

Chapter 1 – Introduction

This chapter introduces the debate on how small states can influence international security outcomes. It defines what it means to be a small state, explains why legitimacy emerges as the centre of gravity, and explores how myths and national history shape strategic identity. It also sets up Ireland and Israel as “problem cases” for the small-state category, before outlining the five-effects framework — niche specialisation, organisational agility, hybrid leverage, soft power synergy, and legitimacy — which structures the remainder of the essay. The purpose is to set boundaries for the argument and establish the hypothesis that small states are limited in their ability to dictate outcomes but may still shape them conditionally through legitimacy and institutional engagement.

Defining the Small State

The first task is to define what constitutes a small state. Scholars diverge in their approaches. A material definition stresses population, GDP, and military capacity as determinants of size (Waltz 1969). On this basis, states such as Ireland, Denmark, or Qatar are small because they cannot project power unilaterally. A perceptual definition stresses how states see themselves and are seen by others (Thorhallsson 2012). From this perspective, a state can be small in strategic imagination even if it has moderate resources, as with Finland during the Cold War. A systemic role definition stresses position within the international order (Keohane 1969). On this basis, small states are those that cannot shape structures but must adapt to them.

Newer work adds refinements. Vital’s analysis of size highlights not just material inputs but *action capacity and vulnerability* as defining features — stressing that what matters is the scope of what a state can credibly do relative to its exposure (Vital, as cited in EU size literature). This complements Keohane’s systemic lens. Bessner and Guilhot (2015) extend this critique, arguing that neorealism strips out decisionmakers and locks states into structural adaptation, which confirms the limited agency of small powers. These perspectives sharpen the hypothesis: small states may act, but always within constraints imposed by structure and perception.

Limit. Definitions overlap and risk conceptual stretching.

Implication: For credibility, this essay applies a systemic perspective grounded in capacity, vulnerability, and institutional positioning.

Legitimacy as the Centre of Gravity

Legitimacy emerges as the true centre of gravity for small states. Military means are marginal: token contributions cannot alter the balance of power. However, legitimacy allows small states to frame actions as consistent with norms and institutions. Ireland’s participation in United Nations peacekeeping exemplifies this dynamic: although

materially limited, it gained disproportionate recognition by presenting its forces as impartial and committed to collective security (Rothstein 1968).

Legitimacy functions in two ways. Externally, it amplifies small-state voice within institutions. Internally, it sustains domestic support for engagement abroad. Bailes and Thorhallsson (2013) show that legitimacy derives from alignment with international law, credible delivery of commitments, and consistent political narratives. Yet legitimacy is fragile: Duman and Rakipoğlu (2025) highlight how UNSC paralysis in the Gaza crisis shows institutions failing to provide a stage for small states. Lake, Martin and Risse (2020) also argue that liberal-order institutions are strained but not collapsed, reinforcing that legitimacy is contingent rather than guaranteed.

Limit. Legitimacy is perception-based and erodes when rhetoric diverges from practice. Implication: For the Irish Defence Forces, legitimacy must be renewed through credible delivery in EU and regional niches, not assumed as permanent.

Myths, History, and Strategic Identity

National myths and history further shape small-state strategies. Ireland's wartime neutrality under Éamon de Valera has long been mythologised as a moral stand. Fanning (2015) shows that this neutrality was framed as independence from Britain, while concealing material weakness. Ayiotis (2023) demonstrates that Irish neutrality evolved through phases — necessity, expediency, convenience — each shaped by external pressures. Fleming argues that post-war policy was essentially hedging, seeking to balance neutrality with selective UN engagement.

These interpretations highlight that neutrality, often presented as principle, was in fact a realist adaptation to survival pressures. Mythologised narratives, however, created a strategic identity that endures. Neutrality became part of Irish self-understanding, sustaining legitimacy abroad and reinforcing domestic support for limited defence spending. This illustrates how myths and history can lock in strategies that may be at odds with structural realities.

