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BOOK REVIEW

## Small States, Big Strides

REVIEW BY VINOD KUMAR PILLAI

*Independent Scholar*

Tommy Koh, editor. *Small States in a Big World: Size is not Destiny*. (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2022), 258 pages, S\$30.

While large countries like the United States, China, and lately India, power ahead, reaping the benefit of size, economies of scale, and the negotiating clout in world forums, the attention they get tends to blur the contributions and successes of smaller countries, and restricts the bargaining power and influence of small states on the global stage. This is why Singapore, a successful small state, took an initiative in 1992 to set up a Forum of Small States (FOSS), an informal, cross-regional grouping of 108 countries (with population below 10 million) at the United Nations headquarters in New York.

*Small States in a Big World: Size is not Destiny*, brought out on the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the FOSS, intends to showcase the success achieved during the last thirty years by small states from

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various regions of the world. The book consists of forty essays by forty-six writers from twenty-nine countries, and is edited by Tommy Koh, Singapore's Ambassador-at-large, also a lawyer, professor, and author, who has also contributed two essays for this volume. The book presents the success stories of small states, achieved against the backdrop of numerous problems that they face on many fronts. The World Bank, which has a Small States Forum consisting of fifty countries with populations less than 1.5 million, (much smaller than the FOSS limit of 10 million), lists some of the challenges that confront small states. The bank believes that "due to their small population and economic base, these countries are particularly vulnerable to exogenous shocks such as economic shocks, natural disasters, and climate change. With limited economic opportunities and significant migration, they often face capacity constraints" (The World Bank in Small States/Overview/Strategy, Para 1).<sup>1</sup>

The President of the Republic of Singapore, Halimah Yacob, too, acknowledges this reality when she writes in the foreword to this book that "Small states are inherently vulnerable to disruptions caused by global shocks, such as economic crises, climate change or pandemics" (p. 9). But, she adds, "At the same time, small states are not entirely without agency or advantage . . . There are many examples of small states that have benefited from flows of people, trade and investment to become vibrant hubs for talent, technology and innovation," adding that, "Many have excelled in the fields of education, science and technology, sports, art and culture, and gender issues, as the essays in this book demonstrate" (p. 9).

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<sup>1</sup> The World Bank in Small States/Overview/Strategy, Para 1, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/smallstates/overview#2>



This book, a compilation of such success stories, spells hope by offering accounts based on the experience of eminent authorities in different fields, from various countries and backgrounds. Twelve essays are contributed by writers from Singapore, while the remaining twenty-eight are authored by contributors from other small countries: Timor Leste, Lebanon, Estonia, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Rwanda, Switzerland, Bhutan, Costa Rica, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Jamaica, Jordan, Kuwait, Lichtenstein, Malta, Namibia, Norway, New Zealand,

Sweden, and Gambia. Most of the contributors are ambassadors/career diplomats with a sprinkling of judges, academics, journalists, and specialists in various fields.

The book is divided into three sections: “Small States and Security” (nine essays), “Small States and the Economy” (eight essays), and “Small States as Centres of Global Excellence” (twenty-three essays). The first section begins with an essay by Liz Thompson, Barbados’ Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary (with responsibility for Climate Change, Small Island, and former cabinet minister), focusing on the concerns, challenges, initiatives, and achievements of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), a significant one being in the area of climate change and on influencing negotiations at various conferences in this regard. The author writes, “Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan once described Barbados as being part of a group of small states that ‘punch above their weight.’ That is certainly true of the role that SIDS have played in the [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change] UNFCCC negotiations” (p. 18).

The next essay by Ibrahim Shaheeb, High Commissioner of the Maldives to Singapore outlines the various steps taken by the Maldives to deal with the real dangers and challenges of sea level rise, and makes a compelling case for all countries “to act now and honour their commitments to the climate agreements before Maldives is wiped off the map” (29). The other essays in this section focus on how small states have actively participated in international organizations, like the UN and World Trade Organisation, and have worked to resolve their boundary and other disputes by referring them to the International Court of Justice as well as direct negotiation and reconciliation, thereby



helping to foster international peace and the rule of law in international relations.

Judge Abdul G. Koroma, who served as a member of the International Court of Justice between 1994 and 2012, points out in his essay that the Republic of the Marshall Islands went to the International Court of Justice, accusing nine states (United States of America, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, China, the Russian Federation, Democratic Republic of Korea, France, India, Israel and Pakistan) of not fulfilling their commitment to nuclear disarmament. Although the Court finally decided not to proceed because of the absence of a dispute between the parties, the case brought international attention to nuclear non-proliferation, which is an issue of great global concern. The author writes, “On 11 November 2019, the Republic of The Gambia filed an application before the Court instituting proceedings against the Republic of the Union of Myanmar concerning its alleged violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, committed against members of the Rohingya group” (p. 32). Other examples cited are the peaceful settlement of the dispute between Malaysia and Singapore over the latter’s reclamation activities as well as the settlement of the dispute between Timor-Leste and Australia regarding demarcation of the maritime boundary.

