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Setting the Scene: Small States and the Instrument of Diplomacy

In *The Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides (1972: 402) highlights the effects of the general, overall weakness of smaller states vis-à-vis larger, more powerful ones in a key passage, where the Athenians remind the Melians that:

“... since you know as well as we do that, as the world goes, right is only in question between equals in power. Meanwhile, the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”

Concerns about the vulnerability of small, weak, isolated states have echoed throughout history: from Thucydides, through the review by Machiavelli (1985) of the risks of inviting great powers to intervene in domestic affairs, through 20th century US-led contemporary political science (Vital, 1971; Handel, 1990) and Commonwealth led scholarship (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1985). In the context of 20th century ‘Balkanization’, the small state could also prove unstable, even hostile and uncooperative, a situation tempting enough to invite the intrusion of more powerful neighbours: a combination, according to Brzezinski (1997: 123-124) of a power vacuum and a corollary power suction²: in the outcome, if the small state is ‘absorbed’, it would be its fault, and its destiny, in the grand scheme of things. In an excellent review of small states in the context of the global politics of development, Payne (2004: 623, 634) concludes that “vulnerabilities rather than opportunities are the most striking consequence of smallness”. It has been recently claimed that, since they cannot defend or represent themselves adequately, small states “lack real independence, which makes them suboptimal participants in the international system” (Hagalin, 2005: 1).

There is however, a less notable and acknowledged but more extraordinary strand of argumentation that considers ‘the power of powerlessness’, and the ability of small states to exploit their smaller size in a variety of ways in order to achieve their intended, even if unlikely, policy outcomes. The pursuance of smaller state goals becomes paradoxically acceptable and achievable precisely because such smaller states do not have the power to leverage disputants or pursue their own agenda. A case in point concerns the smallest state of all, the Vatican, whose powers are both unique and ambiguous, but certainly not insignificant (The Economist, 2007). Smaller states have “punched above their weight” (e.g. Edis, 1991); and, intermittently, political

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scientists confront their “amazing intractability” (e.g. Suhrke, 1973: 508). Henry Kissinger (1982: 172) referred to this stance, with obvious contempt, as “the tyranny of the weak”³.

This paper seeks a safe passage through these two, equally reductionist, propositions. It deliberately focuses first on a comparative case analysis of two, distinct ‘small state-big state’ contests drawn from the 1970s, seeking to infer and tease out the conditions that enable smaller ‘Lilliputian’ states (whether often or rarely) to beat their respective Goliaths. The discussion is then taken forward to examine whether similar tactics can work in relation to contemporary concerns with environmental vulnerability, with a focus on two other, small island states. Before that, the semiotics of ‘the small state’ need to be explored, since they are suggestive of the perceptions and expectations that are harboured by decision makers at home and abroad and which tend towards the self-fulfilling prophecy.

A Declaration of Bias

I cannot launch into this paper without declaring my personal bias at the outset. I am a Maltese citizen, and was one of six ‘technical experts’ on a nationally representative Malta-European Union Steering and Action Committee (MEUSAC) that participated in the detailed negotiations, led by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, on the adoption of the *acquis communautaire* between the Maltese Government and the European Commission; this, in the run up to Malta’s eventual entry to the European Union in May 2004. Malta did not achieve all that it had hoped for - it did not manage to obtain an exemption from the use of plastic containers for beverages, for example - however, Malta *did* manage to secure the largest number of exemptions (72) from the *acquis* amongst all 10 candidate countries at the time. This includes a much bigger, and very demanding, state – Poland - which came away with the second largest haul of exemptions (43). Malta even secured the only permanent derogation from the *acquis* amongst this group of accessing states: blocking non-permanent residents indefinitely from buying second homes in Malta. I agree with my colleague at the University of Malta, Roderick Pace, who has argued that “Malta has used its small size to advantage in negotiating” (The Economist, 2004).

So, where is the ‘Small State’?

In this paper, I am deliberately using the word “smaller” rather than “small”, resurrecting a usage preferred by Burton Benedict (1966, 1967) and Gerald Berreman (1978), that alerts readers to a tendency in the literature to equate ‘large states’ as ‘normal’. This is hardly the case in practice. Out of 237 jurisdictions listed in the CIA *World Factbook* (CIA, 2007), only 11 have populations exceeding 100 million; 23 have populations of over 50 million; while 158 have populations of less than 10 million (of which 41 have a resident population of under 100,000). Wikipedia has a list of 221 “countries by population”, including sub-national jurisdictions, and ranging from the People’s Republic of China to Pitcairn: the median (111th) position is occupied by Finland, with

³ I have heard Olafur Ragnar Grimson, President of Iceland, use the same term, but with some obvious glee rather than any associated contempt.