Limit. Historical interpretation risks imposing coherence on pragmatic and inconsistent choices.

Implication: Policymakers must distinguish myth from structural necessity when drawing on history.

Problem Cases: Ireland and Israel

Ireland and Israel present challenges to the small-state category. Ireland masks realist hedging behind neutrality rhetoric, as Ayiotis (2023) shows through covert UK–Irish planning. Israel, by contrast, blends small size with coercive reach through nuclear deterrence and US shelter (Hirst 2010). These cases demonstrate that smallness is not uniform: Ireland's legitimacy rests on institutions, while Israel's influence comes from

coercive capacity sheltered by a patron. Together, they test the limits of the small-state framework.

Limit. Treating these as “typical” small states risks diluting conceptual clarity.

Implication: This essay treats them as boundary cases to probe the conditions under which small-state influence is real or illusory.

The Five-Effects Framework

To structure the analysis, the essay applies the five-effects framework. First, niche specialisation — small states contribute in areas like peacekeeping, cyber, or mediation. Second, organisational agility — they can reform faster, as HLAP (2022) showed in response to CODF. Third, hybrid leverage — they exploit interdependence and networks, including regulatory niches (Keohane 1969; Bailes et al. 2013). Fourth, soft power synergy — combining diplomacy, identity, and neutrality to amplify credibility (Nye 2008). Fifth, legitimacy — the centre of gravity sustaining all other effects.

Newer contributions also matter. Krenson (2012) stresses that great powers orchestrate DIME instruments in full, whereas small states integrate selectively — mapping DIME onto the five-effects highlights how small states operate by fragments, not the whole. NATO’s 2022 Warfighting Capstone Concept reinforces the centrality of adaptation, echoing the agility pillar. Slack (2019) and Pai (2024) push the information instrument as decisive in the cyber/disinformation era, which maps directly to hybrid leverage.

Limit. The framework risks overstating coherence across diverse cases.

Implication: It must be applied critically, highlighting fragility as well as promise.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has defined the small-state category, established legitimacy as the centre of gravity, examined myths and historical identity, and set Ireland and Israel as problem cases. It has also outlined the five-effects framework as the structure for the essay, while mapping these onto DIME to clarify selective integration. The hypothesis is that small states cannot dictate outcomes, but they can conditionally shape them through legitimacy, niche roles, and institutional engagement.

Limit. The analysis so far is qualitative and relies on secondary sources, many with Eurocentric or institutional biases.

Implication: Subsequent chapters must test these claims against both critical theories and comparative case evidence.

Chapter 2 – Reasons For the Proposal (Framework Applied Positively)

This chapter applies the five-effects framework positively to show how small states can influence international security outcomes. It argues that niche specialisation, organisational agility, hybrid leverage, soft power synergy, and legitimacy provide small states with tools to amplify their limited material capacity. These mechanisms are illustrated with examples drawn from Ireland, Estonia, Finland, Denmark, and Qatar. The purpose is to demonstrate that, under specific conditions, small states can shape debates and outcomes in ways disproportionate to their size.

Niche Specialisation

Point. Small states can leverage niche specialisation to carve out valued roles despite limited resources.

Evidence. Ireland's long-standing contributions to UN peacekeeping illustrate this. By deploying impartial units in UNIFIL, Ireland secured recognition well beyond its military weight (Rothstein 1968). Estonia has built influence in NATO through cyber defence since the 2007 attacks, hosting the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre. Qatar has carved a mediation niche by funding conflict resolution. CODF (2022) recommends that Ireland sustain relevance through LOA2 reforms, particularly EEZ policing and radar (pp. 36–37).

Explain. Niche contributions provide visibility and credibility in multilateral settings. Krepinevich (1994) stresses that asymmetric innovation allows smaller actors to shape outcomes indirectly. NATO's 2022 Warfighting Capstone Concept emphasises adaptation, which small states can embody by pursuing specialised roles others cannot.

