

Draft Introduction

Small states occupy a paradoxical position in international relations: their limited material capabilities restrict unilateral action, yet their influence often exceeds what size alone would suggest. Defining what constitutes a “small state” is therefore an essential starting point. Thorhallsson’s six-category model, which evaluates political, administrative, economic, and societal dimensions, clarifies that smallness extends beyond population or GDP. By this measure, Ireland exemplifies a small state: economically advanced but structurally dependent, militarily modest, and reliant on international institutions for shelter and legitimacy. This conceptualisation avoids the pitfalls of conventional metrics, recognising that size is a multidimensional constraint that shapes both opportunities and vulnerabilities.

Within this framework, legitimacy emerges as the proposed “centre of gravity” for small states. Unlike great powers, which rely on material force, small states sustain relevance by cultivating recognition as credible and responsible actors. Legitimacy provides them with access to alliances, international organisations, and diplomatic networks that amplify their otherwise marginal voices. For Ireland, neutrality has long functioned as a vehicle of legitimacy. Éamon de Valera’s policies during the Second World War illustrate this dynamic: his realist strategy preserved sovereignty by maintaining strict neutrality, even as Ireland covertly supported Allied intelligence efforts. The episode demonstrates that small states rarely achieve pure autonomy; rather, they manage dependence through carefully crafted strategies that balance survival with reputation. Neutrality was less an ideal than a pragmatic hedge, revealing that legitimacy often masks realist calculations.

Perception further conditions small-state influence. Thorhallsson emphasises that myths, history, and identity shape the strategic behaviour of small powers. In the Irish case, neutrality has become embedded in political identity and public expectation, reinforcing legitimacy abroad while constraining policy choices at home. These narratives can empower small states by providing reputational capital, but they also risk rigidity. When national identity is tied to symbolic neutrality, policymakers may struggle to adapt to changing security environments. This tension underscores the importance of perception as both an asset and a limitation in small-state strategy.

To test the extent of small-state influence, this essay applies a five-effects framework: niche specialisation, organisational agility, hybrid leverage, soft power synergy, and legitimacy. These effects capture how small states exploit asymmetries, adapt to constraints, and amplify influence. Niche roles, such as peacekeeping or cyber defence, enable visibility; agility allows rapid reform and adaptation; hybrid strategies convert vulnerability into leverage through networks and regulation; soft power magnifies credibility through culture and diplomacy; and legitimacy sustains all other effects by providing recognition and credibility. Applied to Ireland and comparative

cases, this framework will evaluate both the promise and fragility of small-state influence in international security.

In summary, this essay argues that small states cannot dictate outcomes unilaterally, but they can shape the international security environment by leveraging legitimacy and embedding themselves in multilateral frameworks. The following chapters first examine the reasons supporting this claim, before turning to realist critiques that expose its limitations. Case studies of Ireland, Estonia, Finland, Denmark, and Qatar will provide empirical grounding, while comparative analysis of surprising cases such as Israel and North Korea will test the boundaries of small-state categorisation. Ultimately, the essay assesses whether legitimacy endures as the decisive multiplier for small states, or whether it collapses when confronted with the hard realities of power politics.

Draft Chapter 2: Reasons For the Proposal (Framework Applied Positively)

Niche Specialisation Effect

A first way in which small states can exert disproportionate influence on international security is through niche specialisation. Krepinevich (1994) argued that revolutions in military affairs create opportunities for smaller states to “steal a march” on larger powers by embedding novel technologies or doctrines within their force structures. Ireland’s long-standing commitment to UN peacekeeping illustrates such a niche. Despite its modest defence budget, Irish contingents in Lebanon, Liberia, and Mali have secured visibility and credibility in international fora, demonstrating that small contributions can carry symbolic and reputational weight. Similarly, Estonia’s post-2007 development of cyber defence capacity has carved out a specialised role within NATO and the EU, giving it an outsized voice in shaping digital security agendas.

