
Breaking the paradigm(s): A review of the three waves of international relations small state literature

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Abstract

Mainstream international relations (IR) literature has long treated small states as marginal actors who exist on the periphery of global affairs. For many years, scholars have struggled to conclusively define the category of small statehood. Additionally, IR's privileging of the theoretical paradigms of realism and neorealism when analyzing small state issues, has meant that, until recently, small states have been conceptualized as actors that struggle to make proactive foreign policy choices on their own terms. Despite this, small states, and particularly small island states in the Pacific region, appear to have many opportunities to engage in vibrant foreign policy endeavours in the present day. This article offers a review of small state IR literature, with a particular focus on small state foreign policy issues. It begins by reviewing the various approaches to defining small statehood, before turning to a review of how small state issues have been treated in broader IR. It posits that the small state IR literature can usefully be broken down into three distinct time periods—1959–1979, 1979–1992, and 1992–present—and reviews the literature within that framework, drawing out the theoretical through lines present in each distinct era.

Keywords: small states, international relations, theory, realism, neorealism, literature review

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Introduction

Since first recognized by political scientists as an analytically valid category of political unit in the 1940s and 50s, international relations (IR) scholars have commonly seen small states as weak or powerless actors with severely constrained foreign policy options and a negligible impact on international affairs (Baldacchino, 2009; Braveboy-Wagner, 2010; Elman, 1995; Ingebritsen, 2006). Across the broad sweep of IR literature, theorists have overwhelmingly assumed the structure of the international system to be the primary motivator of small state behaviour (Hey et al., 2003; Elman, 1995), and small state foreign policies have often been understood as primarily reactive to external circumstances, rather than as proactive attempts by small states to shape the world in which they exist (Reeves, 2014: 256–58). As a result of this state of affairs, mainstream IR has long struggled to understand both how foreign policy is developed in small states and what foreign policy tools small states have available to them at any given time.

Despite the state of the academic literature, in practical terms, today “Small states are more visible and prominent than at any other point of world history” (Baldacchino and Wivel, 2020: 2). This is especially true in the greater Pacific, a complex and vibrant region full of island states that, while commonly conceptualized as being ‘small’, collectively hold jurisdiction over a large percentage of the Earth’s total surface area. Today, with the future of American foreign policy in the region highly uncertain, the regional influence of Australia and New Zealand seemingly in decline, and the presence of ‘non-traditional’ actors such as China, India, and Indonesia increasing throughout the region, the Pacific is as geopolitically fluid as at any point since the conclusion of World War II (Wallis, 2017). This, combined with the fact that Pacific small island states are on the frontlines of several globally significant issues such as climate change, has created a situation where Pacific small island states have more opportunities to engage in foreign policy action and activism than perhaps ever before.

With all of this in mind, this article offers a review of the academic literature that addresses small states in IR, with an emphasis on small state foreign policy behaviour. This is, in general, a small literature, and it is defined by a number of key authors and key theoretical paradigms. The article begins first by examining the debate over what exactly constitutes a ‘small state’—a debate that has “played an excessively dominant role in the study of small states for the past 50 years” (Baldacchino and Wivel, 2020: 3). It then moves onto more fertile theoretical ground, positing that the study of small state issues within IR can be usefully broken down into three distinct periods: 1959–1979, 1979–1992, and 1992–present. Each era is examined, with key scholars and theoretical insights identified. Finally, the article concludes with several summarizing thoughts.

The Elusive Small State

For many years, the study of small states has remained on the margins of broader IR scholarship. Indeed, there is no universally, or even widely, accepted definition of what constitutes a small state (Baldacchino, 2009; Crowards, 2002; Prasad, 2009; Ólafsson, 1998; Amstrup, 1976; Maass, 2009). Scholars have been unable to settle upon the appropriate criteria for defining smallness or even the appropriate terminology for referring to small states. Some have preferred the terminology of ‘small powers’ (Kassimeris, 2009), others ‘weak powers’ (Castro, 2010), and still others ‘weak states’ (Reeves, 2014), even though these terms overlap so much as to be synonymous with one another (Elgström, 2000). In short, although scholars mostly agree that “Small states exist” and are “an empirically relevant unit of study for the discipline of international relations”, they do not agree on what a small state actually is (Maass, 2009: 65).

