



*Small State Studies*

# **AGENCY, SECURITY AND GOVERNANCE OF SMALL STATES**

**A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE**

Edited by  
Thomas Kolnberger and Harlan Koff



# Agency, Security and Governance of Small States

*Agency, Security and Governance of Small States* examines what seems to be a defining paradox of Small-State Studies: the simultaneous coexistence (and possible co-dependence) of vulnerability and opportunity related to small-state size.

This book analyses small states within the framework of this apparent paradox. Traditionally, Small-State Studies has focused on three guiding questions: what constitutes a ‘small state’? What explains small-state influence in global affairs? Are small states truly vulnerable to security threats given the expansion of multilateralism and regionalism throughout the world? This book contends that new questions should be asked which recognise the important shifts in twenty-first-century security paradigms to better understand how some states deploy their smallness as a resource for agency in supranational contexts. By varying historical, geographical, security, and governance contexts, the book embraces a most-different-cases approach. The historical perspective is often neglected in Small-State Studies but contributes to understanding how small states have often, over time, transformed perceived insecurity into agency. By focusing on different world regions, the authors enable the comparative analysis of collective actions and the creation and implementation of institutions for ‘common sense purposes’ within a geographical region. Of particular contemporary importance, the book includes contributions which contend with hard-security issues alongside other soft-security challenges. The comparison of case studies confirms that hard-security vulnerability and soft-security opportunities seem to be two sides of the same coin which reinforces the book’s focus on small-state paradoxes and raises the question of whether smallness can be considered the defining characteristic of governance in these countries.

This book will have a broad appeal because of the different world regions it analyses. It will be of interest to postgraduate students, scholars, and researchers of international relations, security, sustainability, governance, development, and political economy, as well as Small-State Studies.

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## **Small State Studies**

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Half the world's sovereign states have populations of less than 5.3 million, and over 30 have populations of less than ONE million. Clearly, there is scope to consider the impact that small size and scale (of population, civil service, expertise, talent pools, ambassadorial ranks, service providers, and so on) could have on the nature of governance, politics, international relations, economic development, climate action, transportation, etc.

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*Edited by Thomas Kolnberger and Harlan Koff*

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A Global Perspective

**Edited by Thomas Kolnberger and  
Harlan Koff**

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# Preface

This volume derives from a research project with the title “Military history of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg in a transnational perspective”, which was funded by the Luxembourg Defence Directorate in the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs. The objective of the project was, among other things, to link Luxembourg’s military history to International Relations and to the study of systems of political alliances, economic cooperation, and spheres of influence. As part of this research on Luxembourg, the project team organised a workshop in Luxembourg City from September 24 to 25, 2021, titled “Why Lilliput is all but a (theoretical) island: knowledge, security & governance of (and in) small states”. It was organised by the editors with the support of our colleagues Sonja Kmec and Karl Hampel, to whom we are grateful for their contributions to this meeting. The purpose of the meeting was to contextualise empirical research on Luxembourg within emerging discussions in Small-State Studies. The present volume originated in these exchanges with a group of internationally recognised scholars working in this field. Our discussions focused on the state of the art in Small-State Studies, the role of history in this broad area of scholarship, and directions for future research. We thank the participants for contributing to this volume with their conceptual and empirical research and the intellectual exchanges which helped us to more fully develop the analytical framework presented in the book.

The Grand Duchy of Luxembourg provides an excellent setting for dialogues on security, agency, and governance. Its history highlights a distinct evolution in international affairs: from a small state searching for political survival amidst the rise of nation-states in Europe during the nineteenth century to an industrialised country committed to regional integration in the mid-twentieth century, to a financial capital and normative actor in global affairs in the twenty-first century. Luxembourg has developed remarkable agency in an ever-changing environment characterised by exposure to external political, financial, and environmental shocks. The more integrated Luxembourg becomes in global systems, the more vulnerable it is to shocks. Despite this vulnerability, it continues to thrive. For this reason, Luxembourg is an appropriate setting for a discussion of the small-state paradoxes that are identified in this volume. Through this framework, our book seeks to make an original and accessible contribution to understanding the relationships between challenges and opportunities for small states.

In conclusion, we would like to thank the contributors to this volume for their interest and willingness to engage in this project. We are grateful for the assistance of Routledge's editors throughout the editorial process and for the support of the series editors. And last but not least, many thanks to our proofreader Peter Marsden!

We hope that the reflections published here will be enriching to those engaging in Small-State Studies.