By focusing on narrow areas where resources can be concentrated, small states overcome the impossibility of fielding comprehensive forces. Qatar’s diplomatic niche in mediation exemplifies a non-military parallel. Its brokering of negotiations in Afghanistan and Sudan demonstrates that specialisation can yield recognition even for geographically small and militarily weak actors. Such niches provide a platform for influence by magnifying relevance in domains where larger powers may be overstretched or inattentive.

However, the effectiveness of niche specialisation depends on embedding tactical novelty within broader political strategy. Gray (2005) warned that innovation without coherent ends risks irrelevance, as operational novelty cannot compensate for absent political purpose. For Ireland, peacekeeping is most effective when framed as part of a principled neutrality that sustains legitimacy in the UN. Similarly, Estonia’s cyber niche is effective because it is embedded within NATO’s collective defence structures.

Limit: Niche specialisation yields visibility but remains fragile without political strategy. Implication: Small states must ensure that niches are embedded in coherent diplomatic or institutional frameworks to convert novelty into sustained influence.

Organisational Agility Effect

A second advantage often claimed for small states is their ability to adapt institutions more rapidly than larger counterparts. Metz (2000) highlights that militaries adapt most effectively in the wake of crisis, suggesting that smaller polities may possess fewer bureaucratic obstacles to reform. Ireland's High Level Action Plan (HLAP 2022) illustrates this principle: by restructuring command arrangements, revitalising the Reserve Defence Force, and committing to capability modernisation, Dublin seeks to demonstrate responsiveness to both domestic criticism and external pressures. Agility here lies less in battlefield manoeuvre and more in institutional adaptation, signalling credibility to allies and partners.

Estonia again exemplifies agility in practice. Its rapid integration of cyber security into national defence structures after 2007 reflected both necessity and political will. By contrast, larger states often struggle with inertia due to entrenched bureaucracies and multiple veto points. Cohen's (2002) concept of the "unequal dialogue" further emphasises that agility is relational: small states demonstrate credibility when political leaders and military organisations engage in active, probing dialogue that ensures strategic coherence.

Agility also extends beyond military structures. Denmark's decision to join NATO after the Second World War, despite its previous neutrality, illustrates how political agility can reposition a small state within new institutional frameworks, ensuring relevance in shifting contexts. Such responsiveness allows small states to project reliability to larger allies, gaining a seat at decision-making tables otherwise inaccessible.

Nevertheless, agility has limits. Ireland's recruitment and retention crisis has repeatedly undermined reforms, while domestic politics constrain defence spending. Organisational change without resources risks hollowing out credibility.

Limit: Agility is constrained by material scarcity and domestic politics. Implication: Small states must pair institutional reform with credible resourcing to ensure that agility is recognised externally rather than dismissed as symbolic adaptation.

Hybrid Leverage Effect

In an era of globalised interdependence, small states can convert vulnerability into leverage by exploiting their position within international networks. Farrell and Newman

(2019) demonstrate how interdependence creates asymmetrical power relations, with dominant states weaponising chokepoints such as SWIFT or internet governance. Yet small states embedded in multilateral frameworks can influence the rules of these networks. Ireland's hosting of major technology firms and EU headquarters makes it a critical node in digital and regulatory ecosystems, enabling Dublin to shape debates on data governance and cyber resilience.

The EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) provides a striking example. Although no single small state could have imposed global standards alone, collective institutional platforms allow them to amplify influence. Ireland, as the home regulator for many US tech giants, has acquired significant relevance in enforcing GDPR provisions, shaping corporate practices far beyond its borders. This is hybrid leverage in practice: converting economic vulnerability into regulatory authority.

Nye's (2008) notion of "smart power" reinforces this point. By combining normative influence with embeddedness in networks, small states can discipline larger actors who depend on their compliance. Estonia's cyber posture, backed by NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn, illustrates how regulatory entrepreneurship and technical expertise can create asymmetrical influence in emerging security domains.