As a result of these definitional challenges, it has become something of a cliché for small state researchers to note and opine on the lack of definitional clarity when it comes to their object of study, and most small state research begins with a fairly lengthy discussion of how the author has arrived at a particular definition (for example: Crowards, 2002; Dumieński, 2017; Hänggi, 1998; Hey, 2003; Kelly, 2013; Maass, 2009; Neemia-Mackenzie, 1995; Neumann and Gstohl, 2006; Ólafsson, 1998; Prasad, 2009). As a consequence, there is a fragmentary quality to the small state IR literature, and even today, small states remain an ill-defined and vaguely conceptualized category of political actor. Problematically, this leaves broader IR “in some danger of remaining

‘blind’ to certain of the special—and perhaps highly important—ramifications of small size” (Ólafsson, 1998: ix).

The most common means of defining a small state is through the measurement of some objective indicator such as total land area or population size. Generally, scholars and practitioners who adopt this method select a single variable and use it “as a yardstick in the classification of states according to size” (Neemia-Mackenzie, 1995: 14). Of the possible variables that could be used to define small statehood, population size has become the most common choice, partially because it “provides an indication of the stock of human capital and a rough approximation of the domestic market” and partially because of a kind of soft path dependency in the literature whereby authors have simply accepted the definitions that have come before (Crowards, 2002: 143).

While common, the ‘single variable’ approach is inherently problematic. This is largely because, no matter what variable is selected as a ‘yardstick’, there are no easily discernible cut-off values that most effectively separate small states from large. This is particularly true in terms of the most common variable used to define small statehood: population size. For example, the Commonwealth Secretariat, which is the self-identified ‘champion of small states’, defines small states as countries with a population of 1.5 million or less (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2020). The World Bank uses the same metric (World Bank, 2017). While each, from time to time, makes exceptions for larger states such as Jamaica or Namibia who are judged to lack institutional capacity in a certain area, both identify approximately 45 small states in the world based on the 1.5 million population size measurement (Súilleabháin, 2014). By contrast, the informal grouping of United Nations (UN) member states known as the Forum of Small States (FOSS) limits membership to states with a population of 10 million or less. As of the mid-2010s, 105 states were FOSS members—60 more than are recognized to be ‘small’ by the Commonwealth Secretariat and World Bank and 55% of all UN member states in total (Súilleabháin, 2014). There are any number of other conceptualizations of where the appropriate cut-off point of population size should be located, but given how drastically the number of small states can change depending on the value selected, any choice is open to a claim of arbitrariness (Crowards, 2002; Neemia-Mackenzie, 1995; Dumieński, 2017). As summarized by Thorhallsson and Wivel:

There is no reason why a country with 20 million people should be a great power and a country with 18 million should be a small state, or why number five in Europe measured in terms of military expenditure should be characterised as a great power and number six should not. (Thorhallsson and Wivel, 2006: 653)

Beyond population size, total land area, gross domestic product (GDP), military expenditure, and other single variables have been used to define small statehood. Yet, changing the variable in question does not alleviate the challenge of arbitrary cut-off values, nor does it solve the deeper challenge inherent in constructing an analytically useful category based on a single variable: the challenge that “countries similar in one geographic or demographic aspect can nonetheless be so different [in] all others that putting them into one category makes little sense” (Dumieński, 2017: 17). To provide examples of this: Israel and Papua New Guinea (PNG) both have comparable population sizes near 9 million (World Bank 2020a; 2020b). Yet, as of 2018, Israel’s total military expenditure is approximately US\$15.5 billion, compared to PNG’s US\$59.9 million—a difference of nearly 200% (Trading Economics, 2020b; 2020a). Similarly, Qatar and Vanuatu each have total land areas of around 12,000 km². However, Qatar has the second highest GDP per capita in the world at approximately US\$124,000, while Vanuatu ranks 196th with a GDP per capita of US\$2,700 (Central Intelligence Agency, 2020). No matter what variables or cut-off values are selected, the single variable approach always produces any number of such unusual and impractical pairings. Thus, while relying on one single criterion may be useful in terms of producing a broad sketch of the concept of ‘small states’, the utility of such an approach is limited if an analyst’s goal is to compare like with like.

Some have argued that smallness will always be a relative concept, and thus a universally acceptable definition of small statehood will always remain elusive (Wood, 1967: 29). To some extent, this is true. For example, New Zealand, with a population of just over four-and-a-half million, is often considered to be a small state (for example: Kelly, 2013). Its politicians frequently encourage this perception, and an identity of