Limit. Flynn (2019) warns that niches risk tokenism without scale; Hellmüller et al. (2024) show UN mandates are shrinking, reducing peacekeeping's utility.

Implication. Ireland must pivot from UN-heavy niches to regional or EU cyber and maritime roles that are credible, scalable, and institutionally embedded.

Organisational Agility

Point. Small states may adapt institutions more quickly than great powers, gaining advantage through agility.

Evidence. Ireland's High-Level Action Plan (2022) responded rapidly to CODF's recommendations, outlining governance and HR reforms. Estonia, after its 2007 cyber shock, created a whole-of-society defence model that NATO now references. Finland's 2023 NATO accession, prompted by Ukraine, demonstrates agility under systemic

pressure. NATO's Warfighting Capstone Concept (2022) reinforces agility as central to modern defence.

Explain. Metz (2000) argues that post-defeat or shock, states innovate faster. Smaller organisations, with fewer veto players, can adjust institutions and culture more rapidly. CODF (2022) and the DoD/DF Strategy Statement 2025–2028 highlight Ireland's intent to reform crewing, cyber, and governance.

Limit. Cottey (2022) stresses continuity dominates in Ireland, with underinvestment persisting despite shocks. Murray warns that doctrinal inertia afflicts all militaries, regardless of size.

Implication. Agility is possible but not guaranteed. For Ireland, reforms must be resourced and sustained, or agility risks collapsing into rhetoric.

Hybrid Leverage

Point. Small states exploit interdependence and networks to amplify voice, even without coercive power.

Evidence. Estonia's cyber role shows how vulnerability can be converted into agenda-setting capacity. Ireland wields regulatory leverage in the EU, particularly through data protection. Bailes et al. (2013) describe how EU and NATO shelters give small states hybrid platforms. Nye (2008) shows that hybrid strategies blend hard and soft elements. Farrell and Newman's "Weaponised Interdependence" (2019) demonstrates how economic networks (SWIFT, internet governance) both empower and constrain. Pai (2024) highlights the centrality of narrative dominance in hybrid competition.

Explain. Hybrid leverage works when small states align their niches with larger institutions, framing contributions as global public goods. Krenson (2012) stresses that DIME integration is beyond small states' capacity, but embedding selectively — especially in the "I" of information and "E" of economics — provides conditional influence.

Limit. Hybrid moves risk retaliation: Betts (1996) cautions that technological misuse creates vulnerabilities; Mearsheimer (2019) warns great powers respond aggressively if their interests are challenged.

Implication. Ireland should embed hybrid niches within EU structures, ensuring resilience against coercion while avoiding unilateral exposure.

Soft Power Synergy

Point. Soft power remains a multiplier for small states, especially when embedded in institutions.

Evidence. Nye (2008) argues that attraction and persuasion can shape outcomes. Ireland has cultivated soft power through neutrality, disarmament advocacy, and peacekeeping. Bailes and Thorhallsson (2013) show that EU shelter strengthens legitimacy by embedding identity within collective frameworks. Tonra (1999, 2011) demonstrates how Europeanisation amplified Ireland's diplomatic reach. Denmark has consistently leveraged soft power through development aid, while Qatar has invested in cultural diplomacy.

Explain. Soft power works when states project identity in credible institutional settings. For Ireland, neutrality has long been its core brand. EU integration has amplified this but also tested credibility. Slack (2019) stresses that information dominance is now central to attraction; small states can frame narratives and set agendas if they align with broader institutions.

Limit. Soft power is fragile. Contradictions between rhetoric and practice (e.g., neutrality vs EU defence integration, or reliance on US overflight) erode credibility. Implication. Ireland must ensure its neutrality brand remains credible, reframing soft power around EU roles such as climate or cyber security rather than relying solely on peacekeeping myths.