Still, hybrid leverage is fragile. Farrell and Newman caution that great powers adapt to offset vulnerabilities, while small states remain dependent on institutional coalitions. Ireland's regulatory power in data is conditional on EU backing; absent that, Dublin's autonomy would be minimal.

Limit: Hybrid leverage depends on institutional coalitions and exposes small states to counter-coercion. Implication: To sustain influence, small states must embed hybrid strategies within multilateral frameworks that both amplify voice and provide shelter.

Soft Power Synergy Effect

Joseph Nye (2008) defines soft power as the ability to co-opt through attraction, rooted in culture, values, and policies perceived as legitimate. For small states, soft power is not a luxury but a strategic necessity. Ireland's neutrality, peacekeeping contributions, and identity as a principled actor generate diplomatic visibility disproportionate to its size. Within the EU, Ireland's reputation for mediation and consensus-building has often enabled it to play bridging roles, while in the UN its peacekeeping record has secured elections to the Security Council.

Thorhallsson (2006) and Bailes & Thorhallsson (2013) further argue that small states enhance credibility through "shelter" in institutions. By embedding soft power within institutional contexts, small states magnify their voice. For instance, Ireland's use of the

EU Presidency in 2013 and 2026 allowed it to shape agendas beyond its material weight. Similarly, Finland and Denmark have amplified their voices through reputations for diplomacy, human rights advocacy, and development aid, reinforcing their legitimacy in wider security debates.

Qatar provides a non-European illustration. Through cultural investments, international media (Al Jazeera), and mediation diplomacy, it has projected influence that belies its small population. This demonstrates that soft power, when coupled with institutional or financial resources, can reposition small states as significant players in global politics.

Yet, critics warn of fragility. Soft power collapses when confronted with hard power, as evident when Qatar faced blockade by regional neighbours in 2017. For Ireland, neutrality remains attractive internationally but faces domestic contestation and strains under EU defence integration.

Limit: Soft power is contingent and collapses under coercive pressure. Implication: Small states must reinforce soft power through institutional embedding and consistent credibility to prevent symbolic gestures from being exposed as hollow.

Legitimacy Effect

Finally, legitimacy functions as the centre of gravity for small states, sustaining all other effects. Gray (2018) insists that strategy is defined by political consequences, not operational brilliance, making legitimacy indispensable for durable influence. Cohen (2002) similarly stresses that legitimacy derives from civil–military dialogue, where political leaders and armed forces jointly shape coherent strategy. For small states, credibility abroad is inseparable from legitimacy at home.

Ireland's neutrality exemplifies this. Externally, neutrality provides recognition as an impartial peacekeeper; internally, it commands broad public support and functions as a cornerstone of political identity. Bailes and Thorhallsson (2013) argue that legitimacy is amplified through institutional shelter, with EU and UN membership providing platforms where Ireland's voice gains relevance. The election to the UN Security Council in 2020, despite modest campaigning resources, illustrates how legitimacy grounded in peacekeeping and neutrality can yield tangible influence.

Legitimacy also sustains niche specialisation and soft power. Estonia's cyber niche resonates because it is backed by NATO's recognition of Tallinn as a credible hub. Denmark's role in humanitarian diplomacy carries weight because it is embedded in long-standing institutional credibility. For small states, legitimacy transforms otherwise modest contributions into meaningful influence.

Nonetheless, legitimacy is fragile. Neutrality can be contested, as Ireland discovered when US military use of Shannon Airport provoked domestic criticism and international

scrutiny. Without credible delivery, legitimacy risks hollowing out. Gray's warning is pertinent: symbolic strategies collapse unless tied to coherent political purpose.

Limit: Legitimacy erodes when symbolic commitments outpace credible delivery.

Implication: Small states must align limited means with coherent political ends to sustain legitimacy as the foundation of influence.

