

## EDITORIAL

### Security challenges of small states

*Michał Pawiński*

*The University of the West Indies, Trinidad and Tobago*

[Michal.Pawinski@sta.uwi.edu](mailto:Michal.Pawinski@sta.uwi.edu)

*Randy Seepersad*

*The University of the West Indies, Trinidad and Tobago*

[Randy.Seepersad@sta.uwi.edu](mailto:Randy.Seepersad@sta.uwi.edu)

and

*Annita Montoute*

*The University of the West Indies, Trinidad and Tobago*

[annita.montoute@sta.uwi.edu](mailto:annita.montoute@sta.uwi.edu)

**ABSTRACT :** This guest editorial introduction reviews the rationale and contents of the special section on security challenges to small states. These face unique security threats because they are more susceptible to systemic instabilities, whether economic, political, or social. The literature on small states' security is growing; but it is often overshadowed by their geopolitical landscape. The authors in this special issue examine various challenges surrounding small states, including the role of smallness in conflict environments, migratory trends, human trafficking, youth delinquency, and economic security. Overall, this special section underscores the unique security challenges faced by small states and emphasizes the need for more comprehensive research that takes into account the diverse experiences and perspectives of small states from different parts of the world.

**Keywords:** power asymmetry, security challenges, security studies, small states, smallness

© 2024 – Islands and Small States Institute, University of Malta, Malta

---

## Introduction

Small states face unique security challenges that differ from those of larger states. They are often located in regions that are prone to insecurities or in close proximity to larger, more powerful states that may transpose their insecurities onto the smaller states. They are also more susceptible to systemic instabilities, whether economic, political, or social. The existing literature on the security of small states is growing and provides valuable insights into the topic. Yet, the security concerns of small states are frequently in the shadow of their geopolitical landscape, as in the case of Latin American and Caribbean states whose security is tied to that of the US (Marczak, Bozmoski, and Kroenig, 2024); while other small states have their security situated in their membership of regional organizations or alliances that consist of larger powers: such as the European Union, North Atlantic Treaty Organization or the Organization of American States. Thus, there is need for more thorough research that takes into account the diverse experiences and perspectives of small states from different regions.

Before addressing the unique context of small states' security, one should ask what constitutes a small state. Historically, authors have struggled with a suitable definition. Some consider the physical dimensions of the land or population size to categorize countries; others

have taken an economic perspective (e.g. GDP); or a deficit approach, looking at what small states lack in international relations when compared to the great powers. Each of those attempts to find a fixed drawer for small states has met many problems (Baldacchino and Wivel, 2020; Maass, 2017). Therefore, Wivel, Bailes, and Archer (2014, p. 9) suggested that small states should be analysed from the perspective of power asymmetry, specifically, “the weaker part in an asymmetric relationship, which is unable to change the nature or functioning of the relationship on its own”.

### **Contents of the Special Section**

It is within this context that **Máté Szalai (2024)**, in **Bound to lose? The usage of smallness in the strategic narratives of smaller states during armed conflict**, explores how three different states – Kuwait during the Iraqi invasion (1990-1991), Armenia during the second Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (2020-2021), and Ukraine after the Russian attacks (2022-2023) – use the ‘smallness’ narrative to gather support, gain sympathy, or deflect responsibility in a conflict environment. He argues that smallness should not be seen as a source of inherent weakness; and it is not the most critical variable in defining small state foreign policy.

After Szalai (2024), the special section proceeds to tackle migration, addressed from the perspective of two small island states. The migration phenomenon is not a unique occurrence in the realm of world politics, and its impact has become pivotal to small and large states alike. In 2020, some 281 million migrants resided outside their countries of birth: 3.6% of the global population (IOM, 2022). Migrant numbers have surged over recent decades, reflective of a shift in economic, political, and social contexts. On the one hand, small states may experience significant internal displacement due to conflict, as in Papua New Guinea (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2014), or because of climate change, as in the Solomon Islands (Ramsay et al., 2023). On the other hand, these countries might in turn be receiving high levels of irregular migrants from other affected areas, which can overwhelm their infrastructure and overall socio-economic capacities (Joensen and Taylor, 2021; Selee and Bolter, 2020). Human trafficking is also an issue in many small states, which often serve as source, transit, and destination countries for such a practice (Khonje, 2015).