5.3 million citizens⁴. Clearly, the so-called ‘small state’ is the typical state size (as it has also been for most of recorded history). In contrast, therefore, it is the *large* state which is the quirk and the anomaly – a condition that finds the state dealing with secessionist tendencies (Chechnya, Biafra, Aceh, Okinawa) and other conditions of “giantism” (e.g. Lewis, 1991). There is also “no widely accepted definition of a small state” (Crowards, 2002: 143). Moreover, and as had already been observed by Baehr (1975: 466), there is no sharp dichotomy between ‘small’ and ‘large’ states.

The earliest equation of ‘large states as normal’ probably emerged in the reference to the “great powers” as the powers of consequence at the Treaty of Vienna in 1814, though Michael East (1973: 556) traces this new development to the Treaty of Chaumont of 1817. The model has, however, been driven primarily by US-based political scientists in the Cold War period. When the United Nations (UN) was set up in 1945, it had only one smaller state as member: Luxembourg; it still had only two – Luxembourg and Iceland – by 1960. When, thereafter, smaller territories were becoming newly independent sovereign states with a fairly rapid frequency, however, certain ‘large state’ observers were seriously concerned with the implications of this trend for superpower balances. The involvement by these small (or worse, micro) states in sensitive global geopolitics was denounced as irresponsible interference, and was close to being deemed intolerable. Some way of packing up these potentially destabilizing quirks of colonial retrenchment, with their absurd claims for sovereignty, was being taunted (e.g. Plischke, 1977: 9-10). At a certain point, the UN was also presented with a report by a ‘Committee of Experts’ that recommended associate membership for small states, without the right to vote (Harden, 1985: 17). With such paranoia rampant, smaller polities were pictured as dangerous, as “problems” (Benedict, 1967; Diggines, 1985), and so as anomalous, apart from consistently inconsequential (Keohane, 1969). Barston (1973) questioned whether smaller states could have any meaningful foreign policy at all. Similarly, Watson (1982: 159) questioned whether smaller states had the “... resources, experience and sufficient institutional mechanisms to engage in effective dialogue with other states”.

Why call some States ‘Small’?

The nomenclature has stuck. First of all, international organizations have responded to the swelling number of smaller members. Amongst these, the Commonwealth Secretariat, in particular, has ushered in a range of studies focussed on ‘small states’. This was mainly in deference to its membership: no less than 32 of 54 Commonwealth members have populations of up to 1.5 million, but any neat definition has been skilfully avoided to embrace Jamaica, Papua New Guinea, Botswana, Lesotho and Namibia at its upper limits, “even though their populations each exceeded 1.5 million” (Payne, 2004: 625-6). Moreover, in the wake of the 1983 US-led invasion of Grenada (one of the Commonwealth’s smallest amongst its small state members), and later on by mercenary attacks on the Maldives (another Commonwealth member) in 1988, the Commonwealth Secretariat has spawned a variety of educational and professional development programs focusing on small states (reviewed in Crossley & Holmes, 1999). It has supported the eventual development of a vulnerability index (e.g. Briguglio, 1995; Atkins et al., 2000), and continues to sponsor a modest literature peddling the concept of *vulnerability*

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_population. The list should include a 222nd member, Kosovo, as from February 17, 2008.

(reviewed in Bray, 1987), and, more recently, its putative corollary, *resilience* (e.g. Briguglio et al., 2006; Kisanga & Danchie, 2007). Other notable contributions have been made by such institutions as UNESCO, through its International Institute for Educational Planning in Paris and its Regional Offices in Jamaica and Samoa (Bray, 1992; Lillis, 1993). Parallel studies evoked an analogy with Jonathan Swift's Lilliput (Swift, 1965), to suggest not just a chronic weakness in the face of a world driven by Gullivers, but also as indicative of an inability to adopt proactive policies in international relations (e.g. Sutton & Payne, 1993).

Secondly, critical commentary about smaller states is typically driven by academics based in first world universities. The smaller the jurisdiction, the less likely is it that it has the internal capacity to generate research about itself, all other things being equal. So the 'small state' finds itself in an environment where it may be largely defined by others, with no capacity to counter such representations.