'smallness' was a major component of the narrative that New Zealand advanced in its campaign to secure a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council during the 2000s and 2010s (McLay, 2014). Indeed, when New Zealand won the seat in late 2014, its then Prime Minister, John Key, summarized the outcome as "a victory for the small states that make up over half the United Nations membership" and claimed that New Zealand was "determined to represent the perspective of small states at the Security Council" (Key, qtd. in Young and Trevett, 2014). Yet, relative to the broader Pacific, New Zealand, along with Australia, can also be reasonably seen as a regional superpower (Baker, 2015; Mapp, 2014). For instance, within the Pacific region, Australia and New Zealand are both:

in the same awkward position of being major aid donors to the other members of the Pacific Islands Forum, of having the resources and capacity to dominate regional meetings, and of being a hindrance to the forum's credibility and utility as a vehicle for south-south cooperation. (Baker, 2015: 137)

In short, New Zealand may claim an identity of smallness with some justification relative to other large Western democracies like the United States (US) or Germany. However, in the Pacific, its relative economic and military strength enables it to apply political pressure in regional forums in ways that set it apart from most other island states in the region.

As the New Zealand example indicates, while the concept of smallness can usefully be thought of in a comparative sense, as with single variable definitions of smallness, definitions of small states that rely exclusively on relative measures are in danger of becoming overly simplistic. For instance, it has been claimed that "essentially, a small state can be any state in a relationship of marked inferiority of power vis-à-vis another state" (Knudsen, 2002: 184). Yet, while this *can* be true, there are any number of examples where this premise would be difficult to defend. For instance, Mexico is markedly less powerful than the US in any number of politically significant ways, yet rarely, if ever, has it been described as a small state.

For all of these reasons, some researchers have argued that the concept of small statehood has no analytic value (Baehr, 1975). Others have created complex quantitative formulas that take into account multiple variables in order to reach their own idiosyncratic definitions (Crowards, 2002). Still others have treated the concept of smallness as perceptual or psychological (Amstrup, 1976). Taking this latter approach, Rothstein (1968: 23–29) notably argued against using objective variables to measure smallness and instead defined small states as those that recognize that their material limitations prevent them from obtaining security without the aid of other states in the international system. Critiquing this view, but also taking a psychological approach, Keohane (1969: 295–296) argued that smallness should not be defined based on security perceptions, but rather how a state's leaders interpret their country's role in the international system. In *Lilliputians' Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics* (1969), a notable early essay examining small states in IR, he built upon this premise to describe a continuum of 'system-determining', 'system-influencing', 'system-affecting', and 'system-ineffectual' states. Finally, some small state researchers have simply chosen to avoid the definitional challenge altogether (Maass, 2009; Amstrup, 1976).

Island Jurisdictions as Small States

The concept of the sovereign small state is one with a long history in international politics, extending at least as far back as the golden age of the Greek city-state (Neumann and Gstohl, 2006; Amstrup, 1976). However, the concept of the sovereign small *island* state is a relatively new one. As Baldacchino (2015: 1) describes, while there have been a few notable small island states throughout history—including Tonga in the Pacific region—it was Iceland's independence from Nazi-occupied Denmark in 1944 that cemented the modern concept of a sovereign small island state in the popular and academic consciousness. Later, as a result of decolonization in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, many new island states came into the world, including in the Pacific region.

Outside of academia, the “outburst of cartographic activity” that saw so many new island states enter the international system during the decolonization period caused the international community to start, for the first time, to begin conceptualizing island states as a distinct category unto themselves in the 1960s (Herr, 1988: 185). Early efforts were led by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), which was seen in the 1960s and 1970s as a voice for developing states across the globe (Grote, 2010: 165–68; Hein, 2004: 4). Spurred on by the efforts of UNCTAD, during this period, the UN first identified a category of state that it called Developing Island Countries (DICs), and in 1974, UNCTAD commissioned a landmark report to study their particular development challenges (Grote, 2010). As Grote notes, the UNCTAD report was the first attempt to examine the issues of developing island countries in an international forum, and its “attempt at defining the characteristics of DICs revealed that they were essentially related to smallness” (Grote, 2010: 170). Of the fifty-one DICs identified in the report, 70% had land areas of less than 10,000 km² and only thirteen had populations greater than 1 million, with the vast majority having populations of fewer than 500,000 (UNCTAD, 1974: 3).

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw major shifts in development discourse globally as concepts like climate change and sustainable development entered the arena of international politics (Mebratu, 1998; Bodansky, 2001; Betzold, 2010; Grote, 2010). These shifts brought about an unprecedented era of international influence for small island states—and a more focused approach to issues of concern for such states in international forums like the UN. During this time, small island states themselves came together to form the advocacy coalition known as the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) (Betzold, 2010), and the UN adopted the denomination Small Island Developing States (SIDS) (Hein, 2004). Although neither AOSIS nor the UN provides strict criteria for defining what SIDS are, today the term has become the most commonly accepted vernacular for referring to small island countries. AOSIS currently has thirty-nine members and five observer states, while the UN Sustainable Development Platform identifies thirty-eight UN member SIDS and twenty non-UN members (Alliance of Small Island States, 2020; United Nations, 2020). By population size, Cuba and Haiti are the largest members of each grouping, with both having populations of approximately 11.5 million.

