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Small States in UN System: Constraints, Concerns, and Contributions

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Abstract

Small states in the global system are seeking to organise themselves effectively in the international scene. They face many challenges and constraints but also possess the potential to contribute to better global governance. The study notes Singapore's role in this regard and examines the contributions of two South Asian small-states, namely Bhutan and the Maldives in the creation of global norms. If present political trends continue, the paper extrapolates that the number of small states will grow.

Introduction

The United Nations (UN) comprises an overwhelming number of small states. It is a multilateral body that is oftentimes seen as 'The Parliament of Man'.² The Member-States, therefore, are akin to constituencies from which 'Representatives' (in the case of the UN, 'Permanent Representatives') are sent to this legislative body (the 'General Assembly', the only principal

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² Paul Kennedy 'The Parliament of Man: The Past, Present, and Future of the UN' (New York: Random House, 2006). Kennedy borrows the title from a poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson, entitled 'The Lockesley Hall' and written in the Nineteenth Century.

organ of the institution where all have seats). This fact, together with that of the principle of sovereign equality, would render San Marino or Liechtenstein the same status as the United States, or Bhutan or Maldives as India. This is not just in theory but in practice, though not always without murmurings of complaints from the bigger players.³ However, when the UN seeks to assert force, as it does when it acts through its Security Council, such equality becomes a myth. The role of the Small States in the UN system reflects a continuing tension between myth and reality.

Time was when powers were invited to the table of multilateral diplomacy, because they were important. Such invitations were of 'enormous value to a state's prestige'.⁴ When the United Nations was set up, following the Second World War, it was designed to be a permanent conference where all, big and small states, were invited to the table, provided they were sovereign. It was not a difficult concept to grasp because even in international diplomacy in the earlier centuries, the protocol of equality among individual sovereigns was an established norm. Only then, the right to be heard of the small had not taken the firm roots as it now has, as global political values have evolved.

Definitional Dilemma

The definition of a 'small state' has been much debated. David Vital proposed one on the basis of the size of the population and state of development, that is ten to fifteen million in the case of economically advanced countries and less than twenty or thirty million in the case of underdeveloped countries.⁵ The idea of using population as a criterion was an important contribution, which, as we shall see, many international organisations have now adopted. Keohane, on the other hand, suggested influence instead. To him, a 'small state' is one whose leaders consider that it can never, either acting alone or in a small group, make a significant impact on the globe.⁶ Military power was proposed as the index by Robert Rothstein who defined a 'small state' as one which recognises that it cannot obtain security primarily by its own capabilities and that it must rely fundamentally on the aid of other states, institutions, processes and developments to do so.⁷ Karl Deutsch on the other hand, emphasised the aspect of economic

³ One outspoken former Permanent Representative of the United States, Ambassador John Bolton, has written: "It is inherently untenable that America submit to any decision-making process in which it is simply one nation with one vote among 192 'equal' nations. There is nothing 'equal' about them except the diaphanous idea of "sovereign equality though no one outside the UN pays the slightest attention to them". *Surrender Is Not An Option: Defending America at the United Nations and Abroad* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2007). p.442.

⁴ G. R. Berridge, 'Diplomacy: Theory and Practice', Third Edition (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) p.154.

⁵ D. Vital, *The Inequality of States: A Study of Small Power in International Relations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 8.

⁶ Robert Keohane, 'Lilliputians Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics', *International Organization*, Vol xxiii(Spring 1969), p. 296.

