

From prisons to prism: *Small States & Territories* journal and the study of small states and territories

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ABSTRACT: The journal *Small States & Territories* (SST) was launched in 2018. This article discusses the contribution of the journal to the study of small states and territories. The main argument of the article is that SST constitutes a prism reflecting a pluralist and highly diverse body of research on small states and territories held together by a shared commitment to a non-dogmatic social science recognizing the value of general propositions as well as context-embedded findings. With this point of departure, SST has succeeded in globalizing and mainstreaming the study of small states and territories, although some biases and limitations remain. After a brief discussion of the history and status of small state studies, the argument proceeds in three steps: a mapping of the content of the journal, a discussion of how the journal has contributed to the study of small states and territories, and some advice for the future of the journal.

Keywords: politics, size, small states, Small States & Territories, sociology of science, territories

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Introduction

The study of small states and territories is notoriously fragmented. Traditionally, much research on small states was done by country experts with a focus on the characteristics, challenges, and opportunities of a particular small state, with little attention as to how analyses and conclusions may travel to other small states in similar contexts. At most, the focus was on clusters of small states, e.g., in the Caribbean or Northern Europe, analyzed from an area study perspective. The main audiences were (and to some extent continue to be) national academic and administrative elites, with little patience for complex theory building or articles written in a non-native language.

Only a small number of publications, often written by scholars located in the United States, made a global and lasting impact. These include: Anette Baker Fox on small state diplomatic success and failure (Fox, 1959); Robert Keohane on the inability of small states to make a real impact on the international system (Keohane, 1969); Robert Rothstein on small states in international security and alliances (Rothstein, 1968); and Peter Katzenstein's work on small European states in world markets (Katzenstein, 1985). Paradoxically, like social sciences in general, the study of small states seemed to be primarily "an American social science" (Kristensen, 2015).

The past decades have seen an internationalization of the study of small states. This expansion is driven by a growing number of students and scholars of small states self-identifying as social scientists rather than country or area experts. It is shaped by a less US and Western centric social science and the market forces of the academic job market creating incentives for publication in international English-language journals. The development is facilitated by a growing number of journals and publishers taking small states seriously, including book series from Springer (2024) and Routledge (2024).

Still, fragmentation remains, and some biases have even been galvanized. Since the end of the Cold War, the number of international publications on small states in Europe has increased significantly. Several studies of electoral politics and public administration in European small states have been published in some of the best social science journals. However, they frequently neglect the small state context in favour of general conclusions on politics, administration, and organization. Conclusions seem to travel seamlessly, even to a US context, without much appreciation of historical cultural and economic context or the importance of size and scale. The number of international publications on European small state foreign policy and diplomacy have also grown significantly.

This literature has increased our knowledge on how rich, democratic small states navigate a highly institutionalized and relatively peaceful international environment, but much less about the opportunities and challenges of small states outside the old West. To be sure, much is happening outside Europe, although rarely backed by the same financial resources and access to publication networks. In the context of increased US-Chinese rivalry, research on small states in East Asia and the Indo-Pacific has provided important clues on small states in a conflictual security environment and their opportunities for hedging their security bets, although the implications for small states located outside these regions are less clear. A growing body of literature on small states in South and Central America has produced knowledge on populist politics, and how to navigate power asymmetry; and the Caribbean has long nurtured a tradition of analyzing small states and territories in the region (e.g. Lewis, 1972). Regions such as the Middle East and Central Asia remain at the margins of the study of small states, and Africa is mostly missing (Sanches et al., 2022; Sanches and Seibert, 2020 are exceptions).

In sum, rather than one international community of small state scholars, internationalization has resulted in parallel communities of regional experts, to some extent reproducing the parochialism and inequalities of the past. Small state researchers mainly work inside these regional “prisons” with little knowledge of what is going on outside their own confined space.

