

## Chapter 1 – Introduction

The extent to which small states can influence international security outcomes remains a contested question in international relations. While their material limitations appear to consign them to the margins, institutional participation, niche roles, and reputational capital suggest more complex possibilities. This essay argues that although small states cannot dictate global outcomes, they can exercise influence when legitimacy is secured through coherent alignment of means and political purpose. Legitimacy, rather than material capability, is therefore the decisive centre of gravity for small states.

To establish this claim, it is necessary first to clarify what constitutes a “small state.” Competing definitions emphasise different dimensions. One strand defines smallness by material capacity, typically measured through population, GDP, or military strength (Waltz, 1979). This systemic lens tends to reduce small states to structural objects rather than agents. A second approach highlights *perceptual size*, as developed by Thorhallsson (2006), whereby the status of smallness is mediated by institutional shelter, administrative capacity, and reputation. A third perspective, offered by Keohane (1969), categorises small states by their systemic role: while not “system-determining,” they can nonetheless be “system-affecting” when institutions provide a platform for their voice. Taken together, these frameworks suggest that smallness is not absolute but relational, shaped by both external perception and internal capacity.

The Irish case demonstrates how legitimacy emerges as the key multiplier of small-state agency. During the Second World War, Éamon de Valera’s policy of neutrality has often been remembered as a principled assertion of sovereignty. Yet historians such as Fanning (2015) and Ayiotis (2023) show that neutrality was also a pragmatic hedge, balancing survival against competing pressures from Britain and Germany. Similarly, Fleming (2023) reveals how rhetorical commitments to principle often concealed realist calculations. Legitimacy, in this sense, was less a moral constant than a strategic resource: neutrality was performative abroad and protective at home. This tension between principle and pragmatism recurs in contemporary debates about Ireland’s role in EU defence integration and UN peacekeeping (Cotter, 2022).

Problem cases such as Ireland and Israel sharpen the conceptual challenge. Ireland masks realist hedging with the language of neutrality, allowing it to project legitimacy disproportionate to its capabilities. Israel, conversely, complicates the small-state category by blending limited geography and population with hard realism, nuclear deterrence, and great-power shelter from the United States (Hirst, 2010). These examples illustrate that small states are not a homogenous category. Their influence depends on how legitimacy is constructed and perceived within wider strategic and institutional contexts.

To interrogate these contradictions, the essay applies a five-effects framework: niche specialisation, organisational agility, hybrid leverage, soft power synergy, and legitimacy. Each effect captures a pathway by which small states attempt to convert constraints into opportunities. Niche specialisation highlights visible roles in peacekeeping or cyber security. Organisational agility examines how small states reform institutions faster than larger counterparts. Hybrid leverage considers how interdependence in finance, cyber, or regulation can be weaponised or constrained. Soft power synergy emphasises the amplification of credibility when identity and diplomacy are embedded in institutions (Nye, 2008; Bailes & Thorhallsson, 2013). Finally, legitimacy anchors the framework, providing the recognition that sustains all other effects (Gray, 2005; Cohen, 2002).

This introduction therefore sets the stage for the central hypothesis: small states are structurally limited, but influence is possible when legitimacy underpins their strategies. The following chapters will evaluate this claim by first examining reasons supporting the proposition, then considering critical counter-arguments, and finally weighing the evidence through comparative case studies. In doing so, the essay will assess whether legitimacy endures as the true centre of gravity for small states in a shifting and fragmented international order.

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

Small states remain constrained by their limited resources, yet they continue to demonstrate that influence in international security is possible when institutional participation, legitimacy, and innovation are combined. This chapter examines the positive case for the proposition, structured through the five-effects framework: niche specialisation, organisational agility, hybrid leverage, soft power synergy, and legitimacy. Each effect highlights how small states convert structural weakness into diplomatic and strategic advantage, and each section concludes with a Limit–Implication reflection.

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### **Niche Specialisation Effect**

One of the most visible strategies for small states is the cultivation of niche roles. By focusing limited resources on specific functions, small states can achieve visibility and credibility disproportionate to their size. Ireland’s long-standing peacekeeping contributions under the UN, including sustained deployments in Lebanon and Mali, exemplify this approach. Similarly, Estonia has become internationally recognised for its cyber-security expertise, while Qatar has invested in mediation and hosting roles in Middle Eastern conflicts.