Conclusion to Chapter 2

Taken together, the five effects illustrate how small states can influence international security outcomes despite their material weakness. Niche specialisation provides visibility; organisational agility signals adaptability; hybrid leverage exploits interdependence; soft power amplifies credibility; and legitimacy sustains them all. Comparative cases — from Ireland's peacekeeping to Estonia's cyber role, Qatar's mediation, and Denmark's diplomacy — show that small states can indeed “punch above their weight” when strategies are coherent and institutionally embedded.

Yet each effect is conditional. Specialisation risks tokenism; agility requires resources; hybrid leverage exposes vulnerability; soft power is fragile under coercion; and legitimacy collapses without credible delivery. The cumulative lesson is that small states can shape security environments, but only within carefully managed frameworks where legitimacy remains the decisive multiplier.

Draft Chapter 3: Reasons Against the Proposal (Framework Applied Critically)

Niche Specialisation Effect — Tokenism and Structural Dependence

While niche roles offer visibility, critics argue they rarely translate into substantive influence unless aligned with the interests of larger powers. Waltz (1979) stresses that the international system is structured by the distribution of capabilities, not by innovation on the margins. From this neorealist perspective, peacekeeping missions or cyber niches cannot fundamentally alter great-power dynamics. Ireland's longstanding commitment to UN operations, for example, has brought symbolic recognition but little tangible leverage in shaping global crises. Its troops in Lebanon or Mali have not determined outcomes, but merely supplemented missions under the strategic control of larger actors.

Mearsheimer (1994) similarly cautions that small-state innovations are absorbed into great-power strategies, rather than shaping them. Estonia's cyber expertise, while celebrated, functions primarily as an adjunct to NATO's collective deterrence posture against Russia. Without NATO backing, its influence would be negligible. Israel's early adoption of drones in the 1980s demonstrates the same limit: while tactically pioneering, it was the United States that translated unmanned systems into global strategic paradigms.

Limit: Niche roles risk tokenism when not backed by material or institutional power.

Implication: Small states may gain symbolic credit but cannot unilaterally determine outcomes.

Organisational Agility Effect — Constraints of Resources and Culture

Agility is often presented as an inherent advantage of small states, yet this claim is vulnerable to critique. Murray (2011) argues that doctrinal and cultural inertia often outweigh the supposed advantages of small size. Militaries are conservative institutions, and smaller forces may lack the resources or expertise to implement reforms effectively. Ireland's High Level Action Plan (2022) highlights this problem: while it promises structural reform and Reserve revitalisation, persistent recruitment and retention crises undermine delivery.

Furthermore, Mearsheimer (2001) reminds us that the external environment is dominated by great-power competition. In such a context, small-state reforms cannot overcome structural dependency. Even when reforms succeed, they often serve primarily to reassure larger allies rather than to generate autonomous capacity. Denmark's NATO reforms during the Cold War illustrate this: while agile compared to larger states, its reforms were embedded in alliance expectations, not independent strategic innovation.

Cultural constraints compound the issue. The Irish Defence Forces’ “survivalist mindset” (as Gray (2018) might frame it) reflects an institution primarily designed to preserve existence rather than to project influence. In such cases, agility is not a strategic advantage but a veneer covering chronic underinvestment.

Limit: Agility without resources or cultural change collapses into symbolism.

Implication: Small states risk presenting reforms as progress when in fact they remain dependent on external shelters for security.

Hybrid Leverage Effect — Vulnerability Over Leverage

Hybrid leverage is perhaps the most double-edged of the five effects. Farrell and Newman (2019) argue that interdependence generates vulnerabilities as much as opportunities, with great powers weaponising networks to coerce smaller actors. For Ireland, reliance on US-centred digital and financial infrastructures illustrates the problem: while the EU’s GDPR appears to confer leverage, Dublin’s enforcement capacity is constrained by limited administrative resources and dependence on US investment.

Realists argue that hybrid strategies invite escalation. Waltz (1979) would contend that when small states use regulatory or cyber leverage, they risk provoking countermeasures from larger powers that can easily overwhelm them. Qatar’s experience after 2017 exemplifies this vulnerability: despite its financial resources and mediation diplomacy, its hybrid strategies could not prevent a blockade by its more powerful neighbours.