⁷ See, R. L. Rothstein, *Alliances and Small Powers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968).

strength⁸ while more recently, Laurent Goetschel called it one that poses no threat to neighbours.⁹ A pragmatic connotation was proffered by Hey who said she knew one when she saw one.¹⁰

Behaviour-Patterns

How do small states tend to behave in the international setting? Let us look at it at two levels: (a) regional; and (b) global. James Rosenau, who has been viewed as one of the greatest experts on comparative foreign policy, has suggested that small-state behaviour would vary according to three traits: the size, the level of development and finally the political system of any given state.¹¹

The perceived adversary of a small power is usually the predominant regional state actor. Hence, Hedley Bull's axiomatic assertion that 'the deepest fears of the smaller units in the global system are their larger neighbours'.¹² If a neighbouring state is the pre-eminent country in the region, it will be seen as a 'regional hegemon' with the ability to exercise 'power' in the neighbourhood as defined by the French philosopher, Raymond Aron which is 'the capacity of a political unit to impose its will upon other units'.¹³ At a regional level, such apprehensions would generally lead the small state to behave in one of three different ways.

One is what the Scandinavian analyst Erling Bjøl has described as 'pilot-fish behaviour' that is keeping close to the shark to avoid being eaten.¹⁴ Finland's relations with the Soviet Union are an example. These were based on early Finnish perceptions that its 'national interests do not permit ties nor the pursuit of an alignment with an anti-Russian [Soviet] policy'.¹⁵ A second option for the small power would be to enmesh itself in a web of international linkages, hoping to draw strength from beyond the region to redress the regional power-imbalance.¹⁶ This is also true if the small power is poor, and in need of foreign aid for development, thus dependent on

⁸ Karl W. Deutsch, *The Analysis of international Relations* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1968), p.31. p.31.

⁹ See his *Small States Inside and Outside the European Union*, (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998).

¹⁰ See Jeanne A. K. Hey (Ed.), *Small States in World Politics : Explaining Foreign Policy Behavior* (London: Lynne Reiner Publishers, 2003).

¹¹ Hey, op. cit.

¹² H. Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977) p.310.

¹³ R. Aron, *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations* (Trans.) Richard Howard and Annette Baker Fox (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), p. 71..

¹⁴ Erling Bjøl, 'The Small States in International politics' in August Schou and Arne Olav (eds.), *Small States in International Relations* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1971), p.33.

¹⁵ President Urho Kekkonen's speech at the Swedish Agrarian Union in Stockholm, 7 December 1943 in Thomas Vilku (ed.), *Neutrality: The Finnish Position*, *Speeches Given by Dr Urho Kekkonen* (Trans.), P. Ojansu and L. E. Keyworth (London: Heinemann, 1970), p. 30. .

¹⁶ Iftekhar A. Chowdhury, 'Strategy of a Small Power in a Sub-System', *Australian Outlook*, April 1980, Vol 34, No. 1., p..

multiple donor countries and international institutions. A third behaviour-pattern could be for the small powers, because of their limited interests, to have a low level of international involvement, as argued by Ronald Barston.¹⁷ There is yet a fourth interesting option, that is, to drop out from the international system whenever felt necessary, as what Burma did in the earlier days.¹⁸ (However, contemporary Myanmar, led by Thein Sein and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, has deeply involved internationally).

At a regional level, then, it is difficult to extrapolate a pattern of common behaviour for all small states. Each will behave differently, sometimes reacting to circumstances and sometimes even proactively. Some will limit external interactions, preferring to play a limited role, because of multiple domestic problems (Nepal), while others will seek to increase international stakes in them which will enhance their sense of security (Switzerland) without joining any regional grouping. There are those (Bhutan) who would prefer to rely on the single pre-eminent regional power for protection, while there are those (Luxembourg) who will join a collective regional organisation for the sake of protection and prosperity. It is therefore, unwise to seek to construct a theory of regional behaviour-pattern for the small states.