The objective of this article is primarily to review the literature on small states and not to wade into complicated definitional waters. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that despite the shortfalls of the various methods of defining small statehood, when defined by almost any variable, most of the island states in the Pacific region are small in both a comparative and an absolute sense. By population size, Tokelau¹ and Niue² are two of the three smallest states in the world, with Tuvalu³, the Cook Islands⁴, and Palau⁵ among the fifteen smallest. Discounting the outliers of Australia, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea, the largest of the Pacific island states by population size is Fiji⁶—and it is only the 161st largest state in the world (Worldometer, 2020). By most other commonly used single variable measures of smallness, many states in the region also rank among the smallest states in the world. In terms of GDP measured by purchasing power parity (PPP), Tokelau, Niue, Tuvalu, Nauru, the Marshall Islands, and Kiribati are all among the ten poorest countries globally, with a number of other regional states just outside the bottom ten. Again, discounting the outliers, Fiji leads the region with only the 163rd largest GDP in the world (Central Intelligence Agency, 2020). Although, as discussed earlier, the practice of categorizing states based on single variable measurements is a flawed one, by all of the single variables that are commonly used, most of the Pacific region’s island states are small. Additionally, the island states of the Pacific commonly self-identify as small island states or SIDS in international forums and associate themselves with the various small island state groupings that exist within the architecture of international politics (for example: Paeniu, 1990; Sopoaga, 2015; Bainimarama, 2019).

¹ Pop: 1,357

² Pop: 1,626

³ Pop: 11,792

⁴ Pop: 17,564

⁵ Pop: 18,094

⁶ Pop: 896,464

Small States in International Relations

Moving on from definitional issues, the following sections examine how small states, and particularly small state foreign policy issues, have been treated within the broader IR literature. It posits that small state studies in IR can usefully be broken down into three distinct eras—1959–1979, 1979–1992, and 1992–present—and it reviews the literature within that framework, identifying key scholars and insights from each period. However, before turning to small state issues exclusively, it is worth drawing a distinction between IR and foreign policy analysis and discussing a few key theoretical paradigms that have played an outsized role in the academic study of small states.

The academic fields of IR and foreign policy study are closely related, though not entirely the same. At a general level, IR “studies the political interactions of states and other actors in the international arena” (Rittberger, 2004: 1). More specifically, it seeks to explain a wide range of international political behaviours—from warfare and peaceful cooperation to the protection of human rights and efforts to address global climate change. In short, IR as a whole is interested in the interplay between international actors and the conflicts and cooperation driven by that interplay. Foreign policy analysis, while in some sense inseparable from the broad strokes of IR, has a distinctly different analytic focus. Whereas IR is interested in how actors interact in a *system* of international politics, foreign policy analysis is concerned with the individual actions of sub-systemic units and how those actions come into being. Foreign policy analysis is thus “predicated on a particular actor” and examines how that actor promotes its interests and values abroad (Rittberger, 2004: 1). In other words, the study of foreign policy is the study of the actions that actors choose to take internationally, while IR is the study of what all of those actions, when viewed in aggregate, tell us about the system of international politics.

Although IR and foreign policy analysis are distinct, the analytic choices made at the level of IR have had implications for how the foreign policies of small states have been conceptualized. Since the modern-day academic discipline of IR began to develop post-World War II, it has been defined by a number of key paradigms, notable among them realism, neorealism, various strains of liberalism, and, more recently, constructivism (Snyder, 2004). While all have contributed to the study of small states in some way, the dominant analytic approaches applied to small state issues have been premised on the realist and neorealist paradigms (Baldacchino, 2009; Braveboy-Wagner, 2010; Elman, 1995; Ingebritsen, 2006).

Classical political realism is a theoretical tradition with roots that can be traced back at least as far as the age of the classical Greek scholar Thucydides (Rittberger, 2004: 3; Snyder, 2004: 56). Neorealism is more recent, having been seminaly articulated by Kenneth Waltz in his work *Theory of International Politics* in 1979. Both view the state as the preeminent political actor and understand the ‘international system’ as anarchical; as defined by the lack of credible actors that can arbitrate inter-state disputes or provide system-wide security (Ringmar, 1996: 441; Browning, 2008: 20; Rittberger, 2004: 2). Classical realists argue that human nature is inherently conflictual and that, in a situation of anarchy, this drives inter-state conflict (Morgenthau, 1948: 27). Neorealists, however, locate the source of international conflict—and most observable elements of international politics—in the international system itself. For instance, Waltz argues that states value security over all else and that the relative distribution of power in the system drives political behaviour internationally (Waltz, 1979: 91).