Krepinevich (1994) provides theoretical justification for such strategies, arguing that military revolutions allow even modest powers to “steal a march” on larger actors by embedding technological or organisational innovations. Ireland’s early adoption of peacekeeping as a strategic identity, and Estonia’s digital defence niche, illustrate how such choices provide reputational leverage. Keohane (1969) supports this view from an institutionalist perspective, noting that small states can be “system-affecting” by embedding their niches within international institutions.

However, Flynn (2019) warns against tokenism: if contributions fall below a credible threshold, they risk irrelevance. For example, Ireland’s shrinking UN footprint and ongoing recruitment crisis raise doubts about whether its peacekeeping contributions remain strategically meaningful.

**Limit–Implication:** Niche strategies risk collapsing into symbolism if contributions are too small or inconsistent. The implication is that small states must commit to credible force packages or specialised expertise if they wish to maintain legitimacy and influence.

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### **Organisational Agility Effect**

Small states often demonstrate greater institutional adaptability than larger powers, allowing them to respond quickly to external shocks and internal crises. Metz (2000) argues that adaptation, particularly after failure, is a hallmark of resilient military organisations. This is evident in Ireland's High Level Action Plan (2022), which responded to the Commission on the Defence Forces by committing to new command structures, revitalisation of the Reserve, and cultural reform. These reforms suggest that small states can reform institutions more rapidly than larger, bureaucratically constrained powers.

Cohen's (2002) notion of the "unequal dialogue" between civilians and the military underscores that agility is not only structural but relational. For Ireland, the establishment of a Chief of Defence and Joint Headquarters demonstrates an attempt to strengthen that dialogue and ensure responsiveness to strategic challenges. Moreover, participation in EU initiatives such as PESCO illustrates how agility allows small states to embed reforms within wider cooperative frameworks, signalling reliability and amplifying voice.

Yet agility is not limitless. Recruitment and retention problems undermine Ireland's ability to deliver on reforms, while budgetary constraints mean that ambitions risk outpacing resources.

**Limit-Implication:** Organisational agility enables small states to demonstrate adaptability, but without material delivery it risks being hollow. The implication is that reforms must be matched by credible investment and human capital, or they will fail to translate into real influence.

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### **Hybrid Leverage Effect**

Globalisation has created asymmetric interdependencies that small states can exploit. Farrell and Newman (2019) describe how network centrality allows powerful states to weaponise interdependence through "panopticon" and "chokepoint" effects. For small states, this duality creates both vulnerability and opportunity. On the one hand, dependence on global networks exposes them to coercion. On the other, institutional embeddedness provides platforms for influence over regulatory norms.

Ireland exemplifies this through its central role in EU data protection regulation. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), enforced largely through Dublin as the headquarters for major multinational tech firms, demonstrates how even a small state can shape global digital standards. This form of hybrid leverage converts structural vulnerability into normative authority. Nye's (2008) concept of "smart power" reinforces this, suggesting that small states can combine soft influence with hybrid regulatory tools to offset their lack of coercive capacity.

Still, Farrell and Newman underplay small-state agency, privileging the dominance of the US and EU. Hybrid leverage is most effective when exercised through coalitions, meaning that small states rarely wield such influence unilaterally.

**Limit–Implication:** Hybrid leverage depends on collective institutional backing rather than unilateral action. The implication is that small states like Ireland must frame hybrid strategies through EU or UN platforms to avoid exposure and maximise influence.

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### **Soft Power Synergy Effect**

Soft power remains one of the most significant assets for small states. Nye (2008) defines soft power as the ability to attract and co-opt through values, culture, and legitimate policies. For Ireland, neutrality and peacekeeping have long functioned as pillars of credibility. When embedded within institutions such as the UN and EU, these practices are magnified, transforming limited resources into disproportionate diplomatic visibility.

Thorhallsson (2006) and Bailes & Thorhallsson (2013) reinforce this, showing that small states derive legitimacy and visibility through “shelter” provided by multilateral institutions. Tonra (1999; 2011) further illustrates how EU membership reshaped Irish diplomacy, embedding it within a Europeanised framework that enhanced voice and credibility. This synergy of identity, neutrality, and institutional membership underscores how small states multiply influence through attraction rather than coercion.

However, soft power can be fragile. Over-reliance on institutions risks dependency, while domestic contestation may undermine external credibility. Ireland’s referenda on EU treaties, for example, reveal how soft power strategies can be contested at home even as they enhance visibility abroad.

