



REVIEW ESSAY

All Powers Great and Small

Why Bigger Isn't Always Better in Geopolitics

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In This Review



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The borders that carve the world into today's states may seem indelible, but expand the time frame, and the lines become much more fluid. It is hard to find an _____ international boundary today that has not shifted in the last two centuries. States are born and disappear; great powers swell, shrink, and vanish. In 1910, roughly 80 percent of the planet belonged to just a handful of European empires—and much of the rest lay in the possession of the Ottoman and Qing dynasties. But world wars and decolonization saw the rise of many new and often quite small nation-states. The United Nations had 51 members when it was formed in 1945; it has 193 now. Most of these additions are old nations but new states that emerged from empires, including former European colonies in Asia and erstwhile Soviet republics. In character and scale, these states and the international system they compose bear little resemblance to the vast empires that preceded them for most of recorded history. The median population of the world's countries today is 8.5 million—about the size of Switzerland's.

And yet it is premature to imagine that the habits and thinking characteristic of that era of empires have also disappeared. Numerous states came into being after World War II, but their creation happened in parallel with another trend: the growth of what the political

scientist Alasdair Roberts calls “superstates.” In *Superstates: Empires of the Twenty-First Century*, Roberts charts the rise of what he considers the biggest polities in the world today—China, India, the United States, and the European Union. By 2050, 40 percent of all people will live in those four entities. They may not be the empires of yore; for one thing, these superstates have a far greater responsibility for the welfare of their citizens than empires ever had. But they share many imperial challenges—namely, how to manage vast, diverse, and often multinational populations within the rubric of a single political entity. Each of these superstates addresses the task in different ways. But their size, economic heft, and internal complexity separate them from what Roberts terms “lesser states,” and these factors fundamentally shape geopolitics today. “The international order that is emerging in the twenty-first century,” Roberts writes, “is distinguished by dramatic differences in the scale of states.” In his view, it’s a superstate world, and everybody else just lives in it.

This perspective may be familiar to many in Western capitals, where analysts and policymakers often fixate on the U.S. rivalry with China and the specter of great-power competition. But most people do not live in superstates, and they have their own worldviews and ambitions. “The world has never been structured to facilitate the survival of small states,” Armen Sarkissian notes in *The Small States Club: How Small Smart States Can Save the World*, “and treating them as disposable has been the norm through most of recent history.” And yet that has not stopped many smaller countries from thriving. In addition to being a professor of theoretical physics and a tech entrepreneur, Sarkissian served as prime minister (1996–97) and president (2018–22) of Armenia. He tours a succession of such countries, including Armenia, to determine how small states can succeed in a world that so often rewards size. With an emphasis on both technological and technocratic savvy, he is keen to show that smallness can be a boon and not a weakness on the international stage.

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Sarkissian’s book offers a corrective to the pervasive bias in favor of big states. For his part, Roberts reminds readers of the intrinsic fragility of superstates and the tremendous governance challenges they face. Taken together, these books reveal the complexity of an

international system in great flux. Small states have agency in their dealings with the large ones, and the supposed greatness of major powers obscures the strains and pressures roiling within. Of course, superstates shape international affairs more fundamentally than smaller ones. But the growing great-power rivalry that threatens global peace and prosperity also creates the space for small and middle powers to build influence and thrive.

TOO BIG NOT TO FAIL?

For much of recorded human history, empires were the dominant form of political organization. These states often exercised loose forms of control over their inhabitants and rarely mapped onto any particular nation—indeed, most empires ruled over diverse populations that could not be described by a single ethnic or linguistic identity. They were top-down affairs, the enterprise of an individual leader, dynastic clan, or ruling class, not the expression of the will of a people. As nation-states began to emerge in the nineteenth century, thinkers debated the merits of size. The German economist Friedrich List argued that small states would struggle to prosper and compete with imperial powers and other larger states. The British liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill, meanwhile, argued that size and diversity were the enemies of democracy: “Free institutions are next to impossible in a country made of different nationalities.”

Such propositions would be continually tested in the twentieth century. After World War I, and more definitively after World War II, a new international architecture emerged that oversaw the dismantling of old empires and the rise of a world of nation-states. Both Roberts and Sarkissian explain the emergence and survival of so many smaller countries in this period by pointing to the establishment of international institutions, such as the United Nations, along with the consolidation of norms that upheld national sovereignty and discouraged territorial invasion. Globalization, technological advances, and the lowering of commercial barriers also allowed otherwise peripheral countries to stake a greater position in the global economy.

At the same time, some big countries got bigger. The Soviet Union might have collapsed in 1991 (Roberts does not consider its shriveled successor, Russia, to be a superstate), but in

quasi-imperial fashion, China, India, the United States, and the European Union have grown to rule over enormous, complex societies and territories. Roberts acknowledges that these modern states are different from prior empires in that they are beholden to their citizens. Superstates, he writes, are “hybrid polities, governing vast territories and diverse populations, and having important features of both empires and states.” They are similar to empires in having to hold diverse communities together over a vast span of territory. But they have technologies of control, such as the Internet and advanced surveillance tools, that empires lacked. Superstates must also meet welfare and human rights demands from subjects who are now concentrated in cities, where they can better organize to exert pressure on governments than could the largely dispersed, rural populations of previous centuries.



