

Sandor Fabian (2015). *Irregular warfare: The future military strategy for small states*. CreateSpace Independent Platform, 349pp. ISBN: 978-1-5084-9052-4. US\$12.85.

In this book, Sandor Fabian examines the utility of irregular warfare as a formalised defence strategy for small states. Focussing primarily on insurgency and guerrilla warfare in six case studies, Fabian calls for institutionalising irregular warfare strategies within the strategic approach of small states, owing to their paucity of resources and the relative unfeasibility of other options. While the text ventures into an understudied area of research with significant real-world implications, the expectation of a detailed study of this field is undermined by two critical factors. First, by its morphological defects relating to the basic definition of a ‘small state’; and second, the underdeveloped linkages between the strategies of irregular warfare that it describes and the political behaviour of small states in the international system.

The book is organised in terms of nine chapters, of which six serve as substantive case studies. Fabian reviews the War of the American Revolution, the Boer War, the War in German East Africa, the Yugoslav Partisans, the first Russo-Chechen War, and the Second Lebanese War. Fabian wrote this book before Russia’s 2020 military aggression against Ukraine; his book is prescient in arguing that the nature of warfare may have changed.

Perhaps the most egregious defect of the text’s analysis lies in its misjudgement of the basic concept of a ‘small state’. Despite vibrant debate about its essential details, consensus is at least found in the fact that such an entity is fundamentally a *state* – with international recognition of this statehood, clear governing structures, and an overarching sense of nationhood. *Irregular warfare* too, appears to initially concede this central truth – defining a small state in Michael Handel’s words as “a state which is unable to contend in war with great powers on anything like equal terms” (p. 34). Yet, the examples subsequently developed in the book indicate not only a far looser conceptualisation of statehood that is left unaddressed, but also reinforce the text’s cosmetic treatment of its avowed definition. Case studies focussing on Boer tactics against British forces at the *fin de siècle*, tactics used by Yugoslav partisans during the Second World War, or even Hezbollah’s insurgent activities against Israeli forces during the Second Lebanese Civil War, may provide a useful account of the strengths and failures of irregular warfare for strategic actors, particularly violent proto-state or non-state actors, but they fail to directly address why it is a useful tactic for small states participating as full members of the international community. The result is an imbalanced dialectic: one that places disproportionate focus on the merits or otherwise of irregular warfare across a variety of historical settings, but fails to appropriately correlate its findings with the unique political characteristics and requirements of small states.

This epistemological imbalance is equally replicated in the text’s failure to correlate its findings regarding irregular warfare with existing theories of small state behaviour in international politics. In cursorily framing the small state-great power dynamic solely in terms of disparities in material and military power, the text overlooks the unique strategies employed by small states to protect their interests and seek status. For instance, Fabian does not engage with the theory of alliance shelter sufficiently. The theory, which holds significant practical importance in relation to questions on small state defence, contends that small states seek to offset their inherent economic, political, and societal vulnerabilities by securing the support of larger partners or joining international institutions, and is discussed in the work of Baldur Thorhallsson and Živilė Marija

Vaicekauskaitė, among others. Other notable approaches include norm entrepreneurship, an idea pioneered by Christine Ingebritsen in 2002; Revecca Pedi and Sarri Nusseibeh argued in 2019 that a state that is “embedded in the sociopolitical fabric and alert to the emergence of opportunities ... acts upon them” with the objective of “effecting change in a substantive policy sector, political rules or in the provision of public goods”; as well as operating as an honest broker in interstate conflicts (which is a strategic approach typically favoured by neutral small states).

For the most part, however, the text fails to sufficiently bring these elements of small state behaviour into serious interaction with the principles of irregular warfare; except for the valid observations that both alliance shelter and neutrality would likely prove insufficient for small states seeking permanent security against an aggressor. The failure to explore these interactions in greater detail, and in closer consideration of the distinct geopolitical landscape which small states navigate through their particularistic strategies of influence and self-preservation, makes for an ultimately skewed analysis. While the point raised by Fabian in relation to the limitations of alliance shelter and the pursuit of neutrality are true, expanding on these, and bringing the foreign policy strategies of small states into conversation with the findings relating to irregular warfare, would have resulted in a more complete analysis.

Notwithstanding these flaws, however, the book’s essential premise – of the benefits afforded by the pursuit of irregular warfare over conventional alternatives for fiscally and militarily disadvantaged parties in conflicts, such as small states – holds value for both policymakers and scholars studying defence strategies of small states. While imprecise in its generalisations, the text is correct in conceptualising the small state as a conventionally weaker party in interstate conflict. To this end, the case it makes for irregular warfare training as a critical and fiscally viable means of homeland defence for small states demonstrates the text’s value, for both scholars seeking to build upon its arguments to theorise about strategies of small state defence, and for practitioners seeking to develop policies around this analysis.

In parting, *Irregular warfare* presents a rudimentary yet courageous foray into an area of research in international affairs that remains underexplored. The overall text provides some valid ruminations on the effectiveness of irregular warfare for materially weaker actors like small states; although the two defects identified above sadly result in an overall diminished analysis. Yet, on the strength of its subject matter, the text provides some inspiration and food for thought to scholars and practitioners seeking to explore this issue further.

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