In this context, the launch of *Small States & Territories (SST)* in 2018, and the ongoing contribution of the journal – with just over 100 articles and an equal number of book reviews published, at the time of writing - is a worthy addition to the field. As noted by Godfrey Baldacchino in his editorial of the inaugural issue, the aim of the journal is “to build and nourish an academic and policy community interested in small states and territories and which will steadily militate against the current exceptionalism and exoticism of the field” (Baldacchino, 2018, p. 11). With this ambition, the journal contributes to a recent wave of studies seeking to explore how scale, size and international asymmetry matter for politics and society, while remaining sensitive to differences in historical legacies and institutional and socio-economic differences (e.g., Baldacchino and Wivel, 2020; Corbett and Veenendaal, 2018; Long, 2022).

This article argues that *SST* is fundamentally successful in implementing its ambition, even if some biases and blind spots remain. Its most important contribution is to create a global meeting point and platform for scholarly research and global debate on small states and territories. In doing so, *SST* constitutes a prism reflecting a pluralist and highly diverse body of research on small states and territories held together by a shared commitment to a non-dogmatic social science recognizing the value of general propositions as well as context-embedded findings. The article makes this point by answering three clusters of questions. First, what “is” *Small States & Territories*? Which topics, events and developments are analyzed in the journal? What are the theories and methodologies used to make sense of small states and territories? The aim of this first section is to map the content of *SST*. Second, what is it that *Small States & Territories* “does”? Does the journal succeed in mainstreaming the study of small states and territories in the social sciences? What kind of meeting place is the journal providing for research and researchers from different regions and social science disciplines? The aim of this section is to assess the impact and effect of *SST* on the study of small states and the community of small state scholars. Third, where could *Small States & Territories* go next? What are the future challenges and opportunities of the journal? The aim of this final section is to reflect upon the future course of the journal.

No journal changes an academic field in five or six years. Taking stock of what *SST* has accomplished over the journal’s first years constitutes at most a “mid-term evaluation” and nothing like a final exam. Moreover, while I illustrate my points about the journal with examples of articles, it is impossible to do justice to everything published in the journal. However, the recent five-year anniversary of the journal is a good occasion for taking stock of the journal and for reflecting on the study of small states and territories.

Mapping Small States & Territories: Contributions, biases, and debates

SST is a journal about small states and territories but not about every aspect of this topic or any approach for understanding it. As stated on the journal’s webpage, it “encourages a truly pluri-disciplinary approach to the study of small jurisdictions”, but at the same time “recognise the added relevance of specific disciplinary foci in the social sciences. Amongst these: geography, political science, economics, education, governance, international relations, public administration, international law and development studies.”¹ In sum, *SST* aims to be a social science journal, inclusive of traditional social science as well as its interactions with, say, geography and educational studies.

Despite this ambition to link up to social science in general, the content of the inaugural agenda-setting issue is closer to political science than other social science disciplines. It has a focus on small state democracy, diplomacy, and governance, even though at least one article seeks a more integrative approach of political science, economy, and postcolonial studies (Grydehøj, 2018). Subsequent issues are more diverse, although the theoretical centre of gravity remains political science broadly defined, including the study of how size, scale and asymmetry condition and influence democracy, public administration, diplomacy, and political economy. More than anything, this is most likely a reflection of a close fit between issues of concern in political science and small state studies. There is a long tradition in democracy studies for debating the ideal size of the polity for effectiveness and democratic accountability. Likewise, a focus on the importance of capability and power asymmetries in the study of international relations links well with the study of small states. The study of public administration deals with the rule of law and administrative effectiveness and recognizes the

¹ The aim, principles and procedures of the journal are located at <https://www.um.edu.mt/sst/aboutus/>

importance of societal and organizational size for these factors, and established research agendas in political economy focus on the size of markets and its effects on competition, responsibility, and equality.