**Limit–Implication:** Soft power amplifies influence but is vulnerable to domestic and external contestation. The implication is that small states must balance institutional embedding with domestic legitimacy to sustain credibility.

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### **Legitimacy as Centre of Gravity**

Legitimacy underpins all other effects. Gray (2005, 2018) insists that strategy is ultimately defined by political consequences, not operational novelty. Without coherent political ends, small states’ niches, agility, or soft power gestures collapse into symbolism. Cohen (2002) complements this by showing that legitimacy is reinforced through active civil–military dialogue, not harmony or exclusion. For Ireland, this means that neutrality, peacekeeping, and EU engagement only matter when embedded in coherent political strategy.

Keohane (1988) provides further support, distinguishing between rationalist and reflective dimensions of institutions. Rationally, institutions lower transaction costs, providing small states with cost-effective platforms for influence. Reflectively, they embed norms and legitimacy, amplifying credibility. Ireland's dual use of neutrality as both cost-saving strategy and normative identity demonstrates this synthesis.

Nevertheless, legitimacy is fragile. Neutrality without credible delivery risks hollowing out Ireland's reputation, while institutional over-reliance exposes small states to pressures beyond their control.

**Limit-Implication:** Legitimacy sustains influence but is undermined when political ends are incoherent or resources are insufficient. The implication is that small states must align their strategies with consistent political purpose if they wish to sustain long-term credibility.

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## **Synthesis**

Taken together, the five effects illustrate the positive case for small-state influence. Niche specialisation, agility, hybrid leverage, and soft power demonstrate that material weakness does not preclude relevance. Yet each effect ultimately depends on legitimacy, which functions as the centre of gravity enabling small states to convert visibility into influence. The chapter therefore supports the proposition that small states can shape international security outcomes, albeit conditionally.

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

While small states have demonstrated avenues of influence through niche roles, agility, hybrid leverage, and soft power, these strategies face significant limitations. Realist and sceptical perspectives emphasise that structural constraints, great-power dominance, and domestic weakness often render small-state gestures symbolic rather than decisive. This chapter critically interrogates the five-effects framework, highlighting where it falters and why legitimacy, though central, may be more fragile than often assumed.

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#### **Niche Specialisation: Tokenism and Structural Dependence**

Flynn (2019) argues that small states must offer credible force packages beyond token contributions if they are to remain relevant in peacekeeping. He warns that units below reinforced company size, particularly when hedged by restrictive national caveats, fail to cross the threshold of operational credibility. For Ireland, whose overseas commitments have shrunk amid recruitment crises, this critique implies that peacekeeping may no longer serve as a reliable source of legitimacy.

The broader structural decline of UN peacekeeping exacerbates this. Hellmüller, Tan and Bara (2024) show that geopolitical tensions, particularly among the permanent members of the UN Security Council, have hollowed out traditional small-state niches. Missions are increasingly underfunded, politicised, and contested, reducing opportunities for small states to demonstrate value. The very platform that amplified Ireland's visibility for decades is therefore eroding.

**Limit–Implication:** Niche specialisation offers visibility but risks irrelevance when contributions fall below credibility thresholds or when platforms such as UN peacekeeping decline. The implication is that small states cannot rely on past niches as durable sources of influence.

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#### **Organisational Agility: Cultural Inertia and Resource Gaps**

While small states may be institutionally nimble, critics argue that organisational change is often undermined by cultural resistance and material constraints. Murray (1999) stresses the persistence of doctrinal inertia, warning that even when reforms are attempted, entrenched military cultures often block meaningful adaptation. Applied to Ireland, cultural resistance within the Defence Forces—manifest in recruitment and retention failures, as well as internal scandals—suggests that agility on paper may not translate into practical capability.

Mearsheimer (2001), from an offensive realist standpoint, adds that great-power competition sets external limits on small-state reforms. Even the most agile institution cannot alter the underlying balance of power. Ireland's structural dependence on EU and NATO frameworks illustrates this: reforms such as the High Level Action Plan (2022) signal intent but remain reliant on external structures for validation.

**Limit–Implication:** Organisational agility is constrained by cultural inertia and great-power dominance. The implication is that reforms may generate the appearance of change but fail to deliver substantive influence without structural backing.

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### **Hybrid Leverage: Vulnerability to Coercion**

Hybrid strategies, often celebrated as asymmetric tools for small states, also carry risks. Betts (1994) highlights the dangers of technological misuse, noting that innovations frequently impose greater burdens than benefits when adversaries adapt. Cyber tools or regulatory influence may expose small states to retaliation without offering reliable deterrence.