Legitimacy as the Centre of Gravity

Point. Legitimacy sustains all other effects and is the decisive resource for small states.

Evidence. Ireland's long record of UN peacekeeping generated disproportionate recognition (Rothstein 1968). Bailes and Thorhallsson (2013) highlight that legitimacy flows from alignment with law, delivery of commitments, and consistent narratives. Thorhallsson's shelter theory underscores legitimacy as both external recognition and domestic reassurance. CODF (2022) links legitimacy to visible commitments such as EEZ patrols and green defence initiatives.

Explain. Legitimacy reconciles material weakness with institutional voice. It enables small states to "punch above their weight" when they are seen as impartial, credible, and consistent. Lake, Martin and Risse (2020) caution that the liberal order is strained but still provides platforms; legitimacy works, but conditionally.

Limit. Legitimacy depends on perception. It erodes when institutions like the UN falter (Duman & Rakipoğlu 2025) or when domestic delivery is absent (DoD/DF 2025 Strategy Statement).

Implication. For Ireland, legitimacy requires constant renewal — anchoring in EU/regional roles, credible delivery of reforms, and transparent narratives to sustain trust.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has applied the five-effects framework positively to show how small states can shape international security. Niche specialisation allows them to contribute valued roles, organisational agility enables rapid adaptation, hybrid leverage exploits interdependence and narratives, soft power synergy amplifies credibility, and legitimacy sustains all others. Together, these mechanisms illustrate the conditional promise of small-state influence.

Limit. The analysis has emphasised success stories and downplayed fragility.

Implication. The next chapter applies the framework critically, testing whether these mechanisms can withstand structural constraints, realist scepticism, and institutional decline.

Chapter 3 – Reasons Against the Proposal (Framework Applied Critically)

This chapter applies the five-effects framework critically to challenge the extent of small-state influence. It shows that niche specialisation risks tokenism, organisational agility is constrained, hybrid leverage provokes escalation, soft power is fragile, and legitimacy is unstable. Realist scholars emphasise that structural limits dominate, and recent evidence suggests institutional erosion further undermines small-state strategies.

Niche Specialisation under Strain

Point. Niches provide visibility but collapse when scale or institutions falter.

Evidence. Flynn (2019) stresses that small-state peacekeeping must cross a threshold of credibility — a reinforced battalion may influence, a token platoon cannot.

Hellmüller, Tan & Bara (2024) show UN peacekeeping mandates have shifted toward political roles and polarised objectives, hollowing a traditional niche. Betts (1996) warns that overconfidence in technological niches, such as RMA precision, creates fragility.

Explain. Niche contributions once provided entry points, but the decline of UN operations reduces their platform value. Without institutional recognition, niches risk becoming symbolic gestures. Ireland's peacekeeping is now at risk of tokenism, with declining force levels undermining credibility.

Limit. Some niches, like Estonia's cyber role, retain relevance when embedded in alliances.

Implication. Irish Defence Forces must test niche viability rigorously and pivot toward EU/regional roles rather than relying on UN peacekeeping symbolism.

Organisational Agility and its Limits

Point. Small states face structural and cultural constraints that undermine agility.

Evidence. Cottey (2022) shows continuity dominates Irish security policy even after the Ukraine shock, with underinvestment persisting. Murray argues doctrinal inertia is common to all militaries, regardless of size. Mearsheimer's offensive realism insists that systemic pressures outweigh internal reform. Finland's NATO accession shows shocks can drive change, but even here adaptation followed structural coercion rather than autonomous agility.

Explain. While smaller bureaucracies might move faster, resource scarcity and cultural inertia blunt agility. CODF reforms and the DoD/DF Strategy Statement (2025–2028)

outline ambition, but credibility is weakened by recruitment shortfalls and delivery gaps.

Limit. Agility can occur in shocks, as Estonia demonstrated in cyber defence.

Implication. For Ireland, agility is aspirational unless reforms are fully resourced and sheltered institutionally; otherwise, continuity prevails.