It is somewhat different on a global matrix. On it, small states tend to behave in a manner in which some commonalities can be delineated. First of all, they seek an orderly world. The small states tend to be weaker, and even one of the strongest amongst them, Israel, would seek a global system that would conform to certain norms, such as respect for borders.¹⁹ Indeed, as many as six and half decades ago, the British political writer, Martin Wight, made the point that weaker states wish to see the prevalence of greater international order.²⁰ Secondly, they are quick to join larger international groupings. At the United Nations, for instance, the weaker or smaller states almost always belong to a multiple of such organisations such as the Group of 77 (whose membership now exceeds by far that original number), Non-aligned Movement, Organization of Islamic Cooperation and so and so forth. Small states have organised themselves into the Forum of Small States (FOSS), which we shall discuss at greater length later. This satisfies two requirements: one, that safety lies in greater numbers and two, that it allows them to speak to global issues in a 'trade unionist' way without actually affronting the larger powers. A third behaviour-pattern would be a 'higher profile' on 'low-risk issues' and 'lower-profile' on 'high-risk issues.'²¹

¹⁷ 'The External Relations of Small States', in August Schou and Arne Olav (eds.), op. cit., p.41.

¹⁸ See, Ralph Pettman, *Small Power Politics and International Relations in South Asia* (Sydney: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976).

¹⁹ This largely explains Israeli Prime Minister's sensitivity to the Iranian nuclear programme on grounds that Iran is defying acceptable international rules and standards.

²⁰ See M. Wight, *Power Politics* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1946, Reprinted 1949).

²¹ For instance, Jordan plays a leading role at the United Nations on issues related to International Criminal Court, a comparatively 'low-risk issue' as evidenced in Seminar remarks by Prince Zeid Raad Al Hussein, Permanent Representative of Jordan at the UN, at the Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore, 10 May 2012). Senior officials from small Middle Eastern countries have generally shied away from speaking significantly on 'high risk' issues such as the Arab Spring.

At International Organisations

Several international inter-governmental institutions have started to formalise the grouping of small states. A good example is the Commonwealth, headquartered in London, an overwhelming majority of whose membership – over two-thirds – comprise small states. The Commonwealth Secretariat's definition of 'small states' is quite straight forward. It is countries with a population of 1.5 million or less, also possessing unique special developmental challenges such as limited diversification, limited capacity, poverty, susceptibility to natural disasters and environmental change, remoteness and isolation, openness and income volatility (interestingly it also included larger member countries such as Botswana, Jamaica, Lesotho, Namibia, and Papua New Guinea because they shared many of the characteristics of small states).²² Conversely the group included countries like Malta and Cyprus who were neither poor nor remote. Obviously, a modicum of politics and a calculation of benefits were factored into the determination of the membership of the group.

The remit of the Commonwealth, with regard to the group of small states, was clearly stated. It included 'promoting high level attention to the particular issues of small states at Commonwealth and other international meetings; providing specific assistance (to small states) to help them address the problems and challenges they face; and building partnerships with international agencies and mobilising support to implement (the small states) programme'.²³ According to a publication of the New Zealand government, the Commonwealth played an influential role as a 'collective voice and advocate' for small states and is contributing to 'greater international awareness of issues affecting them'.²⁴ The protection and promotion of small states in the Commonwealth received a special fillip during the period in office as Secretary General of the New Zealander, Sir Donald McKinnon (1999-2009), who took considerable interest in the promotion of their welfare. Since many small states in the Commonwealth are also members of the United Nations, they carry with them traditions between the two organisations. Indeed, the Commonwealth funds common office space in New York for many small and needy Caribbean and Pacific countries which have such common membership.

At the world's largest international institution, the United Nations, the then Singaporean Permanent Representative Ambassador, Chew Tai Soo, helped create in 1992 an informal grouping called, the Forum of Small States (FOSS), to serve as a 'platform for small states' – in this case, those with a population of 10 million or below -- 'to exchange ideas on issues of shared concerns'. Singapore has chaired it ever since, thus playing a key role. It sees itself as a 'small, but relevant spot in Asia'.²⁵ The grouping comprises 105 of the 193 members of the United

²² <http://www.thecommonwealth.org/Internal/180407?>. Accessed on 5 October 2012..

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ The New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Accessed on 11 October 2012..

²⁵ Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore, in a television interview with Charlie Rose in the United States, 13 July 2005.