The security challenges related to the migration theme of two other small states in two different regions are explored by **Alana L. Wheeler (2024)** in **Prosecuting human trafficking cases in Trinidad and Tobago: Challenges and solutions in a small island state**, followed by **Mary Grace Vella and Yana Mintoff (2024)** in **Smallness and security: Territorial exclusion and opportunistic inclusion**. Wheeler (2024) highlights the under-investigated subject of human trafficking with particular attention to the judicial ineffectiveness of prosecuting such trafficking cases in Trinidad and Tobago. Despite numerous reports, it is only a decade after the setting up of the Counter-Trafficking Unit under the Ministry of National Security, that Trinidad and Tobago secured its first conviction of a human trafficker. Wheeler (2024) investigates problems associated with human trafficking and prosecution of traffickers in T&T and explores similar trends across the Caribbean, with concrete recommendations for the various small island developing states of this region.

The two latter authors also explore the issues of migration but from the perspective of Malta. Vella and Mintoff (2024) apply the securitization theory (Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde, 1998) with a particular focus on how the security/migration nexus is dominated by a crisis rhetoric in Malta, which has led to policies of migrant exclusion and detention. Additionally, the paper highlights the evidence of class and race selectivity in government policies and a prejudiced narrative against specific sets of migrants. The paper argues for stronger uncoupling of migration from securitisation.

Due to limited resources, small states are often left vulnerable to external threats with limited ability to defend themselves. One such threat is organized crime and the youth delinquency that fuels criminal networks. Studies of juvenile delinquency in small states refer to contributing factors such as low self-control (Baek, Han, and Seepersad, 2020) and school policies that marginalize low-achieving youths (Wilkinson, 2020). Considering the role that the school environment plays in fuelling delinquency, there is evidence that educational leadership can counter negative trends in this area.

In this context, **Lystra Hagley-Dickinson, Marcel Archer-Thomas and Randy Seepersad (2024) in Educational leadership: Reducing offending amongst incarcerated juveniles in Antigua and Barbuda** focus on the role of leaders within youth institutions and the critical part they play in ensuring that incarcerated youths are effectively rehabilitated and therefore become less likely to re-offend upon release. Unfortunately, in the Caribbean, youth institutions are neglected, as are adult prisons. All too often, the dominant narrative is that, once youths or adults are held securely, such institutions perform their function. Nothing could be further from the truth, however. Such institutions can function like ‘universities for crime,’ where youths learn new skills, develop values and attitudes conducive to offending, and become more enmeshed in social networks that encourage crime. Even more troubling in the Caribbean is that youths may be sent to secure facilities even when they have committed only status offences or are in need of protection. Hagley-Dickinson et al. (2024) point to the critical role that leadership style plays within youth institutions. They argue that housing youths securely is not enough; a deeper understanding of youths’ needs is required; and these needs are to be addressed through leadership styles sensitive to the diversity of detainees and the trauma faced by institutionalized youths.

Lastly, small states often face challenges related to their economic security. Limited resources and a small domestic market can make them more susceptible to economic shocks and fluctuations. They may also struggle to attract foreign investment or diversify their economies, which can leave them dependent on a few key industries or external actors. Economic vulnerabilities can have serious implications for a small state’s overall security, impacting social stability, political dynamics, and the state’s ability to provide for its citizens. Thus, small states need to be resourceful in addressing their economic security (Baldacchino, 2020). In this special section, **Ben Biedermann and Stefano Moncada (2024) in Islands unchained: The case of regulating virtual financial assets in Malta** examine the ability of a small state (Malta) to effectively leverage virtual asset regulation for commercial activity through its enactment of the Virtual Financial Asset Act (VFAA). Malta’s success was also evidenced by the influence it exercised over the conceptualization of crypto-assets on a European Union level and the influence of Maltese regulatory approaches for virtual assets on the ‘markets in crypto-assets’ (MiCA) EU directive.