For both classical realists such as Morgenthau and neorealists like Waltz, states that are seen as more powerful (in a material sense) are seen as more able to impact the international system. Thus, states with larger military capacities and/or economic resources are argued to have a greater menu of foreign policy options available to them at any one time (Vital, 1967). At its most severe, this way of thinking sees small states as “system-ineffectual”—unable to impact the structure of international politics in any meaningful way (Keohane 1969: 269). In general, for realists and neorealists, this means that there is little incentive to study the how and why of small state behaviour since such states are assumed to lack the power necessary to have a significant impact on the international system. As shall be discussed, in practical terms, this has meant that over a considerable period of time much of mainstream IR has avoided the study of small states in international politics and, by extension, the study of small state foreign policy.

The First Wave: 1959–1979

Annette Baker Fox's seminal *The Power of Small States* is often identified as the work that launched the modern-day school of small state studies in IR (Carlsnaes, 2007; Neumann and Gstohl, 2006; Reeves, 2014; Keohane, 1969; Elman, 1995), and it relies on classical realism to inform its analysis. In her study, Baker Fox examined the ability of several 'weak states' to remain neutral in World War II, seeking to test dominant views of international politics that she argued saw "small states simply as objects, to be moved around at will" (Baker Fox, 1959: 2). Somewhat ahead of its time, Baker Fox's work defied conventional views in finding that small state foreign policy is not inconsequential and that small states can resist the demands of larger powers through skilful diplomacy and the judicious use of alliances. However, she also argued that small states are so disadvantaged within the realm of traditional material resources that their foreign policy can, at best, only ever be utilized as a mechanism of indirect influence on greater powers and not as a means of engaging with international issues directly (Baker Fox, 1959). In her work, the key determinants of small state foreign policy are external to the state itself and include things like the demands large states make upon their smaller counterparts, the level of discord between great powers at any given time, and the relative balance of power in the international system—all of which small states must constantly react to (Baker Fox, 1959). In that sense, in line with classical realism, the international behaviour of small states is assumed to be driven by the structure of the external world; it is a reactionary and not a proactive phenomenon that can only be understood in reference to other, more powerful, actors.

In the 1960s and 70s, a number of scholars built upon the work of Baker Fox in analyzing small states. Many of these early small state researchers were united in their understanding of small states as defined by their military and economic weakness—an understanding informed by the underpinnings of classical realism. Thus, these early small state researchers consistently "opted to study [small states] from the perspective of dependence and vulnerability, not power" (Braveboy-Wagner, 2010: 408). From this era, the pioneering work of David Vital (1967; 1971) remains widely cited. It addresses the question of how small states can survive in an international system defined by the dominance of larger powers. Vital describes a small state as one that is "more vulnerable to pressure, more likely to give way under stress, more limited in respect to the political options open to it and subject to a tighter connexion between domestic and external affairs" and argues that:

the smaller the human and material resources of a state the greater are the difficulties it must surmount if it is to maintain any valid political options at all and, in consequence, the smaller the state the less viable it is as a genuinely independent member of the international community. (Vital, 1967: 3)

Vital's 1967 work *The Inequality of States* argues that, for small states, viability is a relative quality that fluctuates with individual circumstances, but that, for many small states, the most attractive international strategy may be to adopt a policy of passivity so as not to provoke larger states with greater material capacities.

While Vital's work remains a cornerstone of small state literature, other scholars during this time reached differing conclusions about small state behaviour—even as they also conceptualized small states as defined by weakness. For instance, unlike Vital, who found that small state viability was contingent upon neutral, unobtrusive behaviour, in the 1968 work *Alliances and Small Powers*, Robert Rothstein argued that pursuing neutrality is dangerous for small states and that small state viability is contingent upon judicious use of alliances and alignment with larger powers. George Liska's 1968 book *Alliances and the Third World* also examined how small states behave in relation to international alliances, and subsequent to these works, the study of alliance-forming and 'bandwagoning' behaviours has remained a central part of the limited small state literature (for example: Keohane, 1971; Knudsen, 2002; Labs, 1992; Schweller, 1992). Others during this period offered contributions to the burgeoning school of small state studies that were mostly concerned with how to define small states (for example: Barston, 1971; Benedict, 1967; Wood, 1967). As discussed, this remains a central question in the literature.

