The scale of small states such as Singapore, Israel, and Estonia means they face many emerging issues as acute threats. Consequently, their decisive solutions serve as inspiration to the rest of the world. Therefore, we must look at small states to find solutions for issues that many other countries may face tomorrow.

Our observations

- When Singapore faced the acute threat of economic backwardness after gaining independence in 1965, the city-state radically opened up its economy. In 1978, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, inspired by his visit to Singapore, reformed the Chinese economy by opening up to foreign enterprise.
- For decades, the United Arab Emirates have worked to diversify their economy away from exclusive reliance on oil revenues. Last year, Saudi Arabia launched plans to diversify its economy.
- In 2007, Estonia faced the acute threat of cyberattacks launched from Russia. In reaction, Estonia launched initiatives to become one of the most digitally advanced societies in the world, inspiring countries all over the world.
- In Israel, bloody Palestinian uprisings, wars in Gaza, and terror attacks have triggered a generational shift. The left wing, which advocates 'land-for-peace' deals with the Palestinians, has been decimated. 13% of Israeli youth and 16% of Israeli Jews define themselves as left-wing. The left wing is severely weakened in Europe as well while terror attacks increase military presence on the streets of London, Berlin, and Paris.
The small scale of small states means that emerging issues appear as acute threats, but their small scale also enables them to react more decisively than larger countries. Emerging issues, such as economic competitiveness, cyber-threats, or terrorism, take on an existential dimension in small states as they shake up the entire population. Indeed, nearly all Israelis feel threatened when violence intensifies in Palestinian territories, and the entire Estonian population felt threatened by the 2007 cyberattacks. Moreover, the small scale of these states enables them to act decisively. Policy is rolled out quickly in the small territories of Singapore and Israel. Most importantly, the recurrence of acute threats creates a high civil and political willingness to act decisively. In Israel, Netanyahu’s Likud remains highly popular due to its emphasis on national security policy. It is based on a strong military force in which nearly all Israelis serve. In Singapore, trust in the technocratic elite of the People’s Action Party remains high, despite the fact that there has never been a different party in government. Indeed, faced with acute threats, the citizenry and the political class of small states, for example in cities, are more open to a decisive policy and radical experiments.

Since acute threats in small states emerge more slowly in other countries, small states serve as lenses to grasp the future of other countries. The economic reform and opening up of Singapore after 1965 reflected the future of China after 1978, and the diversification of the UAE economy reflects the desired future of Saudi Arabia. However, small states do not only serve as inspiration. In fact, acute threats accelerate socio-cultural development. Therefore, by studying small states, we could anticipate how emerging issues will develop in other countries. Before Europe was shocked by a wave of terror and migration that has transformed the European politics and security, Israel had already become a dominant right-wing country with an intense security policy. Similarly, the shock of sophisticated cyberattacks in Estonia reflects a cyber-threat which virtually all countries face today. Therefore, for instance, as Singapore becomes a more transparent state by experimenting with democratic platforms due to the pressure of a well-educated high-income citizenry, we could expect the Chinese Communist Party to move in the same direction. All in all, small states create solutions for the issues of tomorrow, serve as inspiration, and in relation to emerging issues, they provide a lens to understand the future of other countries.

Implications

- The decisive policy of small states facing acute threats creates strong foundations for powerful national images, including industrial spin-offs. The Netherlands, faced with the acute threat of a rising sea, has become a global leader in water engineering. Israel, faced with the acute threat of hostile neighbors, has become a global leader in defense and cybersecurity.

- The dynamics of small states also apply to cities. The scale of cities and their acute encounter with issues such as climate change and pollution means that solutions will be more radical and experimental.