Farrell and Newman's (2019) concept of weaponised interdependence reinforces this scepticism. Their analysis demonstrates how network centrality privileges great powers such as the United States, leaving small states structurally vulnerable. Ireland's reliance on US-dominated financial and digital infrastructures illustrates this dependency: while GDPR grants Dublin regulatory leverage, it does not shield Ireland from coercive pressure over corporate taxation or data sovereignty.

**Limit–Implication:** Hybrid leverage exposes small states to coercion as much as it empowers them. The implication is that reliance on networked influence may amplify vulnerability rather than enhance strategic autonomy.

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### **Soft Power Synergy: Symbolism Without Substance**

Realists question whether soft power translates into material outcomes. Waltz (1979) and Mearsheimer (1994) argue that international outcomes are shaped by the distribution of capabilities, not by identity or attraction. For them, soft power lacks weight unless backed by hard power. Ireland's neutrality and peacekeeping may bolster reputation, but they do not alter the balance of power in conflicts such as Ukraine or Gaza.

Gray (2005) sharpens this critique, warning that continuity outweighs novelty and that symbolic gestures collapse without coherent political ends. Neutrality may provide short-term legitimacy but risks being exposed as performative if not tied to substantive commitments. Ireland's ambiguous policies—such as facilitating US military transits



through Shannon Airport while rhetorically affirming neutrality—illustrate this disconnection between narrative and practice (Fanning, 2015; Ayiotis, 2023).

**Limit–Implication:** Soft power amplifies visibility but rarely shapes outcomes without hard power or coherent strategy. The implication is that small states risk overestimating the strategic value of attraction.

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### **Legitimacy: Fragile and Conditional**

Although legitimacy is often celebrated as the centre of gravity for small states, it is fragile and contested. Cohen (2002) insists that legitimacy derives from frictional civil–military dialogue, yet Ireland has long marginalised its Defence Forces from strategic decision-making. This exclusion undermines the credibility of neutrality and peacekeeping as strategic choices.

Gray (2018) reinforces the point, arguing that strategy is defined by political consequences, not operational brilliance. Without coherent ends, even legitimate-seeming gestures collapse. Cottey (2022) demonstrates that Ireland has consistently underinvested in defence, even after systemic shocks such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Legitimacy, therefore, risks becoming a hollow performance—externally persuasive but internally unsustainable.

Israel offers a further challenge to the small-state category. As Hirst (2010) shows, Israel combines limited size with nuclear deterrence, alliance shelter from the United States, and a hard realist outlook. It illustrates that legitimacy is not always the decisive centre of gravity: hard power, backed by alliances, may trump legitimacy for survival and influence.

**Limit–Implication:** Legitimacy provides influence only when backed by credible resources and coherent ends. The implication is that small states that rely solely on symbolic legitimacy risk irrelevance or dependency on great powers.

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### **Synthesis**

This chapter demonstrates that each element of the five-effects framework faces significant limitations. Niche roles risk tokenism; agility is undermined by inertia and dependence; hybrid leverage amplifies vulnerability; soft power collapses without hard power; and legitimacy is fragile without coherent ends. Collectively, these critiques suggest that while small states may achieve visibility, they rarely achieve lasting influence. Realist perspectives remind us that the structural dominance of great powers constrains agency, leaving small states to operate at the margins unless they embed their legitimacy within credible strategies backed by resources and alliances.



## Chapter 4 – Back-up Facts / Present Argument

Having considered the optimistic and sceptical perspectives, this chapter synthesises evidence through comparative case studies. It evaluates whether the five-effects framework can still reconcile small-state ambitions with structural constraints. The cases of Ireland, Estonia, Finland, Denmark, Qatar, and Israel provide a cross-section of small-state strategies, revealing both the promise and fragility of influence.

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### **Ireland: Neutrality as Hedge and Symbol**

Ireland provides a central case of both promise and fragility. De Valera's neutrality during the Second World War is often recalled as principled sovereignty, yet historians such as Fanning (2015), Ayiotis (2023), and Fleming (2023) demonstrate that it was fundamentally a realist hedge. By balancing between Britain and Germany, Ireland sought survival under the guise of moralism. This pattern persists: neutrality and peacekeeping generate legitimacy abroad, but practices such as US military transits through Shannon Airport undermine credibility at home.