The geographical scope of the journal aimed to be global from the outset. *SST*'s inaugural issue includes in-depth analyses of the Maldives, Tuvalu, and Greenland, as well as examples from a large number of small states and territories around the world. Articles in subsequent volumes deliver on this agenda-setting with material on a geographically, politically, and socio-economically very diverse group of small states and territories, including Aruba, Bougainville, Cayman Islands, Cook Islands, Corsica, Dutch Caribbean, Estonia, Falkland Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Free Territory of Trieste, Greenland, Guadeloupe, Guam, Guernsey, Iceland, Jersey, Jervis Bay Territory, Kiribati, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Maldives, Malta, Marshall Islands, Martinique, Mauritius, Montenegro, Nepal, New Caledonia, Newfoundland & Labrador, Papua New Guinea, Prince Edward Island, Saint Lucia, Samoa, Sardinia, Sark, Seychelles, Singapore, Sri Lanka, São Tomé & Príncipe, Timor-Leste and Oecusse, Trinidad & Tobago, and Vanuatu; as well as articles including broader categories such as the United Kingdom Overseas Territories, and groups of regional states and islands. *SST* even lends its pages to interesting discussions and analyses, using the fictitious microstates of Occussi-Ambeno (Hayward, 2019) and Greylock (Hayward, 2022) as prisms for discussing statehood.

Still biases remain. There are comparatively fewer articles on small states in Asia and Latin America than on small states in Europe; and very few articles on small states in Africa compared to the rest of the world. This bias is only made stronger by a tendency to focus on the current problems and challenges of small states rather than the history of the emergence and development of small states. Increased attention to this historical dimension could potentially make the study of small states more sensitive to how the different historical trajectories of small states continue to structure and contextualize the challenges, opportunities and understanding of the world, most importantly their very different histories as imperial centres or colonies, dependencies, vassal states, and so on. These biases in regional and historical focus are reflected in analytical biases, most notably surprisingly few articles in the journal from a post-colonial perspective.

The journal follows standard conventions for peer review, and contributions fall broadly into three categories: stand-alone articles, contributions to symposia, and book reviews. The book review section is in itself impressive and serves as an important register and reference on what is happening in the study of small states and territories. The symposia include special sections on: the competitiveness of small states; the Seychelles in the 21st century; a comparison of small island developing states and subnational island jurisdictions; gender, politics and development in Pacific small states and territories; small states and the Corona crisis; resilience and climate change in small states and territories; a section on sustainable island futures; the UK's overseas territories and Britain's crown dependencies after Brexit; and continuity and rupture in small states and territories during the reign of Queen Elizabeth II. Like the stand-alone articles, the special sections reflect a mixture of analyses of current and enduring challenges to small states and territories, as well as general topics of relevance to small states and territories. In this way, the special sections showcase the diversity and pluralism of the journal, but not a specific take on or agenda for the study of small states and territories.

To know more about this agenda and/or what characterizes research published in the journal, it makes sense to zoom in on the two constituent components of the journal title: “small states” and “territories”. As Long (2022, p. 6) notes, “defining who counts as a small state is not a simple matter, and there is no universal approach”. This is reflected in contributions to the journal. They convey a plethora of explicit and implicit understandings of what constitutes a small state. This may count as a strength rather than a weakness of the journal. Rather than setting a formalistic criterion for what counts as a small state, and what does not, the title serves as an invitation to dialogue and analysis on how and why limited societal capacity and international power asymmetry impact states and societies. Contributions to the journal analyze and debate the challenges and opportunities following from the limitations, and concrete experiences of navigating this situation in domestic and international politics. As argued by Grydehøj (2018, p. 72) in the inaugural issue of the journal, taking relative size seriously is useful, and only becomes problematic, if we take one specific size as standard: small is different from large, but micro may also differ from small. In sum, absolute, relative, and relational definitions are complementary rather than competing and may even be combined. *SST* serves as a laboratory for exploring how multiple definitions play out in practice, and how they may be linked or combined to deepen and widen our knowledge of small states and territories.

So how do contributions to the journal match the study of small states and territories in general? In methodological terms, the study of small states is often more qualitative than quantitative, although disciplinary differences exist between e.g., economics (more quantitative) and political science, history, and anthropology (more qualitative). The articles in *SST* fit this characteristic, with single and comparative case studies and narrative analyses constituting the majority of the published articles, but with occasional analyses using quantitative and statistical analysis (e.g., Adams and Pawiński, 2022; Ramessur and Bundhun, 2022). The most significant methodological move of the journal (in sync with its general aim), is towards general social science standards of enquiry. At first, this may be understood as a move in the opposite direction of a current social science trend towards increased use of ethnographic methods and understanding the social world from lived experience. This is not the case. The pages of *SST* include plenty of practice-focused analyses and even some personal experience-based discussions (Baldacchino, 2020; Wettenhall, 2018). Its social science ethos is a call for a greater appreciation of the methodological tensions and dilemmas of studying small states and territories (cf. Baldacchino, 2008), not for the use of a particular method (neither is it a call for refraining from some methods). Just as the ethnographic turn in social sciences more generally may be seen as a useful corrective to an increase in abstract and practice-free research of hypothesis testing and experimental social science, *SST*'s claim to publish social science is a corrective to the ever-looming risk of exoticism and parochialism in the study of small states and territories.

