Interview – Anders Wivel

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Anders Wivel is Professor of International Relations in the Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen. He has published widely on small state foreign policy, European and international order and peaceful change, and power politics and IR realism. Together with Revecca Pedi, University of Macedonia, he is the chair of the European International Studies Association (EISA) standing section on 'Small States in World Politics'. His academic articles have been published in journals such as *International Affairs*, *International Studies Review*, *International Relations*, *European Journal of International Security*, *Ethics and International Affairs* and *European Security*. His most recent books are *International Organizations and Peaceful Change in World Politics* (co-edited with T.V. Paul and Kai He, Cambridge University Press, 2025), *Polarity in International Relations: Past, Present, Future* (co-edited with Nina Græger, Bertel Heurlin and Ole Wæver, Palgrave, 2022), *Oxford Handbook of Peaceful Change in international relations* (co-edited with T.V. Paul, Deborah W. Larson, Harold Trinkunas and Ralf Emmers, Oxford University Press 2021), and *Handbook on the Politics of Small States* (co-edited with Godfrey Baldacchino, Edward Elgar, 2020).

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I am not always sure which field I am in, as I have a keen interest in both regional and international orders and foreign policy analysis, and have done purely theoretical work, empirical analysis and applied policy-oriented work. However, I think what keeps it all together – at least in my head – is an interest in the challenges and opportunities of small states in world politics. Developments in this field have traditionally been inhibited by an unhelpful division of labour between 'theorizers' – typically from Anglo-Saxon universities, writing in English, and publishing in international academic journals and books – and 'analyzers' – often country and area specialists with a deep knowledge of one state or states in a particular region, but often publishing in their native language to local audiences. Fortunately, this division of labour is now being challenged by an increasing number of scholars aiming for cross-fertilization between theoretical innovation and deep knowledge of political practices. The work of scholars such as Annika Björkdahl, Baldur Thorhallsson, Diana Panke, Iver B. Neumann, Jack Corbett, Tom Long and Godfrey Baldacchino is exemplary in this development, but many more are contributing, not least since the publication of the journal Small States and Territories, which has successfully created a meeting place for these discussions and a springboard for bringing the discussions into more generalist IR journals.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

My understanding of the world is shaped by, on the one hand, an interest in the practice of foreign policy, mainly the foreign policy of small states, and how this practice is shaping and being shaped by regional and international orders, and on the other hand, the study of international relations, and in particular, how to understand the nature and impact of power. For me, the one does not make much sense without the other as both theory and practice continue to inform my thinking, and I find it difficult to contribute meaningfully to theory development without knowledge of practice and impossible to make sense of practice without theory.

My interest in the practice and history of Danish and Scandinavian foreign policy and European and global orders left me somewhat puzzled and dissatisfied with the 'explanatory silos' of the IR discipline seeking to explain the world in

terms of either material power or identity construction, either international structure or domestic politics etc. The foreign policy history of small states is typically a history of how the challenges of power asymmetry impact both foreign policy choices and domestic society, but how small states respond to the challenges is not only a function of relative power, but as much, often even more, a result of foreign policy role expectations and ontological security concerns mirroring the decision-makers' and populations constructions of past and present.

To make sense of this I find neoclassical realism – in particular, "Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics" by Norrin Ripsman, Steven Lobell and Jeffrey Taliaferro – a useful starting point. However, I view neoclassical realism not so much as a theory as a template for multi-factor and multi-level foreign policy analysis beginning form international structure.

My inspiration for working with neoclassical realism in this way comes from three different sources influencing me on different career stages. Since mu first years as a university student, I have been fascinated by the realist IR tradition. Hans Morgenthau's Scientific Man versus Power Politics and Arnold Wolfer's Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics continue to inspire me, because they are so good at bringing out the tensions and dilemmas of both navigating in a world of power politics and studying this world. Other early influences include Barry Buzan's People, State and Fear, Buzan's subsequent work with Richard Little and Barry Jones on The Logic of Anarchy, Kenneth Waltz's Theory of International Politics and Stephen Walt's The Origins of Alliances – in particular, I liked Buzan's and Walt's willingness to simultaneously acknowledge and challenge neorealist assumptions. Subsequently, working at the University of Copenhagen and being part of the vibrant IR research environment at the Department of Political Science, I increasingly came to appreciate the value of constructivism, and, in particular, the Copenhagen School. For me, discourse and identity construction are not so much alternatives to my realist approach as something we need to include, if we are to understand how power is translated into foreign policy. Finally, in recent years, working with T.V. Paul on soft balancing, peaceful change and international institutions, I have come to accept, and even appreciate, that our understanding of the world may not always fit neatly into theoretical boxes.

On a personal level, T.V. Paul and Ole Wæver are the two most important influences on how I understand the IR discipline and my own role in it. Ole and T.V. are creative and non-dogmatic thinkers. They are able and willing to think beyond conventional theoretical paradigms and to deconstruct and reconstruct how we think about international relations. They care about the IR discipline as a community and show how we can include early career researchers in this community in a way that respects the individual as well as our shared commitment to vigorous debates and bold assumptions. I think this is crucial for the continuous development of a creative and critical social science.

What role do personal qualities, such as charisma, play in foreign policy?

