

# Maritime Boundary Tension, Resource Competition, and Strategic Security in Small States

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines why maritime boundary disputes and uncertainty carry disproportionate consequences for small states. It argues that unresolved or weakly managed maritime boundaries do not merely generate diplomatic friction; they affect resource security, investment certainty, fisheries management, offshore licensing, and national strategic posture. In an era of heightened competition over offshore hydrocarbons, marine biodiversity, and blue-economy assets, legal certainty at sea has become a core dimension of state capacity. Drawing on the law-of-the-sea framework and small-island development literature, the article contends that small states require proactive maritime legal strategy, technical delimitation capability, and integrated ocean governance. Maritime vulnerability is not defined only by naval weakness. It also includes delayed delimitation, poor data, weak inter-agency coordination, and inadequate translation of legal entitlement into governable maritime space.

**Keywords-** maritime boundaries; UNCLOS; small states; security; resource governance.

## I. INTRODUCTION

For small states, maritime space is often economically larger than land territory. Fisheries, offshore energy, submarine infrastructure, marine biodiversity, shipping routes, and blue-economy ambitions all depend on the ability of the state to define, defend, and govern its maritime jurisdiction. Yet boundary questions are still sometimes treated as specialist legal matters rather than as strategic development issues. That is a mistake. Where maritime entitlements are uncertain, investment is riskier, enforcement is weaker, and resource competition becomes harder to manage (United Nations, 1982; Tanaka, 2019).

The law of the sea provides the framework for delimitation, but legal entitlement alone does not create strategic security. Small states need the institutional capacity to convert legal claims into administratively governable space. Without that capacity, maritime vulnerability persists even where treaty rights are clear (Klein, 2011; Kraska & Pedrozo, 2013).

## II. WHY MARITIME BOUNDARIES MATTER MORE FOR SMALL STATES

The United Nations system has long recognized that small island and coastal developing states depend heavily on marine space for livelihood and growth (United Nations, 2021). In many such states, maritime zones are central to national patrimony. They shape access to fisheries, seabed resources, environmental jurisdiction, and maritime services. Unresolved

boundaries or poorly managed adjacent claims can therefore constrain development far beyond the immediate legal dispute (International Court of Justice, 2009; Tanaka, 2019).

Boundary uncertainty also affects bargaining power. Offshore investors hesitate where jurisdiction is contested or politically unstable. Fisheries management weakens when enforcement authority is unclear. Security risks increase when illegal fishing, trafficking, or unlicensed extraction can exploit grey zones. For small states with limited naval or coast guard assets, legal precision and cooperative arrangements become even more important because operational enforcement capacity is inherently constrained (United Nations, 1982; Klein, 2011).

### **III. LEGAL CERTAINTY, RESOURCE COMPETITION, AND SECURITY**

The basic function of delimitation is legal certainty. The UN Handbook on the Delimitation of Maritime Boundaries makes clear that boundaries help define where states may exercise sovereign rights over exploration, exploitation, conservation, and management of resources (United Nations, 1997). In strategic terms, this certainty lowers conflict risk while improving the credibility of licensing, monitoring, and enforcement (United Nations, 1982; Tanaka, 2019).

Today, the salience of maritime boundaries is increasing because offshore resources are more commercially and geopolitically significant. Hydrocarbon prospects, rare marine resources, seabed uses, and marine conservation obligations now intersect with strategic competition among states. Small states may therefore face pressure not only from neighbors, but also from larger powers, transnational firms, and illicit actors operating through informal or deniable channels. Maritime security, in this wider sense, is the management of lawful entitlement under conditions of unequal power (Klein, 2011; Kraska & Pedrozo, 2013).

This is why boundary work cannot be episodic. It requires hydrographic data, legal expertise, diplomatic continuity, fisheries governance, environmental coordination, and domestic alignment between foreign affairs, natural resources, defense, and maritime administration (International Court of Justice, 2009; Tanaka, 2019).

### **IV. A STRATEGIC AGENDA FOR SMALL STATES**

A credible small-state maritime strategy should include four priorities. First, proactive delimitation and dispute-management capacity. States should not wait for resource conflict before investing in legal and technical competence. Second, integrated ocean governance. Licensing, conservation, fisheries, and maritime security should not operate as disconnected bureaucratic silos. Third, regional cooperation. Shared surveillance, information exchange, and technical pooling can partially offset capacity constraints. Fourth, domestic legal translation. International entitlement must be embedded in national legislation, administrative mapping, licensing systems, and enforcement protocols (United Nations, 1982; Klein, 2011).

The strategic aim is to move from nominal sovereignty to governable jurisdiction. Small states do not secure maritime interests only by invoking international law. They do so by institutionalizing it (United Nations, 1982; Tanaka, 2019).

### **V. DELIMITATION, DETERRENCE, AND INVESTOR CONFIDENCE**

Maritime boundary certainty performs at least three functions simultaneously. It clarifies sovereign rights, reduces the risk of accidental escalation at sea, and improves the legal confidence of firms considering investment in offshore assets. In small states these functions are tightly linked because economic projects, coast guard capability, and diplomatic credibility often depend on the same limited pool of public resources. A boundary that remains legally unsettled or politically contested can therefore impair security and development at the same time (Klein, 2011; Tanaka, 2019).

This is why maritime strategy cannot begin only when a dispute intensifies. Hydrographic data collection, archival treaty work, legal mapping, fisheries enforcement, and diplomatic record-keeping are forms of preventive statecraft. They help small states demonstrate consistency, prepare for negotiation or adjudication, and avoid being strategically surprised by better-resourced neighbours. In practice, the quality of a state's maritime file can influence not only litigation prospects but also the credibility of its peacetime posture (International Court of Justice, 2009; United Nations, 1982).

### **VI. BUILDING A SMALL-STATE MARITIME SECURITY ARCHITECTURE**

A functional maritime architecture requires more than legal entitlement. It requires patrol presence, domain awareness, licensing control, environmental monitoring, and inter-agency coordination across foreign affairs, defence, fisheries, and natural-resource authorities. Where those functions are disconnected, sovereignty becomes nominal: a state may possess rights on paper but lack the capacity to administer them in practice. For small states, external partnerships are

therefore often necessary, but they must be structured to reinforce rather than dilute national control over data, enforcement, and strategic decision-making (Kraska & Pedrozo, 2013; Klein, 2011).

The strategic aim is to convert maritime space into governable space. That means settling what can be settled, managing what remains contested, and ensuring that resource competition does not outrun diplomatic or operational capability. Small states are not doomed to maritime vulnerability. But their security depends on recognizing early that maritime law, resource governance, and national defence are mutually reinforcing domains rather than separate policy silos (Tanaka, 2019; United Nations, 1982).

## **VII. CONCLUSION**

Maritime boundary tension is not peripheral to small-state development. It touches resource access, investor confidence, fisheries sustainability, and national security. In a period of intensifying resource competition, unresolved maritime space becomes a strategic liability. For small states, the law of the sea is therefore not just a legal order. It is part of the architecture of economic survival and sovereign resilience (Klein, 2011; Kraska & Pedrozo, 2013).

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