Theoretically, small state studies have increasingly aimed at translating and modifying existing assumptions and propositions of more general theories to situate them in the small state context (e.g. Jugl, 2022; Panke and Thorhallsson, 2024). For some, there is even a strong assumption of feedback to social science in general: studying small states is likely to “offer important answers to large questions” (Veenendaal and Corbett, 2015). The journal self-consciously seeks to further this development by explicitly denouncing exceptionalism and exoticism in favour of creating a shared social science space analyzing and debating small jurisdictions. A good example of how a general concept may be translated into a small state context at the same time that the small state context is used to pollinate the general concept is Angelique Pouponneau’s article on small island development states’ (SIDS’) understanding of the blue economy. The article systematically examines national policy documents and institutional frameworks employed in SIDS to problematize both their homogeneity and their

implementation of the blue economy principle (Pouponneau, 2023). Other examples include: Jack Corbett's analysis of Tuvalu for a discussion of the ideal size of democratic polities (Corbett, 2018); Courtney Lindsay's work on who influences norm-cycles and why norm-entrepreneurship succeeds or fails (Lindsay, 2019); and Vicente Bicudo de Castro, Christian Fleury and Henry Johnson's discussion of sovereignty through the prism of the Miquiers and Écréhous (Bicudo de Castro, Fleury and Johnson, 2023).

Empirically, small state studies tend to focus on the centrality of geography (e.g. remoteness/ closeness to great powers, islands/ landlocked states), history (e.g. colonial pasts and lost wars leading to the construction of the 'small state') as well as questions of capacity, asymmetry, dependency, and competition arising from smallness. This is also the case with *SST*, although, as noted above, the post-colonial perspective plays a smaller role in the pages of the journal than one might expect. Small island states, SIDS in particular, comprise the majority of case studies, while the challenges of coastal or landlocked states take up fewer pages. There are two likely reasons for this condition: one empirical and one conceptual.

First, there are simply more potential case studies of small island states than small coastal or landlocked states, because there are far more small island states than small coastal or landlocked states. The number of small island states saw a steep increase as a consequence of twentieth century decolonization. In contrast, the number of small landlocked states, historically mainly located in Europe, saw a steep decrease due to wars, annexation, and - more or less voluntary - amalgamation, from the end of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) and the Treaties of Westphalia to the early twentieth century (Maass, 2017). In addition, for most of the post-Cold War period, small island developing states have experienced severe challenges to their resilience, growth, and even survival (Thomas et al., 2020). This has often been due to a combination of post-colonial legacies and the detrimental consequences of the liberal international order, and has naturally spurred research on these states. However, with increasing great power rivalry due to the decline of US primacy and a weakened rule-based international order, small coastal and landlocked states are now facing an increasing number of challenges, including disruption of supply chains, democratic destabilization, and the threat of military annexation or invasion (Abrahamsen, Andersen and Sending, 2019; Pedi and Wivel, 2022). This may call for an increased interest in coastal and landlocked small states in the future.

Second, it is likely that the differences in empirical focus in *SST* reflect constructions and self-perceptions of smallness mirrored in national theoretical traditions and approaches seeking to understand the state as "small" (or not). This is more problematic. It risks skewing the study of small states in favour of the usual suspects in Oceania and the Caribbean (as well as Europe, which has many coastal/landlocked small states) with less attention to coastal and landlocked small states and territories in Central and South America, the Middle East, and Africa. This may create blind spots towards some of the challenges and opportunities of small states and the characteristics of their societies, and it may lead to potentially faulty generalizations.

