

Godfrey Baldacchino & Andres Wivel (Eds.) (2020). *Handbook on the politics of small states*. Cheltenham UK: Edward Elgar. xiv+410pp+index. ISBN: 978-1-7881-1292-5. £139.50; e-book from £48.00.

Introduction: A stress test

Small states are on the edge of the fault lines of the ripples and shake-up of the liberal order, which was the anchor to multilateralism, influence in global institutions, and the free flow of goods, capital and data. In this post-hegemonic cycle of international relations, geo-strategic choices facing small states are blurred, and diplomacy must be practised during a period of flux in power relations and a changing political geography among nations. This trend has been accentuated by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, changing the development and political landscapes more dramatically, as well as shifting the geo-strategic options open to all countries, but extremely limited to small states. The pandemic is a political stress test for small countries: those who can reset will survive, as the premises of the realm of public policy are shaken in the world order of things.

Baldacchino and Wivel's *Handbook on the politics of small states* provides a perfect analytical framework to explore the above assertions, with specific reference to the diplomacy of small states in the contemporary world order. By introducing small states in Part I, the editors masterly cover the concepts and theories of small states, their trajectory over history, how politics influences their style of diplomacy, and their intrinsic strength in a world of microlateralism. The analytics in this introduction dig deeper into political economy: the virtues of being small; the overarching choices in public management and policy-making; and the challenges and coping strategies of small states in the UN General Assembly.

This analytical framework sets the stage for issues-based analysis for small states in Europe – the micro states, island states, Nordic states, and Balkan states – and introduces the missing concept of the buffer state. In a path-breaking chapter titled “Small States in Europe as a Buffer between East and West”, PEDI discusses small states and their “shelter alliance strategy” and “multi-vector foreign policy” in response to the quest by great powers and regional blocs to encourage the participation of small states. This concept, although prevalent throughout history, regained its relevance in the post-Cold War era. PEDI carefully specifies three defining criteria for buffer states: location, relative power and foreign policy orientation. In examining the security complex in which buffer states operate, PEDI argues, “that is why buffer states are found where a balance of power exists and their fate usually follows that of the distribution of power among the rival or great powers in the system” (p. 170). The chapter further elaborates on the case of Ukraine, its historical and political context, and uses it to forcefully demonstrate the buffer state concept and “its applicability to the post-Cold War international system”.

By covering the small states in the Middle East and Africa, Central and South America, and the Caribbean, Asia, and the Pacific, as well as non-sovereign but autonomous territories, this book provides a comprehensive reach, as well as an incisive analysis of key challenges and issues of politics and diplomacy at each focal point. Taken together, they provide a formidable essay on the theory and practice of small state politics and diplomacy and underline the compelling case for microlateralism in today's international relations agenda.

Eriksson elucidates on the mediation of small states in the “process of conflict management”, emphasising “a foreign policy of peace ... as distinct from the great power politics and realpolitik of late 19th to early 20th century Europe” (p. 209). In doing so, the notion of engagement politics of peace, neutrality and impartiality, and influencing factors – such as trust and confidence – all set the conditions for acceptance as a mediator, or intermediary in conflict situations, as was done in the hostage crisis during in the Iranian – American standoff by Algeria.”

By examining the politics of five small African island states – Cabo Verde, Comoros, Mauritius, São Tomé & Príncipe, Seychelles– Sanches and Seibert explore the factors that foster or hinder democratisation in small states, linking institutions to democratic performance and the need to build international networks for credibility.

Central America, often perceived as a bridge in the hemisphere and across the Atlantic and the Pacific, has historically been “vulnerable to external intervention” according to Tom Long’s concise and telling analysis of the politics of the region. Evoking the notions of “pawns or powers”, Long’s skilful analysis sets the frame for students of international relations, and the conduct of foreign policy despite “difficult international constraints”, resulting in “incoherent international action at best”. Wehner tackles the key question of hegemonic power relations in Latin America, using a role theory approach. After a succinct and critical analysis of the politics of Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay, he concludes: “South American small powers can and indeed have changed their type of foreign policy role relationships with regional powers and regional competitors, as well as with the US as global hegemon” (p. 273).