Thomas Kolnberger  
Harlan Koff



IHIST.



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# Introduction

## Agency, security, and governance of small states in a fast-changing world

*Harlan Koff and Thomas Kolnberger*

This volume seeks to unpack and examine what seems to be a defining paradox of Small-State Studies: the simultaneous coexistence (and possible co-dependence) of vulnerability and opportunity related to small-state size. Small-State Studies has traditionally focused on three guiding questions: what constitutes a ‘small state’? What explains small-state influence in global affairs? Are small states truly vulnerable to security threats given the expansion of multilateralism and regionalism throughout the world? This volume contends that new questions should be asked to recognise the emergence of new security challenges in the twenty-first century.

First, the authors in this volume ask whether we really need to continue questioning what constitutes a small state. Thorhallsson’s (2018) review of the field identifies the different responses to this question which have been proposed over the years including size of population, economy (Gross Domestic Product), territory, military, influence in global affairs, and leadership capabilities. Because such criteria vary, some studies include so-called micro-states while others focus on states as large as Canada and Japan (e.g., in relation to the United States and China, respectively). The review also illustrates the lack of consensus surrounding this question by referring to relational definitions of small states (Mouritzen & Wivel, 2005) which contend that a state can be weak in one respect but at the same time powerful in another. Consequently, a small state can be considered powerful in globalised economies but weak when facing a military crisis. This volume contends that defining a small state is not a fruitful intellectual endeavour, and this is compounded by the complexity of security challenges that exist today.

This opens up a major question in the field of Small-State Studies: can we discuss ‘small states’ as a homogenous body of countries which follow policy strategies due to their size? The scholarship that falls within the general label of ‘small state studies’ may be attributing too much importance to ‘smallness’. There seem to be important differences that need to be highlighted in this field: advanced industrial countries versus developing ones, landlocked states versus islands (Randall, 2021; Baldacchino, 2010), technologically advanced versus low-tech economies and societies, liberal democracies versus authoritarian governments, and so on. What impacts do these factors have on ‘small-state’ decision-making in global



affairs? Smallness is a condition that may not always be a defining characteristic of governance in these countries (e.g., Hey, 2003).

A second question that needs to be addressed is whether ‘small states’ have adapted to shifting global security paradigms. Can we identify one singular model of ‘small-state behaviour’ or do small(er) states adopt multiple security strategies depending on the nature of the threat faced? As stated earlier, the literature on small states is only now investigating small-state strategies in relation to soft security. Some authors question whether small states really—almost by definition—have a propensity for establishing collaborative security relations or whether this is limited to certain types of small states (e.g., Koff & Maganda, 2015). Moreover, such studies pose the question whether new security risks arise from the open economies and border integration of small states.

Third and finally, this volume interrogates what role ‘large state’ contexts play in small-state foreign policy. Traditionally, small states have been viewed as consensus brokers amongst large states within regional or multilateral organisations, whether it be for shelter-seeking or status-seeking purposes. However, these approaches have focused mostly on Europe where regionalism is institutionalised (meaning that clear rules are established), and there is no singular regional hegemon since comparatively large countries such as France, Germany, and Italy share power. In other regions of the world, such as Africa or the Americas, contexts related to hegemonic power are very different. Also, regionalism is market-based with less clear rules, which promotes uncertainty in regulation. How do such power-related configurations affect ‘small-state’ behaviour? Koff et al. (2020) have studied Central America, where the lack of a regional hegemon has diffused power to such an extent that small states follow myriad and divergent strategies in relation to soft-security issues. Similarly, Hawksley (2007) demonstrated how European colonial hegemony contributed to legitimacy for centralised states in Pacific small island states.

### **Small states and the vulnerability–agency paradox**

The paradoxical condition of small states in global affairs is recognised in Small-State Studies, even though this situation has not necessarily been highlighted in the literature (e.g., Kolnberger & Koff, 2021). Early works in this field highlighted small-state vulnerability in military and economic-security terms, as scholars argued that small states needed to join alliances to survive, both politically and economically (Keohane, 1969; Handel, 1981; Ingebritsen et al., 2006). In response, other observers such as Katzenstein (1985, 2003) or Cooper and Shaw (2009) have focused on small-state agency either in global economies (Katzenstein) or in diplomacy (Cooper and Shaw), which promoted innovation and prosperity amongst small states. Small states are portrayed as both vulnerable and adept at risk governance (Koff et al., 2020; Lusa, 2019; Koff & Maganda, 2015; Kolnberger & Koff, 2021).