We trust that you will enjoy this small, special collection of papers. We augur that it enriches the literature on the security challenges of small states.

## **Disclaimers**

The authors report no conflict of interest in the writing of this article. They also report that the article did not benefit from research funding.

## **References**

- Baek, H., Han, S., and Seepersad, R. (2020). Why do people’s complaints still fall on the police? Confidence in the police in Trinidad and Tobago. *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice*, 60: 100360.

- Baldacchino, G. (2020). Small states: Challenges of political economy. In G. Baldacchino & A. Wivel (Eds.), *Handbook on the politics of small states* (pp. 70-82). Edward Elgar.
- Baldacchino, G., and Wivel, A. (2020). Small states: Concepts and theories. In G. Baldacchino & A. Wivel (Eds.), *Handbook on the politics of small states* (pp. 2-18). Edward Elgar.
- Biedermann, B. and Moncada, S. (2024). Islands unchained: The case of regulating virtual financial assets in Malta. *Small States & Territories*, 7(1), 75-94.
- Buzan, B., Wæver, O., and De Wilde, J. (1998). *Security: A new framework for analysis*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Hagley-Dickinson, L., Archer-Thomas, M., & Seepersad, R. (2024). Educational leadership: Reducing offending amongst incarcerated juveniles in Antigua and Barbuda. *Small States & Territories*, 7(1), 59-74.
- Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. (2014). *Papua New Guinea: Invisible and neglected protracted displacement*. Norwegian Refugee Council. <https://www.internal-displacement.org/publications/papua-new-guinea-invisible-and-neglected-protracted-displacement/>
- IOM. (2022). *World migration report*. International Organization for Migration. <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2022>.
- Joensen, T., and Taylor, I. (2021). *Small states and the European migrant crisis: Politics and governance*. Springer Nature.
- Khonje, W. H. (2015). Migration and development: Perspectives from small states. Commonwealth Secretariat. <https://www.thecommonwealth-ilibrary.org/index.php/comsec/catalog/book/777>
- Maass, M. (2017). *Small states in world politics: The story of small state survival, 1648–2016*. Manchester University Press.
- Marczak, J., Bozmoski, M. F., and Kroenig, M. (2024). Redefining US strategy with Latin America and the Caribbean for a new era. *The Atlantic Council*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Redefining-US-Strategy-with-Latin-America-and-the-Caribbean-for-a-New-Era.pdf>.
- Ramsay, R., Cox, J., McDonald, L., Maetala, R., Clemo, J., Naidoo, D. and Woo, S. (2023). *Local responses to climate change and disaster-related migration in the Solomon Islands*. World Bank Group.
- Selee, A., and Bolter, J. (2020). Latin American and Caribbean responses to Venezuelan and Nicaraguan migration. *Migration Policy Institute*. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/Venezuela-Nicaragua-Migration2020-EN-Final.pdf>
- Szalai, M. (2024). Bound to lose? The usage of smallness in the strategic narratives of smaller states during armed conflict. *Small States & Territories*, 7(1), 7-24.
- Vella, M. G. and Mintoff, Y. (2024). Smallness and security: Territorial exclusion and opportunistic inclusion. *Small States & Territories*, 7(1), 41-58.
- Wheeler, A. L. (2024). Prosecuting human trafficking cases in Trinidad and Tobago: Challenges and solutions in a small island state. *Small States & Territories*, 7(1), 25-40.
- Wilkinson, K. (2020). School-facilitated juvenile delinquency A critical-interpretive analysis of the schooling experiences of low-achieving high school males in Jamaica. *Journal of Human Security Studies*, 9(1), 1-20.
- Wivel, A., Bailes, A. J. K., and Archer, A. (2014). Setting the scene: Small states and international security. In *Small states and international security* (pp. 3-25). Routledge.