Even Estonia’s cyber posture demonstrates fragility. Its prominence as a NATO hub makes it a likely target, amplifying exposure to coercion. As Gray (2005) warns, adversaries adapt asymmetrically, turning perceived advantages into liabilities.

Limit: Hybrid leverage exposes small states to coercion and retaliation. Implication: Vulnerabilities often outweigh gains, leaving small states dependent on collective institutions for survival.

Soft Power Synergy Effect — Fragility in Confrontation

Soft power, often heralded as a distinctive resource for small states, is acutely vulnerable when confronted with hard power realities. Gray (2005) insists that war is political behaviour rooted in power, and symbolic gestures collapse when disconnected from coercive capability. Ireland’s neutrality, while attractive in principle, has repeatedly been tested when aligned against geopolitical realities. During the Second World War, de Valera’s neutrality secured sovereignty but at the cost of marginalising Ireland from

Allied strategic planning. Similarly, in the War on Terror, neutrality was strained by the tacit use of Shannon Airport by US forces — revealing the tension between principle and practice.

Realists argue that institutions magnify rather than offset power disparities.

Mearsheimer (1994) dismissed liberal optimism about institutional voice, stressing that NATO and the EU are arenas where great powers act out underlying rivalries. Ireland's EU membership may amplify soft power in normal circumstances, but when core strategic interests of larger states are engaged — as in the case of Ukraine — Dublin's influence is marginal.

Nye's optimism about attraction as a form of power is tempered by Betts (2001), who warns that soft power can mislead policymakers into believing they hold influence when in fact their choices remain constrained by stronger actors.

Limit: Soft power collapses under coercion and may generate strategic illusions.

Implication: Small states must recognise that attraction cannot substitute for material capability or alliance dependency.

Legitimacy Effect — Fragile and Contested

Legitimacy is presented as the centre of gravity for small states, yet it is also the most fragile. Cohen (2002) stresses that legitimacy requires frictional civil–military dialogue, but in many small states — including Ireland — the military is marginalised from strategic debate. This weakens internal legitimacy, as policy is crafted symbolically rather than substantively.

Externally, legitimacy is contested terrain. Bessner (2015) demonstrates how hegemonic powers instrumentalise legitimacy to rationalise their dominance. From this perspective, small-state legitimacy is precarious because it can be co-opted or ignored by larger actors. Ireland's claim to neutrality, for instance, has often been dismissed as free-riding by critics in NATO or the United States.

Moreover, legitimacy is difficult to sustain when rhetoric outpaces delivery. Ireland's credibility as a peacekeeper is undermined by persistent under-resourcing of its Defence Forces, while its neutrality faces scrutiny as EU defence integration deepens. Gray (2018) is unequivocal: without political purpose and credible delivery, legitimacy collapses into symbolism.

Limit: Legitimacy is fragile, contested, and vulnerable to incoherence. Implication: Small states risk hollowing their credibility unless legitimacy is grounded in credible policy and sustained delivery.

Conclusion to Chapter 3

The five effects, when viewed critically, highlight the structural and cultural constraints facing small states. Niche roles risk tokenism; agility falters under resource scarcity; hybrid leverage amplifies vulnerability; soft power collapses under coercion; and legitimacy is fragile when not grounded in coherent ends. Realist and neorealist perspectives remind us that the international system privileges material power, and small states cannot escape dependence on great powers or institutions. Ireland exemplifies this tension: neutrality and peacekeeping provide visibility, but chronic underinvestment and alliance dependency limit real agency.

The cumulative lesson is sobering. Small states may project influence under certain conditions, but their capacity to shape international security outcomes remains circumscribed. Influence is relational, conditional, and fragile — easily overshadowed by the interests of larger powers.