Leaders of Oceania's small island states at the White House in Washington, D.C., September 2022

Jonathan Ernst / Reuters

Roberts's principal concern is the durability of these superstates. The implicit assumption is that the failure or disintegration of any of these superstates would generate enormous instability and conflict. The United States is the oldest of the four, having lasted so far around 250 years. But there is no compelling reason to think that it will survive another 250 years or that superstates will be more robust in general than the empires that preceded

them. Superstates are vulnerable to a host of threats: external attack, rebellion, climate change, disease, growing internal disparities, shifts in economic competitiveness, and uneven technological development. Each of these issues is accentuated in superstates by their internal diversity and divisions over policy, since they lack the single-minded focus and clear policy goals of small states. “Never in history,” Roberts writes, “have we constructed polities that carry such heavy burdens.” He offers an insightful account of superstates’ internal governance and a thoughtful exploration of their similarities in diversity, fragility, leadership structures, and ideology.

In his detailed examination of the governance of each of the four superstates, Roberts comes to some counterintuitive conclusions. For one, he sees the temptation to centralize as having the unintended consequence of weakening empires and superstates. The Soviet Union is a prime example of brittleness caused by overcentralization. By contrast, he sees the EU’s model of cohesion without coercion, where the union functions by consensus and lacks the power to enforce its decisions on its members, as a strength and a consistently underestimated source of its resilience. Roberts thus sees the EU as more durable than the other superstates.

It’s not entirely clear, however, that these states are all that different from recent empires. The British Empire, for instance, was probably much more like a modern superstate than ancient Mesopotamian empires such as Akkad and Sumer. The United States today has a population not dissimilar to that of the British Empire at its height. The American ideal of being “a city on a hill,” Chinese leader Xi Jinping’s “China dream” of a world centered on Beijing, or Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s claim to have become a Vishwa Guru (“world teacher”) are modern iterations of the self-important “civilizing missions” of earlier empires. And thanks to technology and globalization, borders remain porous as they did in the era of empires, especially for small states and even for superstates. Those forces continue to test the assumptions attached to the idea of the Westphalian state—that countries have absolute sovereignty, enforce hard borders, have citizens who are loyal only to them, and maintain a monopoly of violence. Today, the difference between empire and superstate is more a matter of degree than of kind. As the historian Charles Maier and others have argued, empires never quite vanished; they just shifted shape.

Sarkissian, in stark contrast to Roberts, is interested in the travails of smallness, not those of bigness. His persuasive and fluent book is part reminiscence, part case for the significance of small states, and part advocacy for Armenia. It is steeped in the experiences of a man whose life was shaped by the disintegration of the Soviet Union. “I write this book from a unique vantage point,” he notes, “that of someone who was born and raised in a seemingly indestructible superpower and went on to steer the course of an apparently untenable small state.”

His reasonable definition of a small state is one that is “small in size and population (say up to or under 15 million).” In 2024, 164 of the world’s 237 states met those criteria, a cohort, incidentally, that excludes most East, South, and Southeast Asian states. Half the world’s states have less territory than Portugal, and there are now 41 UN member states that are microstates with a population of less than a million. (At the end of World War II, there were only two such states, Iceland and Luxembourg.)

Sarkissian argues that small states’ “survival can scarcely be taken for granted in an increasingly multipolar world whose order, institutions, and norms are being torpedoed by the velocity of political, geopolitical, social, and technological transformations.” The pace of change creates new challenges, particularly for small states. With the sharks of large states lunging at one another across the world, can the minnows do more than hide in the reefs? Sarkissian thinks so, and he examines the experience of ten successful small states.

He explores the records of Botswana, Estonia, Ireland, Israel, Jordan, Qatar, Singapore, Switzerland, and the United Arab Emirates, ending with his own Armenia. Many of these countries have indeed outperformed the seeming impediment of their size, leveraging their locations, local talent, ingenuity, natural resources, and other advantages to build dynamic economies and often play influential roles in regional geopolitics. As he points out, it was the Armenian quest for self-determination that helped initiate the unraveling of the Soviet Union.

Sarkissian admires Botswana for its economic prudence and efficient governance, Singapore for aggressively becoming an economic force and diplomatic troubleshooter, and Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, the founder of the UAE, for wrangling the different emirates into a single entity. In each case, these small states set the stage for success that was hardly

preordained or even predicted. Sarkissian finds that successful policy is grounded in a realistic and practical understanding of the international and regional situation and a visionary leader's single-minded pursuit of policy goals.

The supposed greatness of major powers obscures the strains and pressures roiling within.

But the sample dictates the results; by choosing these states, he has selected cases of success, which, in truth, represent the exception rather than the norm among small states. These examples are surely instructive on their own, but the exclusion of so many other countries that have fared more poorly prevents the reader from learning from failure as well as triumph. It is unclear whether the experience of these exceptional states is replicable, transferable, or scalable.