The second section, “Small States and the Economy,” begins with an article by Ghassan Suleiman Amhaz, Director of Media Relations and External Communications in Dubai Airport, on the fascinating history of the Dubai International Airport, which has become the world’s busiest airport for international passengers, hosting 86.4 million passengers in 2019.



Early on, the airport operated for only about six hours and received three to four flights a day—mostly night flights that landed on the facility’s sand runway, lit by kerosene lamps manually lined up on both of its sides to help pilots manage night-time landings. Due to limited resources, Dubai quickly learnt to maximise its simple resources—sometimes the runway was used as a track for horse and camel racing, two popular sports in those days (p. 77).

There are essays on Estonia’s use of e-governance and digital technologies, Ireland’s economic transformation, the transition and rebuilding of the erstwhile Soviet republics of Latvia and Lithuania, the turnaround brought about by Rwanda after a terrible genocide, Singapore’s story of developing and operating one of the biggest ports in the world, and the secret of Switzerland’s economic development. Each story is different and holds valuable lessons for the other small states and, indeed, the rest of the world.

The third section, “Small States as Centres of Global Excellence,” presents examples of unique ideas developed and implemented by some of the small states. For example, a small landlocked country like Bhutan introduced the idea of Gross National Happiness more than fifty years ago and, through its successful implementation since then, influenced the United Nations to look at development in broader terms, leading to the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015. There are twenty-two other essays in this section that show that despite their size, small states can prove to be centers of global excellence. These essays focus on diverse areas, like the initiatives taken by Costa Rica in environmental protection and decarbonization, the secret of Denmark’s low levels of



corruption, the story of the world's first sovereign wealth fund created by the Kuwait Investment Authority, the adoption of knowledge and innovation as Lichtenstein's pathway to human development, and the making of the World's Best airline (Qatar Airways).

The essay on Iceland by Sigríður Ásdís Snævarr, former Ambassador of Iceland, tells us how that country "has kept its place as no.1 on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index for 12 consecutive years" (p. 156). This was not always so. Iceland was like any other country until 1975, when women started demonstrating for men to share in the work because women who went out to work were having to shoulder the double burden of the job and the demands of the home, while men continued to act like their fathers. The demonstrations forced men to start cooking, and pick up the children from school, and perform other domestic tasks. This was followed by the introduction of paternity leave, which was a game-changer. Finally, in 1980 Mrs. Vigdís Finnbogadóttir won the presidential elections of Iceland and stayed on in that position for sixteen years to provide inspirational leadership, that completed the transformation.

We get to know how Finland, one of the happiest countries in the world, created big waves in education, and how they managed to achieve it. The author, Antti Vänskä, Ambassador of Finland, writes that "a basic principle of Finnish education is that everyone has equal access to high-quality education and training, regardless of social or economic background. Education is free from preschool to university levels." Vänskä adds that "in compulsory education, meant for those aged from seven to 16, school meals, study materials and books and school transport are also free. In addition to education, the Finnish social welfare system provides free healthcare, and financial support is available to secondary school and university students" (p. 151).

An interesting essay by Geoff Watson, Associate Professor of History at Massey University, New Zealand, and Greg Ryan, Professor of History at Lincoln University, New Zealand, draws our attention to how a geographically isolated New Zealand made spectacular achievements in sports over an extended period of time. The authors write, “At various times, New Zealanders and their teams have been world champions in many sports, including athletics, rowing, horseracing, motor racing, wood chopping, triathlon, golf and boxing, and its athletes have won 120 medals at the Olympic Games. How and why has this occurred?” The authors explain, “The short answer, it will be argued here, is that historically, New Zealanders have placed a high value on sporting success: have had role models of sporting excellence from an early stage and, despite their country’s geographical isolation, have been integrated into global sporting networks for more than 150 years” (p. 202). In a related essay on small countries winning medals at the Olympic Games, Tommy Koh writes, “I was surprised to discover that 25 small countries and territories had won a total of 113 medals in Tokyo” (p. 237). The author goes on to summarize what we can learn from the successful medal-winning countries in terms of the measures that he feels Singapore should adopt. “First, we should have an ecosystem which systematically spots talent among our students. Second, we should offer talented students, if they are interested, a programme of training, coaching and mentoring, for free. Third, our society must truly value excellence in sports and make it possible financially for talented athletes to pursue their passions.” Koh adds, “We must also develop a culture of supporting our athletes, in good times and in bad times” (p. 239).