Indeed, small states do not seem to fit into any specific international relations paradigm. In general, realist approaches to the study of international relations

highlight small-state vulnerability (resulting from their limited size and power), whereas functionalist and constructivist perspectives emphasise small-state agency (which comes from their adaptability and capabilities as consensus-builders in international relations). Realists discuss small states within the framework of threats (e.g., Koff et al., 2020), while constructivists (e.g., Siitonen, 2017; Graham & Graham, 2019; Nadalutti, 2020; Hannerz & Gingrich, 2017), and neo-functionalists (e.g., Schiff, 2014) frame global affairs in terms of opportunities.

These divergent points of view are as relevant today as ever. On the one hand, contemporary menaces to human well-being, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, threaten the well-being of small states due to their exposure to global shocks. At the same time, humanity's need to respond to these threats also provides opportunities for small states as either constructivists (e.g., the SAMOA Pathway, see <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/samoapathway.html> where Small Island Developing States (SIDS) have codified normative commitments to climate action) or functionalists (e.g., Luxembourg's emergence as a prominent actor in green finance). For these reasons, the themes which drive discussions of small states in this volume are security, agency, and governance—all of which concepts are intrinsically linked by the aforementioned paradoxes that characterise small states.

Empirical research suggests that there is some truth to these assertions. Some small states are well positioned in transnational economic networks characterised by partnerships between state and non-state actors (Clément, 2013). However, SIDS, for example, have difficulties accessing such networks; this acts as a constraint on sustainable economic development. At the same time, the transnationalism of many small states has particularly exposed them to the health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas some SIDS were shielded to some degree from health effects arising from the pandemic. This volume directly addresses these paradoxes, and the chapters presented here suggest that new directions in Small-State Studies should reorient many of the foundational assumptions in this field towards changing notions of security and agency in global affairs.

### **Looking back at Small-State Studies: the Cold War framework**

The study of small states re-emerged during the 1950s and 1960s due in part to processes of decolonisation, the emergence of these countries in multilateral organisations (e.g., Benedict, 1967; Selwyn, 1975; Jackson, 1990; Baker, 1992; Veenendaal, 2017) and the continuing debate around European “Kleinstaaten” (small and micro-states, see, e.g., Waschkuhn, 1993; Duursma, 1996; Klieger, 2013; Wolf, 2016, 2020). Given this context, three issues emerged which have dominated the field of small state-studies ever since: (1) the definitional question of what ‘small’ means, (2) vulnerability in security terms, and (3) the inherent lack of administrative capacity. In the first issue of the journal *Small States & Territories*, Thorhallsson (2018) examines these core concepts and illustrates how they have structured the field of Small-State Studies since these countries began receiving scholarly attention. Thorhallsson's review presents the tension which exists in this field between a

focus on vulnerability associated with smallness and the identification of opportunities, such as leadership in regional organisations, from which many small states benefit due to their internal characteristics. This has led to two main conceptual constructs in International Relations (IR) debates focusing on small states: status-seeking and shelter-seeking theories, the former concentrating on how small states have exploited an ability to thrive in a multilateral and interconnected world and the latter addressing the relative weakness of small states in security terms and their need to associate themselves with large powers. Consequently, Small-State Studies has evolved within the context of Cold War international relations and, as a field of scholarship, presented a puzzle: how can small states, which have generally been perceived as vulnerable, exert influence on global affairs beyond their territorial and population sizes?

This question opened a new line of enquiry in Small-State Studies because it spurred authors to examine domestic-governance characteristics of small states which promote a comparative advantage in a multilateral world. For example, and with middle-sized, central European states in mind, Katzenstein (2003) proposed six defining characteristics of small states: (1) they have relatively homogeneous populations; (2) they are open to international economies; (3) they create niches in global economies; (4) they promote social solidarity due to perceived notions of vulnerability to external shocks; (5) they amplify their influence through regions; and (6) they possess efficient and effective governments because of their propensity for interpersonal relations. It should be mentioned that these characteristics have been identified in a literature that holds a Western bias and so are not necessarily valid in all world regions. However, these characteristics are meant to explain why Western small states are influential in global affairs and domestically stable. Moreover, they also purport to explain why small states are key actors in multilateral organisations at the international and regional levels, which provide them with traditional military security (some small states, such as those in the Pacific, negotiate directly with Western powers; but multilateralism provides the framework for these negotiations). In fact, since the Second World War, most small states have foregone the neutrality that had historically protected them from invasion in favour of supranational integration in security organisations (Lettevall et al., 2012). The need to seek out or join alliances to address vulnerability issues (known as Alliance theory and alliance ‘Shelter’) has been integrated with status-seeking perspectives, as small states increase their influence and ‘punch above their weight’ through commitments to multilateralism. Previously competing perspectives now seem to be two sides of the same coin. For this reason, Small-State Studies scholars are now prompting discussions on a series of new questions.