Nations as of now. Their resources and capabilities are naturally varied. What runs as a common thread among them is their perception that to survive and thrive, as Singapore Foreign Minister K Shanmugam very aptly declared in an address to the UN General Assembly that “a predictable, stable, rule-based system is crucial”.²⁶ Indeed, the protection and promotion of ‘small states’ is seen as being close enough to Singapore’s national interest for the small island-republic to take a leading role in yet another formation of such countries on a global scene, the ‘Global Governance Group’ (3G).

Constraints

However, as naturally to be expected, ‘small states’ do face enormous constraints. First, they lack the power and clout the larger countries possess. While some like Switzerland, Singapore and Qatar are affluent, more often than not, like Bhutan, El Salvador and Burundi they are indigent (Costa Rica, for instance deems it fit not to maintain an Army!). Therefore on a global matrix they lack military might, and or trade partners, are not in possession of economic strength. As in all cases there are exceptions. Qatar, a small state in the Gulf, for instance, tends to punch above its weight in the international arena. Indeed, it has been called ‘the pygmy with the punch of a giant’.²⁷ It played a key role in the Libyan crisis in 2011, and its Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Ambassador Nasr al Nasr, presided successfully over the General Assembly. He made up for personnel deficiency by simply using Qatar’s resources to broaden the catchment area of his staff, thereby significantly enhancing capabilities in an area where most small states with less resources fall short. This is very much an exception rather than the rule.

Secondly, most small states do not possess the wherewithal to follow debates and discussions as effectively as larger states, given limitations imposed by the size of their missions. Every individual by necessity has to be multi-tasked. The United States, by contrast would have a separate Ambassador with the a retinue of staff for each of the UN’s major Councils (under, of course, the overall control of the Permanent Representative). The ‘small states’ often need to make up for this shortcoming by providing ‘thought-leadership’. Certain individual representatives from such countries do play a leadership role by either chairing an important committee, or by assisting UN hierarchs in their tasks. Cases in point are Ambassador Christian Weneweser of Liechtenstein, who, among other things, ably led the State Parties to the International Criminal Court, and the influential Ambassador Daniele Bodini of San Marino, a tiny country described by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon as a ‘driving force’ behind UN Reforms and one which ‘is an excellent example of the indispensable role played by small states (in the UN)’.²⁸ Again the Holy See (Vatican), which is only an Observer State at the UN and

²⁶ Straits Times, 1 October, 2012.

²⁷ As cited in The Economist, 5 November 2011.

²⁸ UN News Centre, 6 June 2008.

perhaps the tiniest by every definition, is hugely important with regard to the Catholic countries in Europe, America, Africa and Asia.

A third constraint is the fact that almost every small state is a member of yet another grouping, either regional or thematic, which exercises a greater pull on its loyalty than does FOSS. For instance, Latvia would find itself unable to act beyond what its European Union membership would require, as would Angola beyond the African Union, or the Maldives beyond the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Most groupings are useful as electoral vote banks, and are usually approached by member-states or by their candidates seeking elections to high offices. The aspirants are more likely to approach the regional or thematic groups first, rather than FOSS which cuts across many fault-lines. Yet for candidates FOSS still remains a forum to air their positions, and because voting is often secret, every forum for lobbying could be useful.

Finally, if it can be called a constraint at all, small states usually cannot enjoy the luxury of 'flashy' foreign policies that may be assessed as aggressive by the powerful states. Most often, their policies are likely to be subdued, unless they are strategically linked to a more powerful country, with absolute assurances of support. Albania could afford to defy the Soviet Union, and did, which is an example of contrarian behaviour, only because it was allied to China. As Simon Tay says: "Lilliputians (small states) should not hope to tie down Gulliver (Large State)...rather prevent giant state from stepping on them inadvertently or otherwise"²⁹

Contributions

The fact that even the biggest and the most powerful consider small states as important is illustrated by the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, together with Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, attending the FOSS session on the sidelines of the General Assembly on 1 October 2012. In her remarks, Clinton specially identified 'human rights' as an important thematic area for contribution by small states, identifying in the process two such countries, Mauritius and Slovenia.³⁰