Beyond the discrete and somewhat isolated school of small state studies that began to form in the 1960s and 70s, during this time, mainstream IR assumed small state behaviour to be a reactionary phenomenon determined more by the behaviour of larger states in the international system than by the small states themselves. Within this broad analytic framework, however, some scholars did indicate that small states could actualize foreign policy power in specific circumstances. In his notable essay *Power and Influence: The Means of Foreign Policy*, Arnold Wolfers argued that there is a particular ‘power of the weak’ that gives small states the ability to resist the world’s superpowers. In keeping with traditional realist conceptualizations of power, he assumed this ‘power of the weak’ to be a function of the international system:

The chief reason for this ‘power of the weak’ stems from the relationships among the great powers themselves. Even for them power is a scarce commodity which they need to husband with care ... Therefore whenever two great powers are locked in a serious conflict they can spare little if any of their coercive strength to deal with minor offenders and to impose their will over them. (Wolfers, 1962: 111–112)

Robert Keohane made a similar argument in his notable 1971 essay *The Big Influence of Small Allies* in which he noted that America’s preoccupation with the “communist challenge” in the post-World War II period had provided some of the US’ “most dependent and weakest allies” a kind of leverage that they could utilize in order to impact US policy (Keohane, 1971: 162). He posited that small states could “take large-scale patterns of international politics for granted, since nothing [they do] can possibly affect them very much”. Thus, they could focus on a small range of vital interests and sometimes behave in unusual ways, safe in the knowledge that their behaviour would have no impact “on the stability of international politics in general” (Keohane, 1971: 162–163). Conversely, according to Keohane, because of the US’ preeminence in foreign affairs, it would often have to yield to the wishes of small states in order to maintain a focus on its broad geostrategic goals. These ideas were different from those that had come before in the way they attributed to small states a particular kind of power that could be used to coerce larger actors. Despite this, however, they continued to view small states as only possessing foreign policy power in relation to larger actors in the international system.

Although, outside of these examples, many IR theorists had little to say regarding small state concerns during the 1959–1979 period, small states sometimes appeared in major works as tangential actors. In this context, and again in keeping with the primary tenets of classical realism, small states were often dismissed as unimportant or assumed to behave in ways so similar that study of their individual behaviours was unnecessary. For instance, Hedley Bull argued in 1977’s *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* that, within an international system defined by a grossly unequal distribution of material resources, “the demands of certain states (weak ones) can in practice be left out of account, the demands of certain other states (strong ones) recognized to be the only ones relevant to the issue at hand” (Bull, 1977: 206). Likewise, Arnold Wolfers, in his well-known analogy of the burning house, made the point that the closer states find themselves to existentially threatening situations, the more their behaviour will converge and thus conform to easily predicted patterns. The analogy posits that the only reasonable reactions to finding oneself in a burning house are either to attempt to flee or to put out the flames (Wolfers, 1962). This line of reasoning is significant for small states since, for Wolfers and other theorists, small states are assumed *always* to be closer to an existential challenge than their large counterparts simply by virtue of their lack of military and economic resources (Elman, 1995: 176). In other words, their material weakness relegates them to a position of chronic vulnerability—in one way or another, the house is always ablaze—and so their ability to pursue what might be called discretionary foreign policy endeavours is severely constrained because they must always be concerned with fleeing the burning house or putting out the flames.

In sum, during the 1959–1979 period, a small contingent of scholars following on from the pioneering work of Annette Baker Fox began to build a discrete school of small state studies within the discipline of IR. These scholars were heavily influenced by the theoretical paradigm of classical realism, and, in general, they defined small states by their military and economic weaknesses. Also, during this time, major IR theorists, many of whom were likewise influenced by classical realism, largely argued that small state behaviour can be understood as a function of the behaviour of larger states in the international system. While some like Robert

Keohane and Arnold Wolfers identified that small states could actualize a particular kind of ‘power of the weak’, others like Hedley Bull argued that the demands of small states could often be left out of any account of international politics. In totality, all of this created a situation where small states were largely seen in IR as marginal actors in the arena of international politics.