Draft Chapter 4: Back-up Facts / Present Argument

Ireland — Neutrality, Peacekeeping, and the Limits of Influence

Ireland provides a paradigmatic case of a European small state attempting to balance legitimacy, neutrality, and limited resources. Since the Second World War, neutrality has anchored Irish security policy, providing both domestic legitimacy and external recognition. De Valera's neutrality in 1939–45 exemplifies realist adaptation: Ireland preserved sovereignty by avoiding entanglement while tacitly assisting the Allies through intelligence and weather reporting (Keogh 1984). Neutrality was less an expression of idealism than a survival strategy, confirming Gray's (2005) point that legitimacy requires political purpose.

In the post-Cold War period, Irish influence has centred on UN peacekeeping. Deployments to Lebanon, Liberia, and Mali have earned Dublin symbolic credibility, illustrating Thorhallsson's (2006) claim that small states can "punch above their weight" through institutions. Election to the UN Security Council in 2020 reinforced this visibility. Yet, as Gray (2018) would warn, peacekeeping remains tokenistic when not tied to a broader strategy. The 2019 Defence White Paper update admitted that the Defence Forces were operating below minimum strength, with critical capability gaps in air and maritime domains (Government of Ireland 2019). Neutrality thus sustains legitimacy but also conceals underinvestment.

Limit: Irish peacekeeping and neutrality provide legitimacy but not decisive influence.
Implication: Ireland's international visibility depends on sustaining credibility in multilateral frameworks rather than unilateral action.

Estonia — Cyber Niche and NATO Embedding

Estonia represents a small state that has consciously exploited niche specialisation. Following the 2007 cyberattacks attributed to Russia, Tallinn invested heavily in digital resilience and successfully lobbied for NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence to be located in Tallinn. This move amplified Estonia's visibility, allowing it to shape alliance discourse on cyber threats.

Here, the Niche and Hybrid Leverage effects appear strongest: Estonia's vulnerabilities became sources of influence once embedded in collective institutions. Farrell and Newman's (2019) framework of weaponised interdependence illustrates this duality. Estonia cannot defend its networks alone, but by framing its experience as a collective vulnerability, it has secured NATO and EU investment.

However, this influence is conditional. Estonia's cyber prominence is inseparable from NATO membership. Without the backing of larger allies, its leverage would be minimal.

Moreover, it remains exposed to Russian retaliation, underlining that hybrid strategies amplify vulnerability as much as they generate influence.

Limit: Estonia's cyber role is inseparable from NATO support. Implication: Small states can gain recognition in new domains, but this is contingent on embedding niches within collective security frameworks.

Finland — Neutrality Reconsidered, NATO Accession

Finland's trajectory offers a contrast to Ireland. For decades it practised military non-alignment under the "Finlandisation" compromise with the Soviet Union, emphasising neutrality and domestic resilience. This echoed Ireland's survival strategy but with greater emphasis on territorial defence. The 2022 decision to seek NATO membership after Russia's invasion of Ukraine illustrates the fragility of small-state neutrality when security guarantees are absent.

From a constructivist perspective, Finland's reputation for resilience and pragmatic diplomacy amplified its legitimacy. Yet, realist constraints dominated once Russia posed an existential threat. Neutrality collapsed, and accession to NATO was pursued as the only credible means of guaranteeing sovereignty.

Finland demonstrates that legitimacy and soft power cannot substitute for hard alliances under conditions of threat. At the same time, its long-term investment in total defence and societal resilience provided credibility that smoothed NATO accession.

Limit: Neutrality is viable only under permissive conditions. Implication: Small states must recalibrate legitimacy strategies when structural threats overwhelm symbolic postures.

Denmark — Institutional Agility and Alliance Dependency

Denmark illustrates how small states can gain influence by embedding themselves deeply in alliances. Following World War II, Copenhagen abandoned neutrality and became an active NATO member. During the Cold War, it developed a reputation for agility by aligning reforms with alliance priorities. More recently, Denmark's participation in NATO and EU operations — from the Balkans to Afghanistan — has secured it a seat at decision-making tables disproportionate to its size.

