

LITSAS, N. Spyridon. *Smart Instead of Small in International Relations Theory*. Switzerland: Springer, 2023. ISBN 9783031446368 (e-book).

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## **Being Small but Smart in the International Arena**

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Small states have attracted the attention of researchers for decades. Historians and political scientists have analysed small states within the context of international relations, delving into facets encompassing foreign affairs, security, power relations and antagonism, diplomatic engagements, as well as peace and conflicts. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the situation for small states was transformed. Soft power became the primary political tool for small states, replacing hard power. While there is no common definition regarding the parameters that distinguish small states from larger ones, there are some common criteria to be considered such as population size (typically below 1.5 million), geographical expanse, military capabilities, GDP, availability of natural resources and geopolitical positioning. Furthermore, the proposed definitions often overlook the relative political influence used by a state, thus failing to encapsulate the full spectrum of its capabilities. Small states have proven to have to have a strategic adaptation and resilience to counter and mitigate multilayered vulnerabilities. Small states have tailored their strategies based on their challenges. By leveraging their unique strengths and maximising their advantages, small states can indeed demonstrate exceptional smartness and competitiveness in the global arena.

In this book, Professor Litsas presents a groundbreaking examination of state behaviour in the contemporary international system. Except for the traditional small states theory, which suggests that small international actors exercise significant influence, the author introduces the concept of the smart states theory instead to better capture the complex dynamics in today's international arena. Through a synthesis of structural and neoclassical realism, he proposes the smart

states theory, which emphasises the importance of adaptability, tolerance, strategic decision-making and effective governance in navigating the challenges of the modern geopolitical landscape.

At the heart of the analysis lies the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a nation that epitomises the principles of smart statecraft. By delving into the UAE's transformation from the Trucial States to a modern and tech-oriented nation-state, the author illustrates how smart foreign policy, visionary leadership and inclusive domestic politics have propelled the country onto the global stage. Notably, the UAE's response to the recent pandemic serves as a testament to its resilience and forward-thinking approach to addressing multifaceted crises. Moreover, the author provides readers with a multilayered understanding of this pivotal actor in the Gulf region through a comprehensive examination of the UAE's history, politics, society and leadership. By intertwining theory with empirical analysis, the book not only advances the discourse in international relations but also offers invaluable insights into the complexities of contemporary statecraft. It offers a thoroughly researched, well-structured and thought-provoking analysis. What sets 'Smart Instead of Small' apart, is its ability to seamlessly blend theoretical rigour with real-world examples, making it accessible to scholars, policymakers and general readers alike. The authors' coherent writing style and accurate arguments make readers embrace a more nuanced understanding of state behaviour in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Dr. Litsas argues that a state's size does not necessarily determine its strength or vulnerability in the international arena. He suggests that the concept of 'smallness' should be considered qualitatively rather than quantitatively, with emphasis placed on how existential challenges threaten a state's survival. In addition, the book highlights the impact of asymmetric interdependency on a state's ability to navigate the international system, emphasising the importance of effective self-help policies. So, it highlights that the fundamentals for a state to be considered smart should include the following – the right to experience happiness which provides confidence to its people, the investment in new technologies to create a smart city, the boost of national unity, the provision of economic prosperity, the promotion of creative diplomacies, the adoption of progressive leadership and the enhancement of tolerance. The aforementioned factors can be considered a success for its state, especially the case study of the book, which is the UAE.

The book is divided into seven chapters. The initial chapter of the book delves into the theoretical underpinnings of the small states theory, examining its classification as either a comprehensive theoretical framework, a prevailing trend or merely a pragmatic assumption. Following this, the second chapter is dedicated to laying the groundwork for the formulation of a novel theoretical framework regarding smart states, which is based on an array of empirical illustrations, clarifying the distinguishing attributes of smart conduct within the realm of

international relations. It presents a series of criteria regarding smart power and offers necessary examples. In the third chapter, the narrative shifts to an examination of the historical course of the UAE, tracing its evolution from the era of the Trucial States in the Arab littoral of the Gulf to its eventual unification into a singular federal state. This historical progression is essential to analyse through the lens of smart ontology, positing that the UAE's consolidation process epitomises smart governance practices. Subsequently, the fourth chapter examines the leadership paradigms embodied by Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed Al Maktoum, which are mainly considered the epitomes of respective and smart leadership, while introducing modernising dimensions to prevailing leadership theories with smart orientation. The fifth chapter focuses on the intersection between positivism and smart state theory, particularly within the context of Emirati foreign policy in the regional and international arena. The sixth chapter diverges from the conventional discourse surrounding smart power, exploring the distinct role of resilience within the UAE's smart ontology. Finally, the seventh chapter undertakes a comprehensive analysis of the significant internal and external challenges facing the UAE. This entails an assessment of the existential risks posed by these challenges, alongside an exploration of adept methods to effectively mitigate them, thus embodying the essence of smart governance.

Professor Litsas manages to present complex ideas and theories accessibly without sacrificing historical, theoretical and analytical depth. He consciously adds his personal touch to the writing by avoiding exaggerations, by sticking to the facts and by providing evidence to support his claims. The book's structure allows readers to navigate its chapters independently and based on their interests. Likewise, the content of the book addresses a wide and diverse audience which are interested in comprehending the dynamic field of international relations of small and smart states and an analysis of the Gulf region. This book offers a valuable addition to the literature on international relations and international politics that shaped the contemporary landscape of the Gulf region. On the one hand, the author challenges existing paradigms and offers a fresh perspective on the active and influential role of small states in global politics, and on the other hand, he highlights the UAE as an epitome of smart statecraft.