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Non-Western Small States: Activists or Survivors?

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The last two and a half decades since the end of the Cold War have been marked by an increasing awareness, among the academic community and other observers, of the growing role played in international relations by non-state actors, from multinational corporations to international governmental and non-governmental organisations, to the new media to insurgency groups.¹ Accordingly, there have been calls to consider these other actors more seriously and more systematically and to question the on-going centrality and importance of states in international relations.² This evolution has a parallel in the domestic realm, where the neo-liberal reforms launched in the 1990s, coupled with current austerity measures in the face of a world economic crisis, have effectively rolled back the state and handed over a number of formerly state duties to non-state, privatised or charity, actors.

Why, then, focus specifically on states? While we do not share realist thinkers' obsession with the state as the one and only international actor, it seems to us that reports of the death of the state are greatly exaggerated. There is a risk that, by focusing overly on other, non-state actors, we forget all too easily that states remain the only legitimate decision-making actors in international relations. More importantly, perceptions of a dying state seem essentially West-centred. In the 'non-Western world' – and we will discuss the limits of this phrase below – the state remains central in the domestic and international realms. It is the one actor that populations turn to for the development of their economy and their welfare and from which they expect protection against enemies and the defence of the country's interests, even – and this is very telling – when their states have long failed to deliver on any of these fronts. In some extreme cases, the line between state and the government or governing elite is extremely blurred, so much so that a state might not survive the death of its leader. Elites in many countries around the world compete through legitimate and illegitimate means for the many formal and informal benefits linked to access to the state.³ Most international aid and post-conflict reconstruction programmes also focus on the reform of the state and its institutions, whether or not they also include support to civil society organisations.

Yet, more than four decades after Robert Keohane's call for a more systematic analysis of the world's 'Lilliputian' foreign policies,⁴ mainstream International Relations scholars continue to neglect the international role played by many states situated in the non-Western world, or 'periphery' as it is also sometimes named. There is a growing body of literature that looks at rising powers and potential game-shifters in the future, as well as states that are developing soft power: some are now called

BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and are thought to be major emerging economies, the MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, Australia) are largely seen as middle powers, while the MINT (Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria, Turkey) have the distinct advantage of having a strong ratio of people eligible to work relative to those not working, thus making them interesting for demographic reasons. Those groupings do not change the nature of states, but aim to create categories that help perceive and handle states in the global system, while such states have few geographical or historical reasons to interact in concert. Can it thus be said that the state is slowly regaining its primacy? Perhaps, but not all states are researched equally and there is surprisingly little interest in analysing the international relations of the many, smaller, states that together make the non-Western realm.

This is not to say that there is a dearth of good research on these states. On the contrary, when one takes the time to look, there is a wealth of excellent empirical literature analysing specific case studies and the contributions presented in this special issue have all drawn extensively on these works. Relatively few of these, however, dare to focus specifically on the international relations of these states, as if they had internalised the academic discipline's determination to count them out. Indeed, small states have often been considered as interesting only in their relations within an institutional setting they could contribute to, or receive advantages from, or in how they would attempt to avoid collapse and disappearance, being absorbed by a larger state. More importantly there have been few attempts at looking at cross-sections of small non-Western states from a comparative perspective and/or at considering how their international behaviour on the international scene may be changing. The world remains unequal – some would even suggest that it is increasingly so, as are most of our societies – but the end of the Cold War's bipolarity and the economic and political rise of non-Western powers, as well as the coming of age of many young states that achieved independence less than 60 years ago, is re-opening the international game in a way that demands that greater attention be given to the world's non-Western small states, and in a manner that will avoid confusion with misnomers in the media, as seen recently with the emergence of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), which is, for all purposes, not a state as International Relations would define one.

Having laid out our reasons for proposing this special issue, we should now account for the use of the somewhat problematic 'non-Western small states' phrase. This issue draws, as mentioned above, on a rich empirical literature looking at a plethora of case studies across the world. It also owes much

to, and hopes to be part of, a growing body of literature looking at ‘small states’. Much of this literature has struggled with the need to find a consensus around the concept of ‘small states’. There have thus been many attempts at defining small states through the use of tangible criteria such as their population size,⁵ or a combination of population size, land area and income.⁶ Others have considered the problem of definition overall irrelevant⁷ and have refused to engage with it,⁸ or have underlined that ‘a concept – a loosely defined notion of small states that eschews rigid specifications – is preferable to a definition when discussing small states’.⁹

There is no doubt that these debates will continue to figure prominently in works that try to analyse a vast number of states as one group based on a criterion as tenuous as their size. Certainly this issue was a contentious one during the workshop that initiated this special issue. One of our participants helpfully suggested that state smallness most certainly had less to do with the actual size, however defined, than with a state’s own, self-perceived vulnerability. In other words, what makes these states small is not so much a measurable smallness as, in a very constructivist turn, their understanding of themselves and their capacities as being small, and the sense of vulnerability, in an unequal world dominated by a few great powers, which naturally derives from this perception. This is not to say that actual state size – whatever the specific criteria used to measure it – plays no role. It clearly has a direct impact on a state’s self-perception and most self-perceived small states will bear a combination of small population and land area sizes as well as low income, though this is not always the case, as many small states have a GNI (Gross National Income) that places them well above the LIC (Low Income Countries) threshold.¹⁰ But taking into account self-perception does account for the fact that states such as North Korea (with a population of 25 million) or the Democratic Republic of Congo (with a land area of more than 2 million square kilometres and a population of 82 million), for example, might perceive themselves as ‘small’. Self-perceived smallness – and the ways in which it is expressed, managed, proclaimed or concealed - can also, usefully, tell us more about the way these states understand their place on the international world scene and form their foreign policies.