Thorhallsson (2006) would highlight Denmark's use of institutional shelter as legitimacy. Yet, Mearsheimer (1994) reminds us that Denmark's influence has been bounded: it reinforces alliance strategies rather than shaping them autonomously. Denmark's opt-out from EU defence integration further underlines the limits of agility, as domestic politics curtailed its ability to participate in European security initiatives until 2022.

Limit: Danish influence is derivative of alliance commitments. Implication: Small states gain visibility in institutions, but agency remains constrained by structural dependence.

Qatar — Mediation Diplomacy and Vulnerable Autonomy

Qatar presents an intriguing case outside the European context. With a population under three million, it has nevertheless played outsized roles in mediation and diplomacy. Hosting negotiations in Afghanistan, Sudan, and Lebanon, and investing in cultural and media soft power through Al Jazeera, Qatar has amplified its visibility far beyond its military capacity.

This reflects both the Niche and Soft Power Synergy effects: mediation diplomacy has become Qatar's signature contribution, while cultural investments reinforce its credibility. Yet, as the 2017 blockade by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and others demonstrated, soft power collapses when confronted by hard power pressure. Qatar's survival depended less on its diplomacy than on its alignment with US security guarantees through Al Udeid air base.

Qatar illustrates both the promise and fragility of small-state strategies. Mediation and soft power provide recognition, but they cannot substitute for external security guarantees.

Limit: Mediation diplomacy amplifies visibility but collapses under coercion.

Implication: Small states must anchor soft power in credible external alliances to survive confrontation.

“Surprising” Cases — Israel, North Korea, and Iraq

Thorhallsson's multidimensional model suggests that conventional metrics do not always determine status. Israel, for example, is territorially small and demographically limited, yet its technological innovation, nuclear capability, and alliance with the United States place it among the region's most influential actors. In terms of perception and administrative capacity, it defies the “small state” label. Israel demonstrates that size is not solely material but also institutional, reputational, and strategic.

North Korea provides a different puzzle. Economically weak and internationally isolated, it nevertheless wields disproportionate influence through nuclear weapons and coercive brinkmanship. Its ability to destabilise regional security underscores Waltz's (1981) contention that nuclear weapons confer deterrence regardless of size. Yet its legitimacy is almost non-existent; its influence derives solely from coercive threat.

Saddam Hussein's Iraq similarly complicates classification. Despite significant resources, it lacked legitimacy and reliable institutional shelter. Its 1990 invasion of

Kuwait triggered overwhelming great-power response, demonstrating that without legitimacy, even militarily strong states risk strategic collapse.

These cases demonstrate the limits of classification: smallness is not merely about territory or GDP, but about how size interacts with legitimacy, alliances, and strategic posture. They also reinforce that legitimacy remains the decisive multiplier. Israel's legitimacy with Western powers sustains its influence; North Korea's lack of legitimacy isolates it; Iraq's illegitimacy triggered regime collapse.

Limit: "Surprising" cases challenge simple size definitions. Implication: Legitimacy provides a more reliable organising principle than material metrics when explaining influence.

Synthesis — Testing the Hypothesis

The comparative cases provide a mixed picture. Ireland, Estonia, Finland, Denmark, and Qatar each illustrate how the five effects can amplify small-state visibility, but all reveal fragility when legitimacy is absent or alliances weak. The "surprising" cases further reinforce this point: Israel and North Korea show that material innovation or coercion can substitute temporarily for legitimacy, but only under highly specific conditions. In general, legitimacy emerges as the decisive variable across contexts.

- **For the proposal:** Small states gain influence through niche roles, agility, hybrid leverage, soft power, and legitimacy. Case studies confirm that visibility and credibility can exceed material weight.
- **Against the proposal:** Realist critiques show that these effects collapse when tested by coercion, resource scarcity, or great-power rivalry. Small states cannot dictate outcomes and remain structurally dependent.