The Second Wave: 1979–1992

Following the efforts of early small state scholars, the mid-1970s saw interest in small state issues stagnate (Neumann and Gstohl, 2006). This was in large part due to the ongoing definitional challenge discussed previously (Baehr, 1975; Christmas-Møller, 1983). However, it was also a result of the emergence of Kenneth Waltz’s theory of neorealism in 1979 (Elman, 1995). As discussed earlier, neorealist theory, also referred to as structural realism, views states as rational actors whose overriding goal is the pursuit of security (Waltz, 1979). In this paradigm, since all states are, in one form or another, pursuing the goal of obtaining security, one needs only to have an accurate understanding of the structure of the international system—defined as the relative balance of power amongst the rational state actors—to be able to predict how any single state will behave (Browning, 2008: 24–26). The attraction of neorealism is largely in its simplicity—understand the system, and you can understand the behaviour of the actors within it—and in its utility in explaining the great power bipolarity of the Cold War. However, the features that contributed to the rise of neorealism’s popularity also “worked to marginalize, and in a sense subordinate, the bulk of international actors who were not amongst the ranks of the Great Powers”, and as a result, “neorealism did not have much time for the weaker players in the system” (Buzan, 1998: 214).

Partially as a result of the rapid rise of neorealism as a bedrock theoretical paradigm in IR, during the 1980s and early 1990s, where scholars did examine small state issues, the idea that domestic level concerns are divorced from small state foreign policy making was heavily reinforced. This was true in case studies of the foreign policy behaviour of individual small states and in broader IR theorizing. For instance, in Michael Handel’s seminal 1981 work *Weak States in the International System*, Handel explicitly acknowledged that the international system should be given analytic primacy when examining small state foreign policy. He argued:

Domestic determinants of foreign policy are less salient in weak states. The international system leaves them less room for choice in the decision-making process. Their smaller margin of error and hence greater preoccupation with survival makes the essential interests of weak states less ambiguous. (Handel, 1981: 3)

Notably, this conceptualization of small state foreign policy behaviour is very similar to Arnold Wolfers’ analogy of the burning house, which posited that small state behaviour is easier to predict because of the inherent vulnerabilities of such states (Wolfers, 1962). This similarity indicates how little small state theory had evolved throughout the 1970s.

Excepting Handel’s widely acknowledged work, small state IR literature through the 1979–1992 period was exceedingly sparse, and, in line with the ascendant paradigm of neorealism, what little there was largely relied on structural analyses of international politics to explain small state behaviour. For example, Bischoff (1986) argued that small state foreign policy behaviour is largely determined by the structure of the international capitalist economy, which exposes small states to dominance and exploitation by larger states and multinational corporations. Similarly, De Vries argued that small state foreign policy in Europe could be understood almost entirely as a function of the structural stability inherent to Europe in the post-World War II period. His conclusion stressed “the need to analyse international relations among small states within the contextual system of which they are a part, and especially as a function of differences with respect to their specific positions within this system” (De Vries, 1988: 51). In a case study of Ireland, Sharp found that Ireland’s foreign policy determinants in the 1980s were almost exclusively external. He argued that when Ireland, a “weak and peripheral actor”, integrated with the European Economic Community “What ... changed was not the fact of Ireland’s dependence on its external environment but the form and intensity of it” (Sharp, 1987: 68). In a similar vein, in a comparative analysis of the behaviour of several democratic states, Schweller argued that “the unique

systemic pressure exerted on Israel explains its deviant foreign policy and military behaviour” (Schweller, 1992: 253).

In a study of small state ‘bandwagoning’ behaviour, Labs (1992: 406) found that Waltz’s conceptualization of neorealism—and thus the primacy of structural explanations of behaviour— was “even more powerful than had previously been thought”. While this statement may not have been intended as a summary of small state scholarship in the 1979–1992 period, it acts as such. In sum, outside of sporadic case studies, these years saw few instances of IR scholars examining small state issues broadly, and those that did almost exclusively argued that it was the structure of the international system that needed to be given analytic primacy. Thus, while the ascendant theoretical paradigm had shifted from classical realism to neorealism since the era of Annette Baker Fox and the early small state scholars, small states continued to be seen throughout mainstream IR as marginal actors unable to meaningfully impact the choices of larger actors in the international system.

The Third Wave: 1992 - Present

Challenges to the commonly held view that small state behaviour could be explained by exclusively analyzing the structure of the international system began to appear in the mid-1990s. This signalled a reinvigoration of small state studies broadly (Neuman, 1998; Elman, 1995; Neumann and Gstohl, 2006; Knudsen, 2002) and was in part driven by the emergence of a new theoretical paradigm that explicitly sought to challenge the tenets of neorealism by examining the role of social construction in IR (Wendt, 1992). Typically known as constructivism, the rise of this new paradigm was in part driven by an increasingly widespread feeling that practical political developments in small states seemed to be outpacing the ability of IR theory to explain them (Neumann and Gstohl, 2006; Neuman, 1998).

