
The study of small states has seen a revival since the end of the Cold War, but despite recent developments in our knowledge and understanding of small state politics, we know comparatively little about the historical context of present conditions and policies. As is the case of the study of politics and international relations in general, the study of small states is dominated by studies of the present and very recent past with little more than symbolic nods towards historical developments upon which present opportunities and challenges are based. In this context, Matthias Maass’s *Small states in world politics. The story of small state survival 1648-2016* is a welcome and important contribution. In his highly ambitious book, Maass traces the history of small state survival from the inception of the modern states system by the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 up until the present (2016). Defining small states as “units that are individually irrelevant to the states system” (p. 31), Maass draws on Classical and Structural Realism and English School-thinking to compose a broad theoretical framework. This framework allows him to emphasize the continued importance of power politics over the centuries, while detecting how changing norms on war and conquest transform the nature of power politics and therefore the conditions for small state survival.

The book adds to our knowledge of small states in three mutually reinforcing ways. First, the book traces the development of small states in the international system since 1648. This is done though descriptive statistics allowing the author to map how the number of small states has increased and decreased through history. The result debunks the myth that the present international system is unique in accommodating small states and underpinning their survival. In 1648, there were 419 small states and 19 larger states. The number of small states fell over the subsequent two and a half centuries – by far the biggest drop in the number of small states was in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries - reaching a historic low point of 35 small states in 1904 before rising to the 150 small states existing today (up from 130 just before the end of the Cold War). Measured against the total number of states in the international system a similar trend is discernible, although it is striking how much the number of small states fluctuates compared to great powers.

Second, the descriptive statistics enable Maass to identify three historical epochs of small state survival since 1648: a classical balance of power system from 1648 to 1814, a system of collective hegemony from 1815 to 1918 and a system of collective security and global governance from 1919 to 2016. Identifying these three epochs helps Maass to structure his analysis. He starts out by discussing small state survival as a historical phenomenon (Chapter 1), continues by defining small states and devising a strategy for studying small state survival (Chapter 2) before engaging in analyses of each of the three epochs identified (Chapters 3, 4 and 5) and summing up and concluding the book (Chapter 6). Power politics and the inequality of states are fundamental facts in the life of small states in all three epochs, but power and inequality play out differently over time. The laissez-faire balance of power system of the early modern state system was surprisingly beneficial for small states as great powers jealously guarded each other’s attempts at expansion. The European concert provided a stable international environment to the benefit of small states, but at the same time the collective great power hegemony marginalized small states, which were viewed by the strong as meaningless anachronisms and mere pawns in a hierarchical international order. The increased emphasis on global governance and collective security since 1919 has provided a relatively hospitable
environment for small states underpinned by great power preference for stability in the bipolar and unipolar orders since 1945.

Third, Maass successfully demonstrates how small states remain the prisoners of great power politics and at the same time that power politics today is in many ways different from power politics in past centuries. This dual insight nuances the recent wave of studies illustrating how small states punch above their weight and act as norm entrepreneurs. Also, it takes issue with the role of small states as advocates of peaceful change and great power détente. The book demonstrates that war is dangerous for small states, but at the same time the (sometimes violent) break-up of empires is the main reason why new small states are created. It also demonstrates that while it is true that small states benefit from a stable and cooperative international environment, great power cooperation and reconciliation is at the same time an important cause of marginalization of small states.

The book is not without limitations. The main argument that the survival and proliferation of small states are shaped largely by the state system is repeated (too) many times. The analyses could have benefitted from more examples from outside Europe and East Asia and more reflections on variations between small states. Finally, by viewing the 1919-2016 period as one epoch and spending considerable effort to explain the general developments in the state system during this period, we get to know comparatively little about the distinct features of the decades following the Cold War. This is unfortunate because reflecting upon contemporary trends in light of the historical development since 1648 could have added important insights on what is new and what is not and how to meet the challenges of the future.

Despite these reservations, Small states in world politics is a treasure trove of historical knowledge on small states, which supplies a much-needed systematic analysis of small state survival since 1648.

Anders Wivel
University of Copenhagen
Denmark
aw@ifs.ku.dk