Hybrid Leverage and Escalation Risks

Point. Hybrid strategies may expose small states to retaliation rather than amplifying influence.

Evidence. Betts (1996) highlights that technological misuse often produces vulnerabilities greater than benefits. Mearsheimer (2019) stresses that great powers punish small-state innovation that threatens core interests. Waltz (1969) frames international politics as self-help, where weaker actors cannot alter rules but must adapt. Duman & Rakipoğlu (2025) show that institutional paralysis in the UNSC further weakens the protective cover for hybrid tactics.

Explain. Small states may seek visibility through regulation, cyber norms, or mediation, but these moves are risky if they provoke larger rivals. Estonia's cyber prominence also makes it a target for Russian retaliation. Ireland's potential regulatory leverage through the EU is constrained by dependence on US technology and global markets.

Limit. Hybrid niches can still add value when embedded in EU or NATO, but unilateral moves carry disproportionate risk.

Implication. Ireland should pursue hybrid leverage only under institutional umbrellas, minimising exposure to great-power retaliation.

Fragility of Soft Power Synergy

Point. Soft power remains conditional and collapses without credible material backing.

Evidence. Gray (2005) insists that strategy requires political ends tied to means; soft power without force is performance, not influence. Waltz (1969) argues that outcomes are determined by material capacity, not attraction. Cottey (2022) underscores Ireland's tendency to free-ride, diluting claims of principled neutrality. Qatar's cultural diplomacy illustrates this fragility: despite media influence, its survival depended on US military shelter during the 2017 Gulf crisis.

Explain. Soft power works only when it complements credible contributions. Ireland's neutrality has been undermined by EU defence integration and reliance on US overflight permissions, eroding its once-credible brand.

Limit. In low-threat environments, soft power can still amplify reputation.

Implication. Irish soft power must be matched by tangible capabilities, or neutrality risks becoming symbolic performance.

Legitimacy under Pressure

Point. Legitimacy, the supposed centre of gravity, is also vulnerable to erosion.

Evidence. Ayiotis (2023) shows Irish neutrality was always pragmatic hedging, not principle, undermining coherence. Bessner & Guilhot (2015) argue that structural realism sidelines decisionmakers, confirming that legitimacy narratives are shaped externally. Duman & Rakipoğlu (2025) demonstrate that UNSC paralysis reduces institutional credibility, eroding legitimacy platforms. Cottey (2022) stresses continuity of underinvestment, weakening delivery. Wright (2024) argues that great-power rivalry's return was inevitable, reducing the space for small-state legitimacy claims.

Explain. Legitimacy sustains influence only when recognised by larger actors and embedded in functioning institutions. As UN paralysis grows and EU/NATO integration accelerates, Ireland risks losing the stage that once amplified its neutrality.

Limit. Institutions can still confer legitimacy when functioning (e.g., EU hybrid regimes, CSDP missions).

Implication. Ireland must diversify sources of legitimacy beyond UN peacekeeping, embedding in EU and regional roles where credibility can be maintained.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has applied the five-effects framework critically to highlight fragility. Niche roles risk tokenism, agility is constrained by continuity and resources, hybrid leverage provokes escalation, soft power collapses without capabilities, and legitimacy is vulnerable to institutional erosion. Realists such as Waltz, Mearsheimer, and Gray emphasise that structure, not agency, determines outcomes.

Limit. This analysis may overstate structural determinism and underplay small-state innovation.

Implication. The next chapter turns to comparative cases — Ireland, Estonia, Finland, Denmark, Qatar, Israel — to weigh these critiques against evidence of conditional influence.

Chapter 4 – Back-up Facts / Present Argument

This chapter tests the five-effects framework against comparative cases. It considers Ireland, Estonia, Finland, Denmark, Qatar, and Israel to illustrate the dual promise and fragility of small-state influence. Each case demonstrates how niche specialisation, agility, hybrid leverage, soft power synergy, and legitimacy interact in practice. The purpose is to show that while small states can exercise conditional influence, their success depends on context, credibility, and institutional embedding.