The study of territories remains on the margins of social science, mostly due to its poor fit with - and critical questioning of - the conventional starting point in legal sovereignty. And so, including "territories" in the journal title is significant, and for at least three reasons. First, and most importantly, the substantial reason that there are over a hundred subnational jurisdictions, and they remain understudied, often even ignored, due to their many variations and poor fit with conventional social science theories. Second, including both small states and territories in the title of the journal reminds us that sovereign autonomy is rarely a dichotomous either/or issue for small states, many of them entangled in security and economic dependency with bigger states, international organizations, and multinational corporations. Autonomy and even statehood are often better understood as placed on a continuum and subject to negotiation

and renegotiation and not as eternally fixed dichotomous either/or categories (Baker, 2021). Finally, including “territories” reminds us of the asymmetrical and hierarchical relations between political entities, and the shadow of the past, continuing to impact both the politics and the policies of many small states. This is true for both former colonial centres such as Belgium and Portugal and the many former colonies navigating various types of dependency. As is evident from the discussions of the geographical scope of *SST* articles and the topics of the journal’s special sections, these three aspects of territories are very much present in the pages of the journal. This is an important contribution of the journal, facilitating discussions on – and more or less explicit deconstructions of – smallness, autonomy, independence, and sovereignty.

Transforming and/or mirroring the study of small states? *SST* and small state studies

The journal title *Small States & Territories* begs an even more fundamental question than those discussed in the previous section: What does “Small States & Territories” refer to? Is it the subject matter of what we study and, if so, what is a small state, and what is a territory? Is it one subject matter or two separate subject matters (“small states” and “territories”) somehow related? Does it even matter? For some, the lack of a generally agreed upon definition is a strength, even a necessary condition, for a continuous pluralist discussion of the effects of size and scale on politics and societies (Maass, 2009). In this understanding, the lack of a clear definition allows students of small states to benefit from and contribute to social science, not just to a clearly delineated and limited field of small state studies. For others, the lack of a shared definition “has hindered theory building [and] complicated comparison” (Long, 2017, p. 144). Moreover, defining the study of small states only in negative terms – a “small state” as something different from the state normally analyzed in the social sciences – feeds the “exceptionalism and exoticism” that Baldacchino (2018, p. 11) warned against in his editorial of the journal’s inaugural issue. It risks leaving the study of small states and territories ineffectual in contributing to the social sciences more generally (Rosenberg, 2016).²

SST leads a third way between these two contrasting approaches. Stopping short of a small state version of Kenneth Waltz’s (in)famous assertion that if we want to identify the great powers, “common sense can answer it” (Waltz 1979, p. 131), the journal’s take on what constitutes a small state (and a territory) is pragmatic and abductive. *SST* is pragmatic in the sense that it allows for a diversity of contextualized, implicit, and explicit understandings of what constitutes a small state or territory analyzed from various perspectives rooted in the social sciences. *SST* is abductive in the sense that authors tend to infer the best possible explanations from their empirical data and sources and link these explanations to social science propositions, but without making claims of verification or falsification or unlimited generalizability. In doing so, the contributions to *SST*, viewed as a whole, allow for multiple understandings of what small states and territories are, and what small states and territories do; but they are linked by a shared commitment to a non-dogmatic social science navigating in the complex – but often fruitful – territory between general propositions and context-embedded findings. In this sense, the function of *SST* for research on small states and territories is the same as for a prism used to analyze and reflect light: it bends light in multiple and sometimes unexpected ways, separating colours and different types of light, allowing us to see what is distinct and what is not.³ To put it bluntly: the *SST* prism may potentially free us from the

² Justin Rosenberg’s discussion is on the study of international relations, which experiences a similar lack of consensus on what its subject matter is, other than “politics beyond settled state confines” (Corry, 2022, p. 290).

³ The prism analogy is inspired by Miles and Wivel (2014, p. 232). For a standard definition of a prism, see ‘prism’ in Britannica.com <https://www.britannica.com/technology/prism-optics>.

parochial “prisons” described in the introduction, where small states in different regions are studied within their own confined spaces, and results are published with little interest in or acknowledgment of variations over time and space. This is the first contribution of *SST* to the study of small states and territories in general.