The other defining character of the states studied in this special issue, their ‘non-Westerness’, is another unsatisfactory generalisation that needs explaining. Most volumes looking at small states in international relations have tended to focus exclusively on European small states,¹¹ while others have also included a small state from every other continent.¹² We contend, however, that while all small states may have much in common on the international scene, the non-Westerness of some sets them

apart. It means, in particular, that they are doubly ‘peripheral’ – if we are to accept this problematic yet meaningful term – both in size and geographical location. It also gives them a number of important historical characteristics in that the great majority, if not all, of these states are former colonies, and/or former parts of great empires, and are comparatively young. They would have experienced a process that moved, according to Knudsen, through several phases, with an identity formation usually preceding them losing ties with a larger unit, such as a colonial power, before going on to state formation and ultimately either ensuring their own survival, or failing to do so and declining, thus returning to a stronger state’s orbit.¹³ As such, many will have participated in, spread or been drawn to the Third World, or South-South, solidarity discourse that has taken multiple forms since the beginning of the Cold War. This, in turn, has an obvious impact on the way they form their international relations – they are more likely, in particular, to look to other non-Western states as both allies and role models. Non-Western states’ comparative youth will also often mean that their regimes are in transition – if not authoritarian, they are generally not considered fully democratic either.¹⁴ As a result, their foreign policies are often in the hands of a small and exclusive elite that is neither willing nor perceiving the need to justify its strategic decisions to the wider population or to ensure that foreign policies benefit the majority. This affects the nature of the interests they defend, but also the nature of both their leeway and the timeframe within which they are able to operate (as these are arguably less constrained by electoral deadlines, although potentially dramatically shortened in times of political crises).

Having thus explained and justified our choice of terms, we hasten to add that we continue to find them imperfect and even problematic in many ways. The first issue we have is with the double-negative enshrined in the term ‘non-Western small states’, which suggests a much greater adhesion to mainstream IR thinking – and its West-centricity and obsession with conventional power – than we are happy to claim. The second issue, indirectly linked to the first, is that talking about ‘non-Western small states’, however much in common they may have, suggests a homogeneity that naturally does not exist. The sheer number of non-Western small states indicates a much greater diversity than this single special issue will be able to adequately represent. There are however obvious advantages to using concepts and terms that are immediately recognisable and understandable by all and we felt those advantages outstripped our misgivings.

Drawing on a nascent body of literature calling for greater awareness of the agency of the former periphery – notably of African states,¹⁵ this special issue focuses on understanding and

explaining the agency of non-Western small states. The concept of agency has been especially salient in the small states literature, with an increasing awareness that such states have been able to play a norm entrepreneur role in some contexts.¹⁶ While this is particularly true for small Nordic and some European states, we contend that non-Western small states, rather than being exclusively geared towards simple survival as a result of their limited means in a great-power dominated world,¹⁷ can at times be better understood as activist states too. This activism may be focused on existing – rather than merely surviving – when bigger states tend to focus on increasing or asserting their power, but it displays a level of foreign policy knowledge and understanding, a pro-activeness, a diversity of approach and strategic thinking and a creativity that they are only too rarely credited for. The articles included in this special issue all consider different aspects of non-Western small state activism and thus contribute to a better, more detailed and diverse understanding of their specific type of agency.

The two first articles in this special issue are theoretical contributions and seek to develop the debate further, notably by acknowledging the diversity of small state foreign policies and proposing new ways of analysing their agency. First, Bailes, Thayer and Thorhallsson share with us their eagerness to explore new theoretical avenues by revisiting alliance theory, underlining some of its limits with regards to small states and suggesting that a shelter theory might offer more interesting and relevant tools to understand small states' international relations. By testing their approach empirically across three cases – Armenia, Cuba and Singapore – they show that all these countries have developed their own diplomatic activism, albeit at different times and in different contexts. Second, Gigueux recognises the increasing need for small states to pursue foreign policies within bilateral and multilateral institutional settings, but suggests that using role theory to analyse their behaviour allows for a better understanding of the choices and compromises small states are faced with. While the literature has often highlighted that small states are indeed self-aware, Gigueux suggests that these states hold several different images and versions of themselves, and are increasingly becoming 'actors' – in the sense that they are not just passive – and cognizant of their own weaknesses, strengths as well as agency with the international system.