This article will examine two contributions to the realm of ideas at the UN by two South Asian small states. The first is that by Bhutan in getting the index of 'happiness' accepted at the UN as a measure of development, which was further elaborated by Prime Minister Jigmi Thinley, a former UN-based diplomat. The concept was originally floated by Bhutan's constitutional monarch King Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck, in the hope that Gross National Happiness (GNH) would replace Gross National Product (GNP) as a mark of progress. The word spread, and indeed in 2011, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 65/309 entitled 'Happiness:

²⁹ Cited in 'The Malaysian Insider', 'G 20: Gulliver and Lilliputians?' <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/breaking-views/article/g-20-Gulliver-and-Lilliputian...>

³⁰ US Department of State, Diplomacy in Action, 1 October 2012.

Towards a Holistic Approach to Development'. Equally importantly, it elicited support for the concept from illustrious economists like Amartya Sen, Jeffrey Sachs and international personalities like Prince Charles of the United Kingdom.³¹

A second is the contribution by the Maldives to the broad area of climate change. As an environmentally threatened country, climate change has always been a topical issue with the Maldives. In 2008, it was able to launch an innovative idea that 'human rights' was linked to 'climate change'. At the UN Human Rights Council on 28 March it tabled and obtained consensus on a resolution to that end. The Resolution called upon the UN to conduct studies into the effects of climate change on economic, social and cultural rights of human beings. It was to, thereafter, form the basis of a debate in the Human Rights Council. Following this, the conclusions of the studies and the debate were to be fed into the negotiating process of the United Nations Framework Convention (UNFCCC). The idea was that it would raise political awareness about the human dimension of global warming.³²

It is through such activities that small states seek to be relevant to the international community, to seek out space for themselves, in justification of their existence in the global system.

Conclusion

While 'small states' continue to see the UN as an 'insurer' of security, this matter has to be approached with a modicum of circumspection. It is true that when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, the UN, albeit a trifle slowly, did seek to restore Kuwaiti sovereignty and ultimately this was done by mustering international backing, most importantly the support of the Bush Administration of the US. David Malone, a keen observer of UN issues, wrote: "The Security Council's capacity to legitimise the use of force provided the legal basis for the international action to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1991".³³

Sometimes UN involvement in restoring stability in a small state is looked upon warily by analysts of that country. When in 2006, following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Nepal, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1740 according the UN Mission in Nepal special tasks, a Nepalese observer wrote: 'This was the first time that the UN was allowed to monitor a cease-fire agreement in this part of the world and also ensure that the weapons of a state's national army and that of the insurgents [in this case the Maoists] remained

³¹ Stewart Patrick, 'UN Happiness Summit', CNN.com.Blog. <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2012/04/01/the-u-n-happiness-summit/> Accessed on 11 October 2012.

³² 'Maldives Secures UN Resolution on Human Rights and Climate Change', Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maldives. http://www.foreign.gov.mv/v3/?p=menu_item&sub_id=51&submenu=Maldives%20Sec. Accessed on 11 October 2012.

³³ David M. Malone, *The International Struggle over Iraq: Politics in the UN Security Council 1980-2005*. (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2006), p. 16

locked up, thereby effectively coming into what was inherently the internal affairs of a sovereign country.’³⁴