To me, charisma is less of a personal quality and more of a communicative practice. In an article published in International Affairs, Caroline Grøn and I argue that foreign policy is a vital link between domestic and international society. However, much too often foreign policy decisionmakers have neglected to communicate this link to domestic audiences. They speak about foreign policy in technocratic terms and as politics of necessity. This leaves it to populists to make sense of the country's role and rationale in the world. President Trump's Make America Great Again-foreign policy is a good example. We argue that liberal politicians and decisionmakers need to engage in sensemaking from liberal premises, if they are to challenge populist foreign policy.

You were the Chief Investigator in the Independent Inquiry into Denmark's military engagements in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq, as commissioned by the Danish parliament. What lessons did you learn from your work?

Our inquiry has two general lessons for how to understand small state foreign policy. First, Danish foreign policy decisionmakers willingly met US demands for military contributions without direct pressure or threats of sanctions. Being the weaker part in an asymmetric relationship with the US in many ways structured Danish policymakers' thinking on what Denmark was and could and should be in world politics. I think this insight travels to many other small states dependent upon great powers.

Second, we found that foreign policy decisions were taken gradually step-by-step rather than at one important decisive meeting, and this made it difficult for both government and parliament to know exactly when they had committed too much to take a step back. I think this is important for understanding foreign policy decision-making in general. We often look for the 'decision', but the decision may be a process rather than an event and take place over several months or even years.

In addition to the substantial results of our analysis, working closely with the director of the inquiry, Rasmus Mariager, a Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Copenhagen, and the other researchers on the inquiry, I learned a lot from how historians investigate archival material and the potential synergies between political science and contemporary history. I enjoyed being located two years in the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and it gave me a great deal of respect for the small state diplomats getting up every morning to navigate in a world of great power politics. I would recommend other academics to try to have a workplace in government for some time.

Your work has focused on the foreign policy of small states. What are some of the characteristics of the foreign policy of small states?

Small states suffer from limits in their diplomatic, economic, military, and administrative capacity and, in world politics, they often find themselves in asymmetric relationships that they are unable to change on their own. For this reason, small states seek shelter and status. But they also seek to influence other states and international society more generally by using smart state strategies: toning the discourses of more powerful actors to their advantage and seeking to position themselves in important roles in international discussions and negotiations. In sum their lack of coercive powers, lead them to pursue strategies of persuasion, often seeking to cooperate with like-minded small states or filling the action space created by larger allies and partners.

You have previously suggested that the rise of China has coincided with the relative decline of the United States. What impact have small states played in this hegemonic shift?

We have seen an interesting shift of roles when it comes to maintaining and developing the international order. International order used to be almost exclusively a great power business with little room for small state voice or action. In the twentieth century and in first decades of the twenty-first century, small states have increasingly taken advantage of institutional and diplomatic infrastructures to influence international agendas and decisions. They have done this by activating their own experiences and vulnerabilities (e.g., on climate change) and sharing their successful practices (e.g., on peaceful change). At the same time, great powers like the United States, Russia, and China have increasingly focused on more narrow, short-term national interests. Today, we increasingly see tensions between, on the one hand, smaller states seeking to save the rules, norms and institutions of international society, and, on the other hand, great power challenging these rules, norms and institutions. While this may look like an uphill battle, foreign policy is both multi-level and multi-actor and even though great power leaders may debate the big issues there are many other actors from different levels of government, business and civil society with an interest in continuing important aspects of a fairly predictable and rule-based international in many subfields, even in parallel to great power conflict.

What impact does a changing security environment have on the geopolitics of a small state?

The liberal international order was characterized by the principles of self-determination, non-intervention, and sanctity of borders as fundamental principles of international order; international institutions providing shelter and information, increasing transparency, and providing voice opportunities for small states; and market globalization making war less profitable and providing access to bigger markets. None of these characteristics of the liberal international order worked perfectly for small states, but they transformed the geopolitical environment of small states in most parts of the world in the 20th and 21st centuries by making the 'survival'-problem less acute: they could now engage in international relations without an ever-present fear of war, defeat and annexation. This is now challenged not only by China and Russia, but also by the United States – the liberal hegemon. For this reason, the security problem of small states has again become acute, and this intensifies the autonomy/influence dilemma of small states: preserving as much autonomy as possible, while seeking to influence the great powers. They must spend more on

defence, but have limited capacity to do so, and they must find a constructive way to seek status and shelter with the great powers while holding on to their political bastions and looking for voice opportunities. Analyzing the consequences of the changing security order, Revecca Pedi and I have argued that in a world dominated by US- and China-led bounded orders, small states must choose their battles wisely, prioritize their resources and build networks with like-minded small states.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

I have three pieces of advice: 1) Let your intellectual curiosity guide your work. As academics we work long hours in careers often spanning more than 40 years. To keep going, you need to do stuff that you find interesting and after all, the freedom to focus on topics and puzzles we care about is one of the most important benefits of academic life. 2) Respect yourself and others. We are each other's work environment, in the institution, where we work, and internationally, when we review and discuss each other's work in journals and books and at conferences. Being courteous and encouraging helps us all stay happy and healthy. Also, respect your own work and efforts. Doing research is difficult. We all struggle with making sense of the world – this is what makes our work interesting but also causes self-doubt and stress. Therefore, remember to take a moment every day to remember the stuff you did well, no matter if it is a sentence or a paragraph you wrote, a lecture that went well or supervising a student. It all adds up. 3) Work with people you like and find inspiring. For many of us our work life is also a good part of our social life. I have met some of my best friends through my work, and I am incredibly grateful for having met so many sweet and smart people throughout my career. Academic life is hard competition and long hours, but it is also a chance to get to know some truly wonderful people.