### **Small-State Studies moving forward: addressing new security agendas**

Thorhallsson’s 2018 review of Small-State Studies presents an interesting perspective, not only because of its analytical contribution but also thanks to the timeline that the author identifies for the development of the field. In this, he addresses

the shift from the “deficit-based assumptions” which emerged in the 1960s to opportunity-based proposals that were presented in the 1980s. The author then contends that new paradigms surfaced again only in 2008 in response to the global financial crisis. This gap between the 1980s and 2008 has been identified by various small-state scholars who contend that Small-State theory has not sufficiently addressed new security issues which have materialised in global and regional agendas (e.g., Ingebritsen, 2010; Koff & Maganda, 2015).

Since the start of the twenty-first century, security paradigms have shifted significantly. Koff (2016) has argued that global security norms have widened while domestic security frameworks have narrowed. Global security agendas have highlighted and integrated new threats to humanity, such as climate security, environmental security, water security, food security, and cybersecurity. Nationally, however, many political agendas and resulting policies, especially those in large states, have focused on border securities and hard threats such as terrorism, undocumented and illegal migration, and organised crime. While a new focus is being placed on military insecurity and economic vulnerability, the classical small-state literature has not paid sufficient attention to ‘new’ threats and risks, which include human and animal pandemics/epidemics, cybersecurity, infrastructure breakdowns, interruptions of supply chains, rise of authoritarianism, and natural disasters. Indeed, actual policymaking in many small states has shown less concern with military security, emphasising instead ‘soft’ threats from the effects of increased globalisation, non-state violence, and environmental degradation. This once again underlines the need to address seeming paradoxes in small-state governance. Scholars studying the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on small states have highlighted the vulnerability of these countries during the pandemic because many small states are economically dependent on open borders and the free movement of people (either for tourism or for cross-border labour) (e.g., Högenauer et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted these economies, which dramatically impacted the livelihoods of their inhabitants. Other scholars have examined the expanding vulnerability of SIDS to climate-change impacts (e.g., Kelman, 2014).

While small-state vulnerability exists, these new security threats have also uncovered new opportunities for small states resulting from specific governance features. In their study, Högenauer et al. (2021) contend that small states display specific advantages such as cohesion, flexible crisis management, and easier tracking of infection chains. Similarly, Petzold and Magnan (2019) have argued that climate vulnerability has promoted climate adaptation policies in SIDS. These domestic policy innovations can also impact the global sphere through participation in regional and international multilateral organisations. Because international security norms call for cooperative solutions to global challenges related to pandemics, climate change, disaster prevention, environmental threats, etc., small states should be well placed to take leadership roles in new global security arrangements (Graham & Graham, 2019). For example, SIDS have promoted sustainability and environmental and human security through their adherence to the aforementioned SAMOA pathway and their pivotal role in UN-brokered climate

action negotiations. This agreement promotes commitments focused on sustainable energy, natural resource management, ocean-based and green economies, and sustainable development partnerships. Its primary focus is climate action.

### **Perspectives of the book: three original features**

In response to these questions, this volume proposes three important original features, all of which indicate a need to expand the focus of Small-State Studies. First, the book includes *historical perspectives* that provide a context for a contemporary analysis of small-state strategies. Discussing or analysing historical case studies from the point of view of Small-State theory is rare so far (e.g., Maass, 2017; Kruizinga, 2022). We regard this as a chance for further insights in historical research. Two studies on Luxembourg, by Thomas Kolnberger and André Linden, respectively, demonstrate how small states have traditionally pursued autonomy in policymaking as much as sovereignty preservation. Eberhard Crailsheim's contribution similarly provides an innovative perspective by showing how the Philippines of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries promoted autonomous security policies due to geographic necessities. As a colonial 'subnational jurisdiction' the administration was opposing directives from the administrative centre of the Spanish Empire for its survival. Composite monarchies and empires developed their own logic of 'big' and 'small' in the context of centres and peripheries.