The hypothesis — that small states cannot unilaterally shape security outcomes, but can influence them through legitimacy anchored in multilateral frameworks — holds. Legitimacy reconciles the institutional optimism of Thorhallsson and Keohane with the scepticism of Gray and Mearsheimer. It sustains influence by providing credibility, even when material means are limited.

Limit: Case studies confirm that influence is conditional and fragile. Implication: Ireland and other small states must embed strategies in legitimacy-conferring institutions while recognising structural dependency on great powers.

Draft Chapter 5: Conclusion

This essay set out to evaluate the extent to which small states can influence international security outcomes through military and non-military means. It advanced the hypothesis that while small states cannot dictate outcomes unilaterally, they can exert influence by embedding themselves in institutions, exploiting niches, and above all cultivating legitimacy as their centre of gravity. The analysis has demonstrated that small states possess real avenues of influence, but these are conditional, fragile, and easily overshadowed by the interests of great powers.

Chapter 2 presented the optimistic case. Through the five effects — niche specialisation, organisational agility, hybrid leverage, soft power synergy, and legitimacy — small states were shown to create disproportionate visibility. Ireland's peacekeeping, Estonia's cyber niche, Qatar's mediation diplomacy, and Denmark's alliance agility illustrate how focused strategies can secure recognition. Institutions provide small states with platforms, enabling them to shape debates on peacekeeping mandates, cyber governance, or regulatory frameworks. In these ways, small states appear capable of "punching above their weight" when their strategies are coherent and embedded.

Chapter 3 applied the realist critique. Here the limits of the five effects were exposed. Niches risk tokenism, agility falters without resources, hybrid leverage amplifies vulnerability, and soft power collapses when confronted by coercion. Legitimacy, though vital, is fragile when symbolic postures outpace credible delivery. Realist and neorealist theorists such as Waltz, Mearsheimer, and Gray remind us that the international system remains defined by structural inequalities. Small states may project influence at the margins, but their autonomy is always conditional on the shelter of larger powers and institutions.

Chapter 4 weighed both sides through comparative case studies. Ireland confirmed the duality: neutrality and peacekeeping provide visibility but conceal chronic underinvestment. Estonia's cyber role amplified its profile but depended entirely on NATO backing. Finland demonstrated the collapse of neutrality when existential threats emerged, while Denmark showed that agility derives from alignment with allies rather than independence. Qatar's mediation diplomacy illustrated the potential of soft power, but also its fragility under coercive pressure. The "surprising" cases further reinforced the central argument: Israel's influence rests on its unique military and alliance profile, North Korea's on nuclear deterrence absent legitimacy, and Iraq's collapse underscored the fatal consequences of illegitimacy. Taken together, these examples confirm that legitimacy is the decisive multiplier: it sustains influence when aligned with coherent policy, and its absence undermines even materially stronger states.

For Ireland, the implications are clear. Neutrality and peacekeeping remain valuable, but only when embedded in coherent political strategies. Domestic reform, such as those promised in the High Level Action Plan (2022), is necessary to sustain credibility externally. EU and UN membership provide legitimacy, but over-reliance risks hollowing out agency if not matched by credible delivery. Ireland's future strategy must therefore balance neutrality with deeper EU commitments, strengthen military credibility to support peacekeeping, and maintain legitimacy as its strategic anchor.

In conclusion, small states cannot unilaterally shape the international security environment, but they can influence it through legitimacy grounded in institutions, identity, and coherent strategy. Influence is conditional, relational, and fragile, but not absent. The case studies confirm that legitimacy reconciles realist scepticism with constructivist optimism: it is the resource that sustains small states in the international system. Future research should explore how legitimacy withstands pressure under deepening great-power rivalry and how surprising cases — such as Israel or North Korea — challenge the boundaries of small-state categorisation. For Ireland, the lesson is unambiguous: influence depends less on material power than on the careful cultivation of legitimacy, consistently embedded in credible policy and practice.