Baldacchino carefully examined the profiles of the multitude of small island states in the Caribbean, raising the question of whether small states are falling apart, faced by shifts in US Hegemony and a rising China, and the manifestation of “power over rules” in the form of “gunboat diplomacy”. He explores the dynamics of working together – “unitarist power dynamics” – and the oscillation between “the island” and “the region”. These small states must manoeuvre obstacles that larger states have concocted. Baldacchino’s rich analysis ends with a somewhat limited prognosis of the possibilities ahead.

In Part 5, Hansen looks at small states in Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan – identifying the impact of their Soviet past, and the quest for political rights and civil liberties in a politics where “the most powerful determinant of alignment is the drive of (non-democratic) leaders to ensure their political and physical survival” (p. 300). In foreign policy, a search for diplomatic space between Russia and China dominates the dynamics, impacting economic performance and reform. On the political front, Hansen asserts that,

the region as a whole is less democratic and less liberal than at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union. At the same time, these states have managed to establish individual action spaces large enough to offer a number of alternative courses of action.

Singapore's unique ability to project its presence as a small country is a classic revolution in the use of deliberate political strategy and smart diplomacy. In his chapter, Chong explains Singapore's foreign policy, based on omni-directional diplomacy and peaceful negotiations. He quotes Singapore's Foreign Minister at the time, Rajaratnam, who said that the distinction between words and deeds is fundamental to assessing other countries foreign policy statements, and to devise a "sound and realistic" foreign policy of one's own. Chong argues that Singapore's diplomats pursue an "abridged realism" as a guide "to avoid policy paralysis in meeting unforeseen challenges over the horizon". This allows for the "utmost built-in flexibility and a self-affirmation that enlargement is desirable". With such flexible talk, Singapore became a global chameleon.

In a revealing chapter, Buszynski captures with great analytical rigour the essential directions of the foreign policy compass of the small countries in the South China Sea: Cambodia, Laos, Brunei, Singapore and the Philippines. Buszynski affirms that all these states are in dispute with China over the South China Sea, pointing out the importance of China and the US in influencing domestic elites as a key factor in foreign policy. He argues that Cambodia stands with China partly to counter the historical threats posed by its neighbours Vietnam and Thailand. Laos has adopted a policy of hedging, Brunei is drawn to China by economic need, Singapore has kept its distance, and the Philippines relies on the US for external security support.

Small states in the Pacific are addressed in this book with a chapter by Corbett and Connell. With a history of colonisation, these states embarked on modernisation programs in the face of old and new vulnerabilities. Dubbed "the ocean of democracy", the island Pacific has had a "stubborn resilience" to institutional change and presents numerous paradoxes: "the region is both too modern and not modern enough, underdeveloped and paradise lost, an ocean of democracy and an arc of instability, a progressive champion of climate change and a conservative bastion of patriarchy". As such, its foreign positioning is a combination of hedging and coping, with little space for clear cut solutions and a classic example of navigating a pathway in the midst of "paradoxes for small state development".

In a refreshing addition, the editorial duo included a chapter by Prinsen on the 120 or so "small subnational jurisdictions": non-sovereign territories, often single islands or archipelagos, clustered together by the artefacts of colonial times and facing the particular challenges of fragmentation. Notwithstanding, the formal bond with much larger states provides benefits through citizenship, resources and national identity, referred to in this chapter as a "sweet spot of sovereignty". The room for strategic partnerships presents "a physical-legal presence across the globe" and enhances the global status of the metropole. At the same time, varying legal complexities emerge, and there is a plethora of ever-evolving arrangements.

Broad categorisations

The *Handbook on the politics of small states* provides an analytical framework for the structured study of the generic term ‘small state’ as I have attested to in this review. The broad categorisation of small states is as follows:

- The buffer state – shelter alliance strategy
- The mediation state – conflict management situations
- The power and pawns state – hegemonic behaviour
- The individual action state – political behaviour model
- The abridged realism state – enlargement strategy
- The dispute diplomacy state – hedging and threats in the region
- The modernisation states – the paradoxes in development and diplomacy
- The sweet spot of sovereignty state – mirage of global presence.

There are two research and policy action initiatives that flow logically from the arguments and strategic insights expressed in the various chapters of this extraordinary collection of chapters on the politics of small states. The first is a commentary on the practice of diplomacy for small states. The second is an advocacy in the case of small states to lead global efforts.