Some small states may worry about the possibilities of intervention by large states, using the UN and such of its principles as the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ (R2P) in order to further their own interests. The ‘R2P’ itself has built-in safety clauses. For instance, interventions under it can take place only in four specific circumstances: ‘genocide’, ‘war crimes’, ‘ethnic cleansing’ and ‘crimes against humanity’.³⁵ So the legitimate grounds for such interventions are clearly marked out.³⁶ Yet, there are those who think that the intervention in Libya was motivated by the desire on the part of the UK and France for ‘regime change’, rather than anything else. Therefore, some have argued for another method of its implementation rather than through the Security Council.³⁷ Others have demanded that it may be made ‘less open to manipulation by powerful countries’.³⁸ For small states, the UN provides a good forum to air their views on issues of global importance. Here, their leaders can put forward ideas, for good ideas are not necessarily the prerogative of the powerful. Also here, they can speak up for the ‘right’ and ‘noble’ causes, which buttresses their ‘feel-good’ sense, and also impresses their domestic audience. The UN also provides the small states a platform to carry out diplomatic interactions among themselves or with the larger states in UN headquarters such as New York, Geneva, Vienna and (in the case of environmental issues, Nairobi) without having to incur the expenses of maintaining bilateral embassies in the world’s capitals. (Where else but in New York and Geneva can Tuvalu interact with El Salvador?) Small states feel more at ease with ‘collective actions’ than with ‘unilateral actions’ on the part of a big power. They believe, with Inis Claude, that “collectivism spells responsibility: unilateralism stands for arbitrariness”.³⁹

Small-state leaders often see their ability to be ‘nimble’ in policy-making (facilitated by their smallness) as the key to their aspiration to remain ‘relevant’ to the rest of the world. At a recent seminar at the Harvard University Asia Centre, Singapore’s Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong said: “We (in Singapore) strive to be exceptional, outwardly oriented, competitive and strategically useful, both regionally and locally”, also pointing out that the four most competitive countries identified by the World Economic Forum are small states: Switzerland, Singapore, Finland and Sweden.⁴⁰ This also raises the question that there may be small states, either too indigent or wanting in capacity, to exist by themselves or ensure sufficient security for

³⁴ Nishal Nath Pandey, *New Nepal: The Fault Lines* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2010), p. 8..

³⁵ The author was instrumental in its drafting as a ‘Facilitator’ on UN Reforms in 2005 working with the then President of the General Assembly, Foreign Minister, Jean Ping of the Gambia.

³⁶ See Gareth Evans, ‘When is it legitimate to intervene?’, *Straits Times* 29 April 2011. Evans is a former foreign Minister of Australia and one of the original propagators of the broad concept.

³⁷ David Hillstrom, ‘The Libyan No Fly Zone : R2P and International Law’, *Foreign Policy Journal* 21 March 2011.

³⁸ K. Kesavapany, R2P: A Good Norm in Search of Fairness’, *Straits Times* 20 April 2011.

³⁹ Inis L. Claude, Jr. ‘The Growth of International Institutions’, *The Aberystwyth Papers: International Politics, 1919-1969* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p.295.

⁴⁰ *Straits Times*, 18 October 2012.

themselves or for others (oftentimes even posing a threat, Somalia being an example). If Northern Mali is to secede, it may face this predicament. The UN would therefore also have a 'responsibility to ensure' that any emerging small states are not destabilising to the region, or to the world.

It is worth considering perhaps whether small states need to pursue an element of 'kiasu-ism', a Hokkien term popular in Singapore, which literally means 'fear of losing'. It implies a somewhat aggressive individualistic behaviour aimed at forging ahead. More acceptable social mores often seek to tame it with 'kiasi-ism', another Hokkien expression for 'fear of death', implying taking measures to avoid it. An appropriate golden mean could be a balance of the two, aiming at careful forward movement, not individually but collectively (for small states).

Despite the recent tendencies for wider regional groupings, as evident in the formation of the European Union, African Union or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, it seems that nation-states will continue to be at the heart of the international system, and thus of the United Nations. Indeed, consolidation of large regional groupings which would provide essential core requirements like 'defence', or 'security' or 'currency' might actually lead to the creation of a greater number of smaller states in order to be able to respond more effectively to local governance requirements. What we have seen in recent times in the old Soviet Union, or in the former Yugoslavia or in the Sudan, lends credence to this possibility. In Europe itself, developments in Belgium, between its French and Dutch speaking halves, Catalonia in Spain and Scotland in the UK merit watching in this regard. So the expansion of the number of small states, also within the UN system, is a distinct possibility. This will require the UN to move in the direction that small states generally want: a more stable international order and better global governance. Ultimately, this would benefit all, both large and small.

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