Early in this period of reinvigoration, Elman directly challenged the idea that domestic factors could be dismissed as a determinant of small state behaviour in foreign affairs, demonstrating through a case study of the pre-1900s US that domestic institutions do impact foreign policy development. Elman’s article *The Foreign Policies of Small States: Challenging Neorealism in Its Own Backyard* (1995) remains widely cited by small state researchers today. Similarly, Buzan (1998) argued that, for IR scholars to appropriately address issues of foreign relations in the ‘Third World’, they need to expand their understanding of how the systemic and unit level factors interact with one another. In part influenced by the rise of constructivism and the expansion of the belief that ‘ideas matter’ in international politics, some scholars during this time focused on the idea that small states might act as “norm-entrepreneurs” by modelling and strengthening international codes of appropriate state behaviour (Ingebritsen, 2002). Others focused on the idea that small states could act as an “international conscience”, particularly with regards to climate change issues (Davis, 1996). Many others focused on how the concept of ‘state identity’ might help to explain the changing nature of international politics in the post-Cold War era and where small states might fit into the new order (Browning, 2002; Kowert, 1998; Neumann, 1998; Ringmar, 1996; Wendt, 1996; Williams, 1998).

Especially since the turn of the twenty-first century, the works of scholars such as Alan Chong, Godfrey Baldacchino, Jaqueline Braveboy-Wagner, Christopher Browning, Christine Ingebritsen, and others have accelerated a trend of arguing that small states are not as powerless in international affairs as much mainstream IR literature has long imagined. For instance, in a 2010 case study of the foreign policy behaviour of Trinidad and Tobago, Braveboy-Wagner (2010: 425) utilized a “weakly realist” lens to argue that, while systemic factors do put important constraints on small state foreign policy choices, it is nonetheless possible for a small state to “craft a foreign policy that seeks to break out of the limited visions of what a small state ... can and should do” if it adopts appropriate ‘smart’ and ‘soft’ power strategies. Elsewhere, Browning (2008) approached small state foreign policy from a constructivist perspective and argued that it is through identity narratives that states come to understand what actions are possible and what they mean. To him, foreign policy manoeuvrability is predicated on what narratives are deployed by politicians at what time—thus, dominant narratives can constrain or expand the bounds of what is considered to be a possible foreign policy action at any given time (Browning, 2008: 95). Browning’s conceptualization of IR theory is very different from Braveboy-Wagner’s, but it is equally indicative of IR’s expanding consideration of non-structural/systemic factors as determinants of small state foreign policy. Other small state analysts have fallen somewhere between these two poles, but most have been

united by the commonly shared idea that small states have more foreign policy manoeuvrability than they have commonly been attributed (Subotić, 2016; Chong, 2010; Ponížilová, 2013; Águeda Corneloup and Mol, 2013; Reeves, 2014).

Conclusion

It is something of a paradox that, while it is difficult to define exactly what a small state is at a theoretical level, in practical terms, the world appears to be full of them. Small states have formed their own alliances such as AOSIS, their own UN groupings such as FOSS, and frequently band together to negotiate in forums at the international level. Many small states are acknowledged to be influential voices in particular issue areas—from international climate change policy (Bodansky, 1993; Betzold, 2010) to the promotion of human rights (Lakatos, 2017).

All of this can be seen in the Pacific, a region made up almost entirely of small states, and one where international politics are in flux. From the rise of China and the relative decline of US influence, to the increasing importance of climate change diplomacy and the geopolitical implications of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic—in the present day, there is much uncertainty in the Pacific. This uncertainty undoubtedly creates challenges that states must navigate, but it also creates opportunities for creative foreign policy endeavours.

The academic discipline of IR exists to help us understand how states behave in the system of international politics—how they address challenges and opportunities. Yet, for much of IR’s history, it has had little to say about small states. A review of the broad sweep of IR literature that deals with small states indicates that small states have often been conceptualized as objects that are *acted upon*, rather than as political actors who can proactively set out to achieve their own goals in international affairs. This is the result of small state IR scholars relying heavily upon the theoretical paradigms of realism and neorealism, particularly in the 1959–1979 and 1979–1992 periods. It is only since the end of the Cold War, and especially since the turn of the twenty-first century, that small state studies has experienced a comparative renaissance and many scholars have argued that small states are not as weak and powerless as has long been assumed.

As the politics of the twenty-first century continue to develop and small states continue to face new challenges and new opportunities, it is incumbent upon the discipline of IR to examine small states free of the bonds of the classic theoretical paradigms that have long dominated—whether that be through the lens of social construction, norm entrepreneurship, comparative politics, or some other paradigm or research program. Moving forward, such an expansion of the discipline of IR’s analytic horizons can only be a positive development, both for the Pacific and beyond.

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