Sarkissian has nary a harsh word to say about all but one of these small states. The exception is Armenia, which he criticizes sharply for having squandered the opportunity of the 1994 cease-fire with Azerbaijan by failing to convert victory into lasting peace. That failure has produced disastrous results in recent years as a stronger Azerbaijan has seized the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and effectively expelled its Armenian residents. Indeed, there surely is a warning here of the risks of geopolitical irrelevance; Armenia's smallness left it isolated and unable to fend off local adversaries and threats.

For Sarkissian, all happy small states are alike. Their policies boast a clear national vision that steers the state. He does not mention that all his examples of smart small states are firmly tied to the West or that their closeness to the West brought economic advantages and access that they were clever enough to use. He lists four ingredients as crucial to their success and as determining their fate: a strong foundation of national identity, robust and savvy leadership, an articulated vision for their country, and methodical strategic planning. In addition, a coherent state structure and an internal balance of power with strong institutions and democracy, as in the case of Israel, can also help small states succeed.

Sarkissian is a techno-optimist, seeing the march of science and technology as enabling small states to overcome the limitations imposed by geography, power politics, and traditional geopolitics, thus disrupting the dominance of large states. As globalization has moved from the physical to the virtual realm, small states have found it even easier to

reconfigure or bypass the rules. Power no longer resides solely in the large players; it resides in small states, too. For instance, Sarkissian ascribes Singapore's success to its shift to research and development after 1986, culminating in the 1991 strategic plan that moved Singapore out of labor-intensive manufacturing to an economy focused on knowledge. Israel's investment in education and technology has helped keep it safe from multiple enemies. The dominance of large states depended on their military, economic, and technological power. Now, small states are gaining leverage in the economic and technological realms using easily available communications technology and surveillance systems and drones in both civilian and military contexts. Seven of the top ten countries in the Bloomberg Innovator Index, which measures the quality of innovation in a particular economy, are small states. An eighth, the Netherlands, only just exceeds the population cutoff. Sarkissian sees artificial intelligence as leveling the playing field—creating a sort of parity between big and small states and making private companies such as Google and individual tycoons such as Elon Musk into meaningful actors.

A practical politician, Sarkissian sees that the power of small states lies in using regional balances to ensure their survival, in building up their economies and militaries to deter adversaries, and in enhancing their attractiveness to make others work with them. Small states, he insists, can prosper and offer their citizens peace and stability even in an era of great-power competition and widening geopolitical fault lines.

THE PROBLEMS OF SIZE

But small states, in Sarkissian's view, aren't just fertile ground for technocratic achievement. They can play an almost moral role in the international system. "Large states desire dominance," he writes. "Small states seek stability." He advocates a "small states club," a body that would convene these countries, seek to advance their interests, and, invariably, be an evangelist for amity among all countries since peace is the condition of their survival. Such a body could help rescue the world from its most extreme instincts. But this assumption that small states always act rationally and pursue the greater good is belied by the fact that more small states have failed than succeeded in building themselves economically and militarily. Sarkissian is guilty of a touch of romanticism in his thinking

about small states; these countries are hardly immune to internal strife or averse to making war, and they often draw great powers into their quarrels.

Yet both Sarkissian and Roberts seem to understand the emergence and survival of small states as evidence of a less bloody and more ordered world. After 1950, attitudes toward the legitimacy of war changed radically and found expression in international law and norms. This belief may have been popular in the West, and it is an offshoot of the common Western conceit that the Cold War was largely peaceful. But it ignores the truth that in its killing fields, which were largely in maritime Asia, 1,200 people were killed every day of the Cold War. Whether or not one agrees with the historian Charles Tilly that “war made the state, and the state made war,” it could be argued that the creation of small states served the Cold War needs of great powers and superpowers. The United States and the Soviet Union assisted decolonization and the breakup of the older European empires in the 1950s and 1960s at least in part because it enabled them to find clients and to continue controlling international affairs while waging war where it suited them, away from their homelands.

Today, great-power rivalry in a world between orders has altered the context in which big and small states operate. Great-power competition offers smaller states the chance to hedge and play bigger states off against one another. But the turn away from globalization, on which so many small states depend, could have damaging consequences. All states are affected by the lack of a settled international order, the resulting ineffectiveness of the multilateral system, and the weakening of post-World War II norms, but these trends hit small states hardest. Indeed, the current inchoate order has seen—contrary to the authors’ view—an increasing reliance on force and the militarization of the foreign policy of larger states in the international system.

If big states suffer problems of cohesion, small states suffer the consequences of weakness. The recent record shows that large states can often be frustrated in imposing their will on smaller ones—see Russian experiences in Ukraine and the U.S. record in Afghanistan. Equally, small states, such as Armenia, can struggle because of their smallness, losing territory to more powerful adversaries. But irrespective of size, today’s global disorder affects all states, as both big and small find it harder to create the outcomes they desire. 🌐

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