Ireland: Neutrality, Peacekeeping, and Fragility

Point. Ireland demonstrates how legitimacy and niche roles can amplify influence, but also how these tools erode.

Evidence. Ayiotis (2023) shows Ireland's neutrality was pragmatic hedging, with covert planning alongside Britain. Fanning (2015) highlights wartime neutrality as realist survival, mythologised afterwards. Fleming confirms post-war hedging. Ireland built legitimacy through peacekeeping, but Flynn (2019) warns that reduced contributions now risk tokenism. CODF (2022) proposes LOA2 reforms — radar, EEZ patrols — to sustain credibility. Cottey (2022) shows continuity dominates, with underinvestment persisting despite shocks.

Explain. Ireland's influence rested on neutrality myths and UN legitimacy, but as UN mandates decline (Hellmüller et al. 2024) and UNSC paralysis grows (Duman & Rakipoğlu 2025), this foundation weakens. EU integration offers alternative niches, but also challenges the neutrality narrative.

Limit. Ireland's case is unusually dependent on UN legitimacy, making it less generalisable.

Implication. The Defence Forces must pivot from UN-heavy niches toward EU cyber, regulatory, or maritime roles if legitimacy is to endure.

Estonia: Cyber Agility and NATO Shelter

Point. Estonia illustrates how small states can transform vulnerability into influence, but only when sheltered.

Evidence. Following the 2007 cyberattacks, Estonia developed a whole-of-society cyber defence model and hosts NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre. Bailes et al. (2013) highlight Nordic shelter logic. Raska (2022) shows cyber and AI act as asymmetric multipliers. NATO's Warfighting Capstone (2022) underscores adaptation as central.

Explain. Estonia leveraged agility to carve out a cyber niche, enhancing its hybrid leverage and visibility in alliance debates. Yet Waltz (1969) and Mearsheimer (2019) remind us that this influence rests on NATO shelter, not independent deterrence. Visibility also carries risks: cyber prominence attracts retaliation.

Limit. Estonia's cyber model is context-specific and relies on NATO guarantees.

Implication. Small states can innovate niches, but only when embedded in credible alliances that offset exposure.

Finland: From Hedging to NATO Membership

Point. Finland demonstrates the limits of hedging strategies under systemic shocks.

Evidence. For decades Finland balanced neutrality with cautious EU participation (Cotter 2022). Thorhallsson stresses perceptual size: Finland acted as a cautious small state despite moderate capacity. The Ukraine war ended this posture, driving NATO accession in 2023. Bailes (2012) frames EU as a “soft shelter,” but hard security now required NATO alignment.

Explain. Hedging provided influence when systemic conditions were stable, but shocks forced reorientation. Finland's accession illustrates hybrid leverage — combining EU integration with NATO shelter — but also shows that small-state choices are constrained by great-power rivalry.

Limit. Finland's geography makes its case exceptional.

Implication. Hedging provides only temporary influence; small states must prepare for shocks that compel alignment shifts.

Denmark: Embedded Niches within Alliances

Point. Denmark shows how consistent niches within alliances sustain credibility and voice.

Evidence. Bailes et al. (2013) highlight Denmark's use of multiple shelters, balancing EU and NATO. Tonra (2011) shows Europeanisation amplified Danish diplomacy. Denmark has specialised in maritime security and Arctic policy, gaining visibility. NATO and EU reports show consistent contributions embedded in alliance frameworks.

Explain. Denmark sustains soft power synergy and legitimacy by embedding niches credibly. Unlike Ireland, Denmark's legitimacy rests on active alliance participation, not neutrality myths. This confirms Keohane's (1969) point that institutions amplify small-state voice.

Limit. Embedded niches constrain autonomy; Denmark adapts within structures but does not shape them.

