

BOOK REVIEW

**Baldur THORHALLSSON (ed.), Small States
and Shelter Theory:
Iceland's External Affairs
(Routledge, 2019)**

Yeliz KULALI MARTIN

Assistant Professor, Galatasaray University, Department of International
Relations, İstanbul

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E-mail: uidergisi@gmail.com

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Small States and Shelter Theory: Iceland's External Affairs

Baldur THORHALLSSON (ed.)

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Yeliz KULALI MARTIN

*Assistant Professor, Galatasaray University, Department of International Relations, İstanbul
E-mail: ykulali@gsu.edu.tr
Orcid: 0000-0003-1548-029X*

2020's international system, which according to John Mearsheimer "shifts from unipolarity to multipolarity,"¹ is more welcoming for small states and small state studies. In this environment where the number of actors is growing, small states have a stronger voice through the alliances they make, the projects they create or the roles they play in international organisations.

The book named "*Small States and Shelter Theory: Iceland's External Affairs*", analyses the current foreign policy decision-making processes of small states as system actors, with the purpose of adding a new theory to the International Relations (IR) discipline. *Shelter theory*, is presented as an alternative to the numerous IR theories explaining the behaviours of small states and this concept was initially introduced by the editor of the book, Baldur Thorhallsson, in 2010.²

The book has three main parts: the theoretical framework, the case study and the prospective. It is well structured and easy to read even if the reader is not from the IR discipline. The first part explains the small states' criteria in the IR discipline as well as the foreign policy choices; and continues with shelter theory that brings a new insight to said choices. If explained briefly, the theory is based on small states with fragile structure and limited resources, accepting big states or international organisations as shelter, that is to say, as protector. (p.1). The areas covered by this protection are divided in three; political, economic and societal protection. The main question brought to light by Thorhallsson in this study is; small states being disadvantaged by their nature. What is the most logical foreign policy behaviour for them in order to survive or to be visible in the system? In this perspective, the healthiest option according to Thorhallsson is accepting other actors as shelters in areas where self-resources are insufficient. Thorhallsson being from Iceland, uses his country as a case study and lists Iceland's main current shelters from independence as the

- 1 John J.Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order", *International Security*, Vol.43, No 4, 2019, p. 8.
- 2 Baldur Thorhallsson, "The Icelandic Crash and Its Consequences: A Small State Without Economic and Political Shelter", Robert Steinmetz and Anders Wivel (Eds.) *Small States in Europe: Challenges and Opportunities*, Aldershot, Ashgate Publishing, 2010, pp.137-213.

USA, Nordic Cooperation and the EU. The last part - concluding remarks, examines shelter options for Iceland such as Russia, China, and Arctic Council as well as, bringing attention to the applicability of the theory to other small states with the questions “*When – How – Why do States seek Shelter?*”

With this book Thorhallsson brings dynamism to small state studies which remain in the background of IR. It also adds a new theory to classical IR theories, which do not sufficiently explain the behaviours of small states in the author’s words (p.18). At this point, it’s worth mentioning that shelter theory can potentially be mistaken for the ‘bandwagoning’ concept born from classic alliance theory. In the discipline of IR bandwagoning is simply explained as “aligning with the most powerful or threatening actors.”³ It is rather difficult to argue whether a small state establishes an alliance in order to obtain support or because it considers said state as a threat. Following the example of the Iceland-China economic rapprochement mentioned by Thorhallsson, it is possible to wonder if it is due to Iceland’s need of shelter or if China’s rise, especially in the Arctic zone, is seen as a future threat by this small state. While this isn’t the case for international organisations considered as shelters, the situation can be more problematic concerning big state/small state alliances.

Without a doubt, admitting having limited resources in shelter dimensions, will be a subject of debate for any state. On the other hand, Thorhallsson, considers small states to be naturally disadvantaged; however, this opinion does not automatically translate into the idea of a ‘weak state’. It is also worth noting that Thorhallsson’s solution to this disadvantaging situation does not have a pejorative connotation. The aim of the alliance established with protecting actors is obtaining ‘support’ especially in times of crisis, as well as ‘surviving and prospering’ in the system. It does not result in being ‘dependent’ to said actors.

On the other hand, needing an actor in order to survive does not naturally create a dependency relation? As Wivel and Ingebritsen also state in the conclusion, one of the theory’s arguable component is the risk for shelters provided in order to “survive and prosper” to transform into an “influence or dependency relationship” (p.210). In other words, this alliance built on ‘good’ intentions at the beginning, can result in an over-dependency to the sheltering organisations or big states. This dependency in its turn can result in limited foreign policy actions for the small states in question. Moreover, this relationship built for prospering can cause stagnation in the concerned areas.

In addition to the above-mentioned theory, “the price of shelter must not be higher than the gains the small states receive” (p.49) argument cited by Thorhallsson is quite impossible from a realistic point of view. It is very difficult to assess the gains and losses resulting from shelter theory which requires a good balance policy. Especially in terms of societal shelter this creates the need for a sociological debate.

I think that one of the contributions of the theory to the literature is, bringing the balance of power in international system in which the shelter relation is established to light. In the framework of the theory, the rise and fall of global powers chosen as shelters such as the USA, Great-Britain, China, and Russia is observed. The same is valid for international organisations like NATO and the EU. In other words, the conjuncture in which the theory is applied allows one to determine which actors are strong, active, or influent in political, economic and military areas. The same is true for declining

3 Baldur Thorhallsson and Sverrir Steinsson, “Small States Foreign Policy”, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 2017, p.8.

actors. While Thorhallsson's aim is explaining the behaviour of small states, we can easily note that the theory in fact gives information about all actors' actions in the overall system and contributes to a general foreign policy analysis.

Overall, the contributions of the book, especially to small states studies is undeniable and shelter theory has been backed by many articles by Thorhallsson with case studies like Denmark, Cuba, Singapore, Scotland etc.⁴ Small states studies are based on relativism by nature (p.2) and so a generalisation about the foreign policy behaviours of these states is also relative. However, when more regional cases are provided, I think that the theory will contribute positively to the literature in terms of interpretation of the foreign affairs behaviours of states. Moreover, as mentioned above, as it is applied in the system analysis level, the theory, has the potential to be one of the classical alliance theories that explain not only the behaviour of small states but also the behaviour of the state actor in the system in general. So, the book is a must-read for all researchers in the IR discipline, especially for those who work on IR theories and foreign policy analysis.

4 <https://uni.hi.is/baldurt/publications/academic-papers/> Accessed 09.11.2022.