Like politics in general, the politics of the social science and humanities disciplines have seen a polarization over past decades. Polarization is both ontological and epistemological: there is little agreement on what constitutes the social world or how to study it. In addition, scholars in both the social sciences and the humanities disagree on the role of research and higher education in society, including the balance between basic and applied research. In this context, a second important contribution of *SST* is to provide a forum for debate curated on the basis of quality and relevance for understanding small states and territories, rather than adherence to specific ontological or epistemological preferences. At the same time, journals tend to mirror systematic variations in the papers submitted. As noted above, there seem to be some imbalances in both geographic and methodological representation and in some social disciplines playing a more prominent role in the pages of the journal than others, even though the geographical location, institutional affiliation and nationality of *SST* authors differ more than in most journals. The solution is not to impose equal representation – this would probably create a journal far removed from the practice of studying small states and territories – but perhaps to strengthen pluralism and diversity in other ways. This could be done through invitations to special sections, active encouragement to submission from underrepresented segments of the community of small state scholars, and an even stronger emphasis of pluralism in communications from the journal, e.g., on the journal homepage.

Finally, a third important *SST* contribution to the study of small states and territories relates to form rather than substance. Publishing the journal as diamond open access, with no publication charges to either author or reader, facilitates and furthers the creation of a truly global discipline. Outside Europe, academia in most small states suffer from no or limited access to costly full-text databases. This obstructs the flow of knowledge and the dissemination of new research results and leads to an uneven socialization into the existing canon of small state studies. This makes the academic playing field even less even and lowers the chance of publishing internationally for scholars from underfinanced educational systems. With its commitment to publish open access, *SST* – and the Islands and Small States Institute at the University of Malta, in Malta, which is its institutional home – has created and maintains a platform for unrestricted knowledge dissemination. This furthers the creation of a truly global community for the study of small states and territories, rather than parallel regional communities. It facilitates a qualification and problematization of established truths in the study of small states and territories and for reflection on what constitutes small state studies: a field not easily or exhaustively defined or delineated through a review of the literature found in the databases of international publishers.

The future of *Small States & Territories*

Where should *SST* go from here? The most important task for the journal in the coming years is to build on its strengths as a meeting point and platform for scholarly analysis and global debates on small states and territories. Two initiatives in particular will strengthen this position: one focused on the journal’s function as a meeting point for global debates, the other focused on its function as a platform for scholarly analysis.

SST can strengthen its role as a meeting point for global academic debates on small states and territories. Special sections can be used to link the study of small states and territories more systematically to both theoretical debates (e.g. on democracy or power) as well as methodological ones (e.g. on process tracing or ethnographic research). Special sections may also be used to explore what the study of small states and territories can contribute to the big challenges facing societies and humanity today such as climate change or populism. Perhaps the upcoming 10-year anniversary of Wouter Veenendaal and Jack Corbett's seminal article on why small states offer important answers to large questions is a good occasion for revisiting this question (Veenendaal and Corbett, 2015). Finally, special sections may be used for symposia identifying and discussing the state of the art within specific policy areas (security policy, public administration), thereby providing useful collections of articles for both research and education. *SST* can also invite contributions from students of small states and territories less well covered in the pages of the journal so far to write contributions that may serve as starting points for more debates and deeper and richer analyses on these actors, e.g. from post-colonial and non-Western perspectives.

If *SST* is going to succeed in this endeavour, it needs to be an attractive platform for scholarly analysis. As noted above, the open access format has contributed to this. Still, for early career scholars in particular, publishing in journals that are not indexed by Scopus or Clarivate may be seen as a problematic use of time in the race towards tenure. Consequently, inclusion in these indexes should be a priority. Visibility on social media and search engine optimization are important ongoing activities for any academic journal. That said, *SST* has come a long way in both globalizing and mainstreaming the study of small states and territories. As academic publishing models move towards increased open access publishing, *SST* is well positioned to strengthen its position as both a meeting place and a platform for scholarly analyses and debates on small states and territories.

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