Implication. Ireland could emulate Denmark by embedding more deeply in EU/NATO, though this would challenge its neutrality brand.

Qatar: Mediation and Wealth-Backed Soft Power

Point. Qatar demonstrates how wealth can amplify small-state diplomacy but also how fragile it remains.

Evidence. Bailes and Thorhallsson (2013) highlight how soft security shelters enable mediation roles. Qatar used wealth to back mediation and cultural diplomacy. Yet during the 2017 Gulf crisis, its survival depended on US military shelter, showing soft power collapses without hard protection. Farrell & Newman's "Weaponised Interdependence" also shows how economic networks cut both ways, exposing vulnerabilities.

Explain. Qatar projects visibility through hybrid leverage and soft power, but its reliance on US shelter confirms Gray's (2005) warning that material power remains decisive.

Limit. Qatar's wealth is unique and not replicable for most small states.

Implication. Soft power strategies require hard or institutional shelter; otherwise, influence is conditional and fragile.

Israel: The Outlier Case of Coercive Shelter

Point. Israel challenges the small-state category by combining small size with coercive influence.

Evidence. Hirst (2010) shows Israel leverages nuclear deterrence and US alliance shelter to exert disproportionate influence. This contradicts Rothstein's (1968) view of small states as dependent on institutions. Instead, Israel exemplifies hard realism sheltered by a patron.

Explain. Israel's trajectory shows that coercive strategies are possible only with exceptional resources and alliance guarantees. For Ireland, this highlights what is not possible: coercion without shelter is infeasible.

Limit. Israel is an exceptional outlier; generalising its model would misrepresent small-state strategies.

Implication. Israel confirms the hypothesis: small states without coercive resources must rely on legitimacy, institutions, and niches.

Synthesis of Cases

These cases confirm that small-state influence is conditional, fragile, and context-dependent. Ireland shows how legitimacy can be built but also eroded; Estonia demonstrates cyber innovation under NATO shelter; Finland illustrates the limits of hedging under systemic shocks; Denmark shows the benefits of embedded niches; Qatar highlights the fragility of soft power without shelter; and Israel demonstrates the impossibility of coercive strategies without exceptional capacity.

The broader lesson is that the five-effects framework captures both promise and fragility. Niches can amplify but also erode; agility can innovate but is often constrained; hybrid leverage increases visibility but provokes risks; soft power amplifies reputation but collapses under pressure; legitimacy sustains all but is institutionally fragile. Wright (2024) stresses that great-power rivalry is now inevitable, narrowing the room for small-state manoeuvre. Lake, Martin & Risse (2020) suggest institutions still provide conditional platforms, but only if small states adapt continuously.

Limit. Case selection focuses on Europe and the Middle East, omitting Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Implication. Future research should test whether these dynamics generalise, but for Ireland the evidence confirms that influence is real but strictly conditional.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

This chapter evaluates the extent to which small states can influence international security outcomes. It revisits legitimacy as the centre of gravity, draws lessons from the comparative cases, considers Ireland's trajectory, and identifies enduring gaps. The central finding is that small states cannot dictate outcomes, but under specific conditions they can shape debates and influence agendas through legitimacy, niches, and institutional embedding. Their influence is always conditional and fragile, reflecting structural limits and institutional contingencies.

The Extent of Influence

Small states can exert influence, but only indirectly. They lack coercive power and cannot unilaterally change structures, as Waltz (1969) and Mearsheimer (2019) emphasise. Instead, their influence lies in selective integration: embedding fragments of DIME within alliances and institutions. Krenson (2012) stresses that great powers orchestrate DIME fully, while small states exploit fragments. Mapping DIME to the five-effects shows this clearly: diplomacy to legitimacy and soft power, information to hybrid leverage, military to niches, and economy to interdependence. Small states are influential only when these fragments are embedded credibly in institutions.