But would the will to counter such skewed representations be there at all? It appears not: the 'small states' appear willing to tag along in this naming exercise. The third explanation for such a trend becomes the growing number of 'small island developing states' (SIDS) which have been active in regional and international fora. This has led the United Nations to sponsor their own 'mini-Rio' summit: the 'Island Matters, Islands Matter' Global Conference, held in Barbados in 1994, which adopted a Program of Action for the Sustainable Development of SIDS. This was followed by an International Review Meeting, held in Mauritius in 2005, resulting in the 'Mauritius Strategy' for the Further Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of SIDS. Today, practically all the UN agencies – including UNEP, UNDP, UNCTAD, as well as the World Bank – recognize the category of small island developing states. (The category, by the way, tends to exclude 'developed small states' – including non-island Luxembourg and Liechtenstein but also insular Iceland – raising concerns as to whether smaller size is actually synonymous with the ills with which it is nonchalantly attributed.) Moreover, the Alliance of Small and Island States (AOSIS) was set up to present these countries with a coordinated and unified international voice: 37 of the world's 51 island states are its members (Depraetere & Dahl, 2007: 101, Table 5). AOSIS's interests were recognized in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (Ashe et al., 1999).

Finally, the appellative 'small', alongside 'vulnerable', has become a useful rallying cry for those that are strategically defining themselves as 'small states'. This composite condition, quantified into an index, has been used to lobby international support for special economic privileges to be granted to small economies. The international community has been politely supportive, acknowledging and taking note of the heightened vulnerability concerns of small developing states, including major references in both the Barbados 1994 and the Mauritius 2005 declarations; yet the concept remains elusive and subject to some scepticism (e.g. Hein, 2004). The World Bank would only go as far as agreeing that small states have "... special characteristics which should be noted by global institutions" (ComSec/World Bank, 2000; Payne, 2004: 626). Moreover, openness - one of the alleged components of economic vulnerability - is itself a key basis for the competitive export-orientation of small economies and which may have prevented their lapse into protectionism and autarchy (Baldacchino, 2000). More recently, but reminiscent of Katzenstein (1985), a fresh flurry of research into the international relations of small states has emerged in the context of European integration (e.g.

Thorhallsson, 2000): as if to add further confirmation of the absence of any rigorous definition of a small state, all the members of the European Union except the ‘big six’ (France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom), and all EU applicant and candidate countries except Turkey, are considered small (reviewed in Neumann and Gstöhl, 2004).

Thus, ‘the small state’ is defined in contradistinction to ‘the big state’: small states are assumed to be price takers in a largely inhospitable global market, while big states are deemed more likely to be price makers. Small states are deemed to be more vulnerable to such external shocks as invasions, externally directed coups and mercenary attacks... unlike larger states. Small states are deemed to be unable to provide or afford international overseas representation ... unlike larger states. And this goes on. Smallness becomes an important quality to peddle, if it is deemed to represent a condition of dependency, fragility or vulnerability. It becomes the hook to attract the interest of donors, fan the ‘soft imperialist’ aspirations of benign larger states, or facilitate aid and grants in cash and in kind by regional powers concerned with a small state’s allegedly inherent instability . . . initiatives from which small states would then arguably benefit. Indeed, certainly in Commonwealth circles, “vulnerability has often been deployed as a surrogate for smallness” (Payne, 2004: 626). This thematic will be revisited below in dealing with environmental diplomacy.

Imagine the consternation, surprise and high drama when small (often island) states *do not* play this game and indeed seek to influence international relations according to their own interests ... and succeed.

Comparative Case Study A: Two Damned Dots

“If you think you are too small to make a difference, try sleeping in a closed room with a mosquito” - African Proverb.

Imagine the governments of two smaller island states, with no standing armies, with populations of less than a third of a million each, heading into a confrontation with the United Kingdom. The respective smaller state governments have either flimsy majorities or shaky coalitions. And yet, in both cases, the wishes of the smaller state prevailed over that of the ex-imperial power, and indeed with the support and additional pressure of the USA. In the context of the Cold War and the Soviet Threat of the early 1970s, both Iceland in the North Atlantic and Malta in the Central Mediterranean played their cards, and won. In an obvious reference to the fictitious “teeny-tiny” European Duchy of Grand Fenwick, they were mice, and yet they roared (Sellers, 1959). The community of “great powers”, including the United Kingdom, was not amused, however. *The Economist* Magazine, reviewing - and reviling - both Malta and Iceland in the same article, thought fit to title this feature “Damned Dots” (The Economist, 1971).