Commentary: Challenges in the practices of diplomacy for small states

Small states are often viewed as inconsequential to world politics, thus requiring innovative approaches in the practice of diplomacy. In their compelling and articulate volume on the subject, Godfrey Baldacchino and Anders Wivel summed up the challenge as follows,

small states today remain restrained by limited capacity and capabilities in pursuing their domestic and international ambitions and are stuck as weak actors in asymmetric relationships, creating dependency and threatening their values and interests. However, they also benefit from being weak, since this allows them a bigger action space and success in pursuing coping strategies.

Coping strategies in diplomacy for small states will indeed be tested in this era of geopolitical reset and the quest for global solidarity, a period of “tired paradigms and starting over again”, and in a time of “changing geo-strategic shifts”.

A recent publication of the *World Economic Forum* linked the pandemic with geopolitics by calling for a geopolitical reset,

the coronavirus is spreading globally and sparing no one, while simultaneously the geopolitical fault lines that divide societies spur many leaders to focus on national responses, a situation that constrains collective effectiveness and reduces the ability to eradicate the pandemic.

The pandemic is accelerating geopolitical trends that existed before the crisis, such as shifts in the end of multilateralism, the vacuum of global governance, and the rise of various forms of nationalism. As such, we are entering a world of entropy, summed up by Swiss economist Lehman as: “there is no new global order, just a chaotic transition to uncertainty”. Increasingly, countries cannot rely on hegemony to provide global public goods and “will now have to tend their own backyards themselves.”

The T20 policy brief reaffirmed the need for global solidarity and the significance of global public goods in the post-COVID-19 era, outlining multidisciplinary approaches to the complex problems facing the world today. It sets the stage, noting that “we must act together and build the strength and global reach of our multilateral institutions” as it makes a compelling case for global solidarity, because “until every country is disease free, no country will be disease free”. Among several recommendations, the policy brief calls for the closing of access gaps between the Global North and the Global South, with particular reference to the health sector and equitable access to vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics.

The World Economic Forum (WEF), in pioneering “a great reset” initiative, established a COVID-19 action platform. It is centred on multi-stakeholder cooperation, listing the following three focus priorities: (1) galvanise the business community for collective action; (2) protect people’s livelihoods and facilitate business continuity; and (3) mobilise cooperation and business support for the COVID-19 response. It calls for coordinated action by governments, businesses, civil society and individuals combined with global multi-stakeholder cooperation, acting with an unprecedented scale and speed to arrest this unprecedented crisis.

Klaus Schwab, the executive chairman of the WEF, in a call for a new capitalism, urged that the great reset should seek to lend a voice to those who have been left behind, so that everyone who is willing to “co-shape” the future can do so.... Some of the pillars of the global system will need to be replaced, and others are repaired or strengthened.

Others, like the *Economist*, have called for a change in macroeconomics in the post-COVID-19 era. It succinctly quipped that “what is clear is that [the] old economic paradigm is looking tired”. Others are still exploring global collective action and equitable approaches to COVID-19 as expressed in the T20 Task Force “COVID-19: Multidisciplinary Approaches Complex Problems”.

All these initiatives pose challenges to small states in forging a platform that is unique and will mitigate risks and mobilise resources in a global policy setting. Small states will find their wiggle space restricted, adding complex challenges to the practice of diplomacy in a world order of ever-changing geostrategic shifts.

W. Dookeran

Advocacy of the case for microlateralism

In the April 2021 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Cohen and Fontaine made a compelling case for microlateralism, asking the question of how small states can lead global efforts. Citing versions of microlateralism that have made a difference, Norway brokered back-channel negotiations in the 1990s between Israel and Palestine for the US-backed Oslo accord, Togo's diplomatic intervention in 1999 helped to end Sierra Leone's civil war; and Qatari Emir Sheikh convened rival Lebanese factions for talks that ended the political crisis in Lebanon in 2008.

Citing visionary leadership from small countries such as New Zealand in the wake of the horrific Christchurch mosque shootings in 2019 to coordinate counterterrorism efforts, drawing on smaller nation's particular strengths in conflict mediation, and dealing with extremist groups, Cohen and Fontaine argued that "leadership by small states can make multilateral efforts more palatable to rival powers". Additionally, such efforts are often more flexible than long-standing multilateral structures.

While the world still needs the United Nations and its advocacy of multilateralism, there is a lack of flexible approaches that are genuinely inclusive and embracing of the special talents of small states. This book thus provides a basis for identifying those talents in the assessment of the role of small states in shaping global solutions in the politics of engagement.

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