An essay on racial and religious harmony by Mohammad Alami Musa, Ambassador of Singapore (non-resident) to Algeria, and Paul





Hedges, Associate Professor of Interreligious Relations at Nanyang Technological University, explains that Singapore achieved social harmony despite its ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity because its leaders realized early on that majoritarian politics would be disastrous. “Therefore, embracing multiculturalism was deliberate, reflected in the profound words of Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore’s founding Prime Minister: ‘This is not a Malay nation; this is not a Chinese nation; this is not an Indian nation. Everyone will have his place, equal: language, culture, religion.’” (p. 213).

An essay on vaccine multilateralism by Umej Bhatia, Ambassador of Singapore to the United Nations, and Daniel Ng, First Secretary at the Singapore Permanent Mission to the UN in Geneva, argues that Singapore took the lead in steering the discourse away from vaccine diplomacy and vaccine nationalism towards vaccine multilateralism. The authors explain, “As early as June 2020, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong urged countries to forge partnerships under the rubric of what he termed ‘Vaccine Multilateralism,’ in his speech to the Global Vaccine Summit hosted by the United Kingdom” (p. 241). This was followed up by Singapore’s championing and supporting global initiatives in setting up the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator and the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) facility.

An essay by Niclas Kvarnström, Ambassador of Sweden to Singapore on the Nobel Prize and Sweden’s Innovation Leadership shows that Sweden was a very poor country in the nineteenth century but has since then become a prosperous symbol of innovation and entrepreneurship, with many globally recognized corporations like IKEA, H&M, Volvo, ABB, SKF, Atlas Copco, Saab, Ericsson, Hexagon, and AstraZeneca and, of course, the Nobel Prize that symbolizes the

same spirit of innovation. It ranked 7th in the Global Innovation Index 2020. Kvarnström writes, “I believe our constant determination to look towards the future and to be early adopters and solution finders have helped us get there. The Nobel Prize inspires us as a symbol both of our entrepreneurship and of our global citizenship” (p. 250).

In the book, the threats faced by small states from larger, more powerful countries are underplayed because the overall theme and mood of the essays is inspirational and celebratory. This is partly because in an interdependent, intertwined world, the equality of all states, whether big or small, is preserved in the United Nations framework, and the application of international rule of law. But then, any assault on the rule of law does pose a danger to small states, as discussed by Tommy Koh, in the context of Russia’s earlier annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing war on Ukraine. Koh argues, “If Russia were to succeed, it will set a very bad precedent for the world. It will undermine the rule of law and may encourage other powerful countries to emulate its example” (p. 60).

The book covers a large number of topics with a broad sweep of the past thirty years, focusing on the challenges and success stories of small states. It makes it an engaging read for the general reader and for those interested in international relations, developmental economics, and related areas. For serious students there are no comparable scholarly books in existence. A few scholarly books in this area examine a few small states and/or certain aspects of their functioning. For example, *Small States in World Politics: Explaining Foreign Policy Behaviour*, edited by Jeanne A. K. Hey (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003), has ten essays analyzing the foreign policy of Paraguay, the Caribbean states, Panama, Luxembourg, Austria, Gambia, Jordan, and Laos. The number of countries/regions covered are only eight, and more



importantly the study is limited to foreign policy. Another book, *Small Island Developing States: Vulnerability and Resilience under Climate Change*, edited by Stefano Monaco, et al (Springer Nature, 2021), explores how vulnerable and resilient communities from small island developing states are affected by climate change. Another study, *Small States in a Legal World*, edited by Petra Butler, et al (Springer Nature 2021), analyzes legal issues with particular focus on small states, and yet another, *Small States and the New Security Environment* edited by Anne-Marie Brady et al (Springer Nature 2021), examines the security, defence and foreign policy choices, as well as challenges of small states in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and its small partner states in the new security environment. Thus, the existing scholarly books are few and limited to a few aspects with limited coverage.

*Small States in a Big World* is, therefore, a unique, valuable resource for the general reader interested in getting an overview of the fascinating stories of small states, and the brilliant successes notched by some of them in various sectors, as well as aspects of nation-building, ranging from airports to sports. Their contribution to various global causes like climate change, multilateral negotiations, and sustainable development goals has clearly enabled them to punch above their weight. For the serious scholar, the book has numerous stories that merit further scholarly research and can therefore be a valuable starting point.

### ***Note on the Reviewer***

Vinod Kumar Pillai is an independent scholar with interest in literary fiction, development studies, and popular science. He regularly reviews books for *Rising Asia Journal*. He is a consultant trainer for over eight years, training employees in the banking and financial services sector.

He delivers training, designs and develops training content, and contributes as a domain expert in developing content for e-learning and bank manuals. He graduated in Agricultural Sciences, and worked for over thirty years in banking, specializing in industrial credit, training, behavioral science, and counseling. Besides literary fiction, development studies, popular science and training, he devotes time to Cinema, Jyotish, podcasting, and stock photography. He is an occasional cook and lives in Hyderabad, India, with his wife and son.

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