The second proposed originality of this book is its focus on *different world regions*, not for the sake of simply varying examples but for comparative analysis of collective actions and the creation and implementation of institutions for 'common sense purposes' within a geographical region. The research in this field was—and probably still is—preoccupied with the European arena in relation to regional integration and security (Trausch, 2005; Goetschel, 2010; Briguglio, 2016; Bauwens et al., 1996; Reiter & Gärtner, 2001). Our global scope directly questions whether 'smallness' defines security strategies in these states or whether other intervening factors are more influential. The volume includes two studies of SIDS in Oceania, two studies of SIDS in Africa, one Central American case, three European studies, and two cross-regional comparative studies, in addition to the three conceptual chapters. Interestingly, these studies suggest that 'smallness' is not only a condition, but also it can be a resource used by government leaders for negotiation in global affairs. Edith Kauffer shows how smallness has three different meanings for Belize within the three different political regions in which the country operates. Similarly, Odair Barros-Varela and Alexander Graef demonstrate that small states in different world regions (Europe and Africa) establish definitions of 'smallness' which permit them to promote their own visions for regional security.

This leads to the third proposed originality of this volume. It includes studies of *both hard- and soft-security questions* (Archer et al., 2014; Brady & Thorhallsson, 2021). The book includes contributions which contend with hard-security issues such as Chinese military threats or Russia's invasion(s) of Ukraine while other chapters focus squarely on soft-security challenges, such as water security or

human security. The comparison of case studies confirms that hard-security vulnerability and soft-security opportunities seem to be two sides of the same coin.

Consequently, the book is guided by the three themes introduced earlier: agency, security, and governance. These interrelated themes highlight three important topics regarding small states: the ability of small states to achieve their objectives; the strategies that small states adopt in contemporary security frameworks; and the relationships between small-state domestic political systems and foreign policy strategies.

### **Contents of the volume**

Apart from this scene-setting introduction, the volume is divided into four parts plus a conclusion. Part I presents three conceptual chapters, which address Small-State theory, penned by leading figures in the field, namely Revecca Pedi with Anders Wivel, Baldur Thorhallsson with Sverrir Steinsson, and Iver B. Neumann. They all critically examine the place of small states in contemporary international relations.

Part II then focuses on small states and agency, defined as the ability of small states to “seize their own history” (Baldacchino, 2018), controlling, directing, or actively influencing their own course in regional and global affairs. It consists of four chapters, including two historical analyses (by Thomas Kolnberger and by Eberhard Crailsheim) and two contemporary studies (by Edith Kauffer and by Antony Dabila with Thibault Fouillet). The part integrates analyses of varied cases, namely those of Luxembourg, Philippines, Belize, Lithuania, and Singapore.

Part III of the book presents small-state strategies in contemporary security affairs. It focuses on both hard- and soft-security agendas. The first two chapters, by Charles Hawksley together with Nichole Georgeou and by Salā George Carter with Jack Corbett respectively present long-term studies of changing security agendas in the Pacific and of the way small island states have responded. The studies are stimulating because they analyse both hard- and soft-security issues and they highlight adaptation as a conceptual lens in security studies. This is followed by two hard-security studies, by Odair Barros-Varela and Alexander Graef respectively which discuss small-state strategies in regional security organisations in Africa and Europe.

Finally, Part IV examines domestic governance in small states and how it interacts with foreign policy. André Linden’s historical study of Luxembourg during the Second World War and its aftermath indicates how a small state’s pursuit of multilateral alliances reinforced emerging commitments to liberal democracy and vice versa. Conversely, Wouter Veenendaal’s comparative chapter examines the breakdown of formal liberal democracy in many small and micro-states due to the importance of informality in these countries and how it affects foreign policy positions. Finally, Suzanne E. Graham and Marcel F. Nagar address SIDS’ participation in global affairs through the lens of international citizenship.

All these chapters suggest that Small-State Studies remain characterised by important paradoxes at the intersection of security and sustainability. As stated before,

these themes are unpacked by Harlan Koff in his conclusion to this volume. Harlan Koff's review highlights the need to reframe small-state debates within the context of sustainability, and he illustrates how small states can indeed convert vulnerability into opportunities in global affairs. Yet the same small states often also undermine sustainability through short-sighted strategies which create new threats to their security. Unless small states can resolve such paradoxes, sustainable security will remain an elusive goal. This, in our opinion, is the challenge which Small-State Studies should address more directly and completely as the discipline moves forward.

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## Conclusion

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