The next set of three articles focuses on states that have been isolated within the international system, either because they do not conform to global norms (North Korea) or do so in a limited manner (Fiji), and/or because of a specific post-colonial identity and regional context that have prevented full international and/or regional integration (Djibouti and Fiji). Yet, in recent years, these small states have

managed to fight off deliberate isolation by greater powers to carve out a specific position within their region and, to some extent beyond it, thanks to specific and at times complex, strategies. In the context of Fiji, Lanteigne highlights the state's ability to create a 'nexus of protest' against larger states such as Australia and New Zealand who had generally been able to impose their influence over Fiji and other small island neighbours. Fiji's newfound agency and activism is explained partly by its geographical position as well as domestic forces that aimed to create a specific identity for the state, and thus to derive power from the country's geo-political context. Grzelczyk's article on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea explores similar dynamics in a country that, because of its political isolation and border closure, is also akin to an island state. The article traces North Korea's development from a post-colonial state struggling to maintain a discreet identity to a state that has managed to gain agency by developing nuclear weapons, a reality that has isolated the country and reduced its potential to interact constructively with the international community while at the same time most likely ensured its survival. Styan's research on Djibouti as a small and weak state highlights the shift from a post-colonial state 'gifted' with a strategic location hosting the United States' only permanent military facility in the Horn of Africa to a country practising an 'activist foreign policy' by exploiting its geo-strategic location further, as well as by drawing on its multi-ethnic make-up to engage in multiple spheres including Africa, Arab countries and Francophone groups.

Finally, the last three articles consider the practical questions of the power, agency and alliance of small states situated in regions that have suffered from conflict, and that are currently reorganizing their political and security arrangements. Looking particularly at Georgia and the question of either hiding away or seeking protection, Wivel explores the country's challenge to exist between East and West, and its lack of agency to determine its own trajectory between a powerful Russia on the one hand and an attractive yet apparently inaccessible European Union on the other hand. A similar East-West dilemma in Post-Yugoslav small states is explored in Kovačević's analysis, which focuses on the agency-structure debate within the Balkans. Kovačević is concerned with how the Balkans and its small states can transcend an apparently imaginary limitation to their own power and role, and how emancipation from a conflictual past is needed for smarter agency to take root. Finally, Rickli's work on the post 2003-Iraq invasion Gulf states and their relationship with the United States shows how small states in the region have slowly started to become more independent in their own military and security policies, albeit under the leadership of Saudi Arabia, thus strengthening the idea that, where it

can be developed, agency for non-Western states often arises from cooperation with like-minded or geographically close partners, rather than from the dominant, Western hegemony.

We hope this special issue establishes with great clarity that although they are not always successful in their endeavours, non-Western small states are dynamic players in international cooperation – their smallness, to quote Bailes, Thayer and Thorhallsson in this issue, means they ‘benefit disproportionately’ from this cooperation in a manner denied to their larger counterparts, and they are arguably also less constrained by the rules of the international power game, expectations and visibility. This evidently calls for much greater attention and analysis than they have been afforded in the discipline of International Relations so far, a call we have no doubt will be heeded by some of this issue’s contributors and many others.

We would like to conclude this short introduction by thanking all of the special issue’s contributors most warmly for their articles, but also for their many contributions to earlier debates and ideas around this publication project (some of these exchanged at a workshop organised in June 2015 with the generous support of the British International Studies Association). We take particular pride in having brought together scholars with different backgrounds and levels of experience (even though we were unfortunately unable to strike the greater author gender equality we had aimed for).

The making of this issue was sadly overshadowed by the death of one of its contributors, Alyson Bailes. We did not have the honour and pleasure of meeting Alyson personally but her excellent reputation always preceded her and we know from friends, colleagues and her two co-authors that she was a much liked and respected diplomat and scholar, and a generous role model and guide for many younger female academics. We are especially moved at the thought that this issue includes her last scholarly contribution and would like to dedicate the issue to her memory.

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- ¹ Dartnell, “Weapons of Mass Instruction,” 2003; Fuchs, “Commanding Heights?,” 2005; Lipschutz, “Reconstructing World Politics,” 1992; Strange, *The Retreat of the State*, 1996; Vinci, *Armed Groups*, 2008.
- ² Avant et al., *Who Governs the Globe?* 2010; Lake, “The New Sovereignty”, 2003.
- ³ See, in particular, Metelits and Matti, *Democratic Contestation*, 2015.
- ⁴ Keohane, “Lilliputians’ Dilemmas”, 1969.
- ⁵ Barston, *The Other Powers*, 1973; Sutton and Payne, “Lilliput under Threat”, 1993.
- ⁶ Crowards, “Defining the Category,” 2002.
- ⁷ Vital, *Survival of Small States*, 1971.
- ⁸ Baker Fox, *The Power of Small States: Diplomacy in World War II*, 1959.
- ⁹ Hey, *Small States*, 2003: 3.
- ¹⁰ Bishop, “The Political Economy of Small States: Enduring Vulnerability?” 2012.
- ¹¹ Ingebritsen et al., *Small States*, 2006; Panke, *Small States*, 2010.
- ¹² Hey, *Small States*, 2003; Simpson, “Small States,” 2006; Archer, Bailes and Wivel, *Small States*, 2014.
- ¹³ Knudsen, “Small States, Latent and Extant: Towards a General Perspective,” 2002.
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