of the book's arguments. Iceland is a member of the European Economic Area (EEA), the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), the Schengen Treaty and a candidate country for EU accession, with however a political spectrum and a voting public that are largely not well disposed to joining the EU. Iceland is well integrated into the structures of Nordic cooperation, but none of the Nordic countries could offer Iceland comprehensive shelter. Iceland is a close ally of the United States and is a founding member of NATO; but the US has opted to abandon its base in Keflavik in 2006, and the Trump administration has not sent strong and unequivocal signals of support to its NATO members. Iceland is aware of the increasingly strategic role of the Arctic both as geo-political theatre as well as site for seabed exploration and mineral extraction: the presence and interest of Russia and China are palpable. Could either of these serve as a new *patron* to Iceland? Either of the two might jump at the opportunity to solidify a stronger presence and impact in the North Atlantic; but with what repercussions? Or would a United Kingdom, fresh out of the EU after 'Brexit', be a ripe, reliable (and less irksome) candidate for nurturing shelter-like relations with the likes of its neighbour and fellow island state Iceland; and in spite of the bitter memories of the 'cod wars'?

The text is bookended by a short preface from the book series editor Iver B. Neumann; and an engaging conclusion by Anders Wivel and Christine Ingebritsen. The latter, in particular, offers vital and critical insights into the analytical power of the concept of shelter theory. How and when is shelter different from dependency, influence, bandwagoning or co-optation? Is it really that impossible for small states to survive, and thrive, without they being granted shelter services, in the shadow of a big red rock? And could such 'services' be merely rhetorical or psychological, enough for the small state public, or its potentially hostile powers, to understand and assume that they exist?

Something tells me that we will be reading much more about this intriguing concept, and applied to cases beyond Iceland.

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