The White Paper on Defence (2015) and its 2019 update confirm the continuity of underinvestment, with persistent recruitment and retention crises undermining operational delivery (Government of Ireland, 2019). The High Level Action Plan (2022) promises reform, but as Cottey (2022) shows, Ireland often over-promises and under-delivers. Neutrality therefore functions as both asset and liability: it amplifies soft power but risks exposure as symbolic performance.

**Limit-Implication:** Ireland demonstrates that neutrality sustains legitimacy only when backed by credible delivery. The implication is that neutrality without reform risks hollowing out Ireland's strategic influence.

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### **Estonia: Cyber as Niche Innovation**

Estonia illustrates the potential of niche specialisation and organisational agility. After the 2007 cyberattacks, it invested in cyber defence, hosting NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence. This provided reputational visibility disproportionate to its population of just 1.3 million. Raska (2021) argues that cyber and AI tools offer asymmetric multipliers for small states, allowing them to shape norms and practices even in the shadow of larger powers.

Yet, as critics warn, Estonia's influence is contingent on NATO shelter. Without the alliance, cyber expertise would not deter Russian coercion. This aligns with Mearsheimer's realist view: innovations matter only within structures defined by great-power dynamics.

**Limit–Implication:** Estonia’s cyber niche demonstrates innovation, but its influence depends on NATO backing. The implication is that niches are meaningful only when embedded within alliances.

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### **Finland and Denmark: Institutional Shelter**

Finland and Denmark highlight how institutional embedding amplifies voice. Finland’s accession to NATO in 2023 signals that neutrality was no longer viable in the face of Russian aggression. Shelter through NATO provides security guarantees, while Finland contributes through resilience and regional expertise. Denmark similarly leverages EU and NATO membership, specialising in expeditionary contributions and Arctic security.

Thorhallsson’s (2006) shelter theory explains this dynamic: small states amplify influence by embedding within institutions that provide both legitimacy and protection. Yet critics such as Waltz (1979) remind us that institutional voices cannot override structural power. Finland and Denmark may gain visibility, but ultimate outcomes are determined by US, Russian, and Chinese strategies.

**Limit–Implication:** Institutional shelter enhances small-state visibility but does not alter structural hierarchies. The implication is that shelter provides influence only in coordination with great powers.

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### **Qatar: Mediation as Soft Power Synergy**

Qatar demonstrates how wealth and diplomacy combine to create disproportionate influence. By mediating in conflicts such as Afghanistan and hosting regional negotiations, Qatar has built a reputation as a diplomatic broker. Its investment in global media (Al Jazeera) further amplifies its soft power.

However, Qatar’s strategy also illustrates dependency. Its mediation is tolerated in part because of its close ties with the United States, including hosting the Al-Udeid Air Base. Without this alliance shelter, its credibility would be more limited. Moreover, mediation can generate exposure: perceptions of bias or overreach risk undermining its legitimacy.

**Limit–Implication:** Mediation magnifies influence but is fragile without alliance shelter. The implication is that small states relying on diplomacy must balance visibility with dependency.

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### **Israel: The “Problem Case”**

Israel complicates the category of small states. With a population of under ten million, it meets material criteria for smallness, yet it exercises disproportionate military and

political influence. Hirst (2010) argues that this stems from hard realism: nuclear deterrence, alliance shelter from the United States, and a willingness to employ military force. Israel demonstrates that legitimacy is not always the centre of gravity; material power, when bolstered by alliances, can redefine the boundaries of small-state influence.

For comparative purposes, Israel challenges institutionalist optimism. While Ireland relies on legitimacy and soft power, Israel exemplifies how small size can be offset by military capability and strategic alliances. It therefore blurs the distinction between “small” and “middle” powers.

**Limit–Implication:** Israel demonstrates that smallness is not a uniform condition; size interacts with alliances and military capacity. The implication is that small-state theory must account for outliers where material power displaces legitimacy.

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## Synthesis

The comparative evidence shows that small states can indeed shape international security outcomes, but only conditionally. Ireland illustrates the fragility of neutrality, Estonia the potential of niches, Finland and Denmark the value of shelter, Qatar the synergy of soft power, and Israel the limits of the small-state category itself. Across these cases, the pattern is clear: influence arises not from unilateral capacity but from embedding within alliances, institutions, and coherent strategies.