Legitimacy as Centre and Constraint

Legitimacy remains the decisive resource for small states, but it is fragile. Rothstein (1968) and Bailes & Thorhallsson (2013) show that legitimacy amplifies voice by embedding commitments in norms and institutions. For Ireland, neutrality and UN peacekeeping provided recognition. Yet legitimacy erodes when institutions falter or rhetoric diverges from practice. Duman & Rakipoğlu (2025) demonstrate how UNSC paralysis has hollowed the UN stage. Wright (2024) argues that great-power rivalry's return was inevitable, leaving less space for small-state legitimacy. Lake, Martin & Risse (2020) show the liberal order is strained but not collapsed, suggesting that legitimacy remains possible, but only if small states adapt continuously and diversify platforms.

Limit. Legitimacy is perception-based and can collapse quickly.

Implication. For Ireland, legitimacy must be anchored in EU and regional roles, not assumed through UN symbolism.

Lessons from Cases

Comparative cases reinforce these conclusions.

- **Ireland** demonstrates how neutrality and peacekeeping provided influence, but underinvestment and UN decline erode credibility.
- **Estonia** shows that innovation and agility can build niches, but only under NATO shelter.
- **Finland** illustrates the fragility of hedging, with shocks forcing NATO alignment.
- **Denmark** demonstrates that embedded niches within NATO and EU sustain credibility over time.
- **Qatar** highlights how wealth can fund soft power, but only under US shelter.
- **Israel** shows that coercive strategies are only possible with exceptional resources and patronage.

Together, these cases confirm the hypothesis: small states influence outcomes conditionally, never independently.

Ireland's Trajectory

Ireland's trajectory from De Valera's wartime hedging to modern UN peacekeeping underscores the conditional nature of small-state influence. Neutrality myths sustained legitimacy, but Ayiotis (2023) and Fanning (2015) show these myths masked realist survival. CODF (2022) and the DoD/DF Strategy Statement (2025–2028) propose reforms to LOA2, emphasising cyber, radar, and EEZ patrols. Yet Cottey (2022) stresses that underinvestment persists, suggesting reforms may prove incremental rather than transformative. Without credible delivery, legitimacy risks collapsing into symbolism.

Limit. Ireland's reliance on neutrality and UN legitimacy makes it an atypical case.

Implication. Ireland must pivot to EU and regional roles, sustain reforms, and reframe neutrality for credibility.

Gaps and Future Research

Gaps remain in the analysis. First, hedging theory requires further development: Ireland and Finland show its promise and limits. Second, alliance dependency is underexplored: small states survive through embedding, but this raises autonomy dilemmas. Third, the definition of small states requires refinement, as Israel demonstrates. Finally, the literature remains Eurocentric; cases beyond Europe and the Middle East are needed.

Limit. The evidence base is uneven, with gaps in primary sources (e.g., HLAP 2022, Hellmüller 2024).

Implication. Future research must broaden the dataset, but for Ireland, the conclusion is clear: small states can shape outcomes, but only through conditional legitimacy, credible niches, and institutional embedding.

Final Assessment

Small states like Ireland can influence international security outcomes, but not dictate them. Their tools are legitimacy, niches, hybrid leverage, agility, and soft power synergy, but each is fragile. Legitimacy remains the centre of gravity, yet it depends on functioning institutions and credible delivery. The return of great-power rivalry (Wright 2024) narrows small states' room for manoeuvre, but institutions still provide conditional platforms (Lake, Martin & Risse 2020). Ireland's future influence will depend on whether it can pivot from UN dependence to EU and regional niches, resource reforms credibly, and preserve legitimacy through consistent narratives and delivery.

Limit. This conclusion is conditioned by institutional fragility and structural constraints. Implication. For the Irish Defence Forces, the path forward lies in selective integration — embedding niches within EU and regional frameworks, sustaining legitimacy through credible delivery, and balancing neutrality with adaptation to a contested international order.