Legitimacy remains central, but it is fragile. Without credible delivery, neutrality risks becoming symbolic. Without alliance backing, niches lose deterrent value. Without coherent political purpose, soft power collapses into gesture. Thus, the five-effects framework captures both the promise and the limits of small-state influence.

## Chapter 5 – Conclusion

This essay has examined the extent to which small states can influence international security outcomes through both military and non-military means. It has done so by applying a five-effects framework — niche specialisation, organisational agility, hybrid leverage, soft power synergy, and legitimacy — to balance optimistic and sceptical perspectives. The analysis shows that while small states can shape agendas, norms, and perceptions, their influence is conditional, fragile, and ultimately dependent on legitimacy aligned with coherent political purpose.

The introduction established that definitions of smallness are contested. Waltz (1979) reduces small states to structural objects in a system defined by material capabilities, while Thorhallsson (2006) highlights perceptual size and institutional shelter, and Keohane (1969) points to small states as “system-affecting” actors through institutions. Ireland and Israel were identified as problem cases: the former projecting neutrality as legitimacy despite persistent underinvestment, the latter defying small-state categorisation through military capability and alliance shelter.

Chapter 2 developed the positive case. Niche roles such as Irish peacekeeping or Estonian cyber defence provide visibility disproportionate to size. Organisational agility, as seen in Ireland’s High Level Action Plan (2022), illustrates the potential for institutional adaptation. Hybrid leverage allows small states like Ireland to convert vulnerability into influence through EU regulation, while soft power synergy shows how neutrality and diplomacy can be magnified within multilateral frameworks (Nye, 2008; Bailes & Thorhallsson, 2013). At the core, legitimacy underpins these effects: when strategies are credible, small states can amplify their voice in international affairs.

Chapter 3 presented the counter-arguments. Critics such as Flynn (2019) warn that token contributions in peacekeeping risk irrelevance, while Hellmüller, Tan and Bara (2024) highlight the structural decline of UN peacekeeping as a viable niche. Realists including Waltz (1979), Mearsheimer (1994), and Gray (2005) emphasise structural dominance and political continuity, warning that soft power and symbolic gestures collapse without coherent ends. Israel illustrates how material power and alliances can displace legitimacy as the primary source of influence. Ireland’s persistent underinvestment and rhetorical ambiguity further demonstrate the fragility of symbolic neutrality (Cotter, 2022).

Chapter 4 synthesised these perspectives through comparative cases. Ireland reveals neutrality as both asset and liability. Estonia demonstrates the potential of niches but only within NATO shelter. Finland and Denmark illustrate the benefits of institutional embedding, while Qatar shows how wealth and mediation can project soft power. Israel complicates the category by demonstrating that small size does not preclude decisive influence when combined with military capability and great-power alignment.

Collectively, these cases confirm that small states can shape outcomes, but only conditionally, and rarely decisively.

The central finding is that legitimacy remains the true centre of gravity for small states. It provides recognition, credibility, and amplification of limited means. Yet legitimacy is fragile: without resources, alliances, or coherent political ends, it risks becoming symbolic performance. Neutrality without delivery, peacekeeping without credible scale, or regulation without enforcement all illustrate how small states can overextend reputational capital. Conversely, when legitimacy is embedded in credible strategies — as with Estonia’s cyber niche or Finland’s NATO accession — influence becomes more durable.

For Ireland, the lesson is clear. Neutrality and peacekeeping remain valuable assets, but they must be matched by investment, reform, and political clarity. The Defence Forces’ credibility depends on aligning commitments with resources, while foreign policy legitimacy requires reconciling rhetoric with practice. For small states more broadly, the challenge is to balance optimism about institutional and normative agency with realism about structural constraints.

Future research should examine hedging as a strategy for small states, alliance dependency as both a shelter and a vulnerability, and the redefinition of “small power” categories in light of cases such as Israel, North Korea, or Qatar. Such work would refine the five-effects framework and test whether legitimacy can continue to reconcile realist scepticism with institutionalist optimism in a fragmented, multipolar order.

In sum, small states cannot unilaterally determine international security outcomes, but nor are they irrelevant. They influence through institutions, niches, and reputations, yet always under the shadow of structural limits. Legitimacy sustains their agency, but its fragility demands coherence, credibility, and constant renewal. The centre of gravity for small states is thus not size itself but the capacity to translate limited means into credible and legitimate strategies within an international system dominated by great powers.

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