Much has been written about the standoff between Malta Prime Minister Dom Mintoff and the British Prime Minister James Callaghan in 1971-2 (e.g. Howard Wriggins, 1975; Smith, 2007). The episode has also featured amongst the case studies that are pored over at the Program on Negotiation, Harvard Law School, USA (www.pon.harvard.edu/). In spite of a parliamentary majority of just one, Mintoff threatened to evict British military forces from Malta (then with a population of 325,000) and to turn over air and naval facilities - deemed to have “negative

strategic value” to NATO and Britain - over to the Soviet Union. In the outcome, deploying “maverick diplomacy”, and playing the role of a ‘power broker’ that has been described as “wholly unsuited for an economically weak, tiny island nation” (Micallef, 1979: 250), Mintoff nevertheless succeeded, against all odds, in obtaining a 300% increase in British development assistance to Malta (Baldacchino, 2002: 202). Whether extracting more money from the British Exchequer was Mintoff’s real long-term goal, we will probably never know.

At around the same time, in the North Atlantic, an Icelandic Government composed of an unwieldy three-party coalition unilaterally expanded sovereignty over ‘its’ fishing grounds by extending its territorial waters from 12 miles to 50 miles, even in the face of an international agreement that had been earlier secured with the United Kingdom, and refusing to recognize the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice over the matter. Britain (population approx. 60 million) rushed to defend its economic interests by sending military vessels to the contested zone, while Iceland (population approx. 290,000) sent its coast guard vessels armed with trawl wire cutters. Iceland, comments Kurlansky (1997: 166), acted “shockingly tough”. “[U]sing the Royal Navy to bully an unarmed small state” (Ingimundarson, 2003: 96), and couching the episode in heavy colonial discourse, generated much international sympathy for the Icelandic predicament, both from developing countries as well as from public opinion in the West; meanwhile, a nationalist discourse secured support at home. All along, the underdog argument was resorted to: “a small state was fighting for its economic survival against big powers, whose sole aim was to get their greedy hands on Iceland’s economic resources” (*ibid.*: 105). Moreover, this was not just *any* economic resource: Iceland was (and still remains) heavily dependent on its fishing industry.

When the tension subsided, and the two smaller states emerged better off from the confrontation, it is easy to conclude that, were it not for their respective strategic value, no pressure would have been applied by the US on Britain to urge it to accommodate these pesky microstates. And yet, these two European economies were already squarely within the commercial and ideological circuit of the West; any isolationist policies would have spelled economic ruin, as US President Nixon hinted to Icelandic Prime Minister Jóhannesson in June 1971 (*ibid.*: 115). One may add with the benefit of hindsight that these strategies even led to political ruin, as both Malta’s and Iceland’s foreign policies eventually backfired. Indeed, may one suggest that the smaller states won their battle, but did not win their war?

It would be more appropriate to conclude that larger states do not want to be seen to bully smaller states, unless the smaller state can be convincingly depicted as harbouring communists, terrorists or other reprehensible categories. Public opinion, at home and abroad, can be swayed and galvanized into protest action by such notions as imperialism or neo-colonialism. Moreover, the manner in which smaller states undertake international diplomacy is also typically both much more focused and more driven by ‘heroic’ individuals (such as Prime Ministers) than would happen in larger, democratic countries, used to pluralism, internal consultation and protracted deliberation by committee (e.g. Singham, 1968). This can disarm larger states who find that a showdown with an intractable negotiator is not necessarily a foregone conclusion (e.g. Pirota, 1985). The stakes are also laid out differentially: a concession by a larger player to a smaller one may not be so onerous, and can always be dismissed as an act of generosity or gratuity; in contrast, the failure by a smaller state to secure its interests via international diplomacy with a

larger state may be simply catastrophic, with possible negative implications for the larger state itself.

Of course, these episodes may very well be the exceptions that justify the rule. Indeed, if we fast forward to the present, there are hardly any victories yet to be declared by smaller states when it comes to a different, perhaps more serious, topic of international statecraft: environmental vulnerability. In spite of a unity of purpose, the development of AOSIS, a widespread recognition of the dual phenomena of global warming and sea level rise, there is as yet no tangible evidence that smaller states are winning the argument. Why? Or, better, why not? How come the lessons of the past have not yet informed the present? Where are the contemporary Maltas and Icelands in the diplomatic war against environmental catastrophe?

Comparative Case Study B: Threatened Paradises

There have been considerable attempts by smaller island state governments to generate regional and international interest in the condition of their islands, especially that of low lying island states at the risk of sea level rise. There is now irrefutable scientific evidence of the human impact on climate, and one of these is a global rise of mean surface temperature by around 2⁰ Celsius by the year 2100. One consequence of this temperature change will be sea-level rise, due mainly to the thermal expansion of the oceans, as well as to the thawing of glacial ice. A mean rise of some 50 cm is projected by 2100 (Charles et al., 1997: 67-69).

Of course, being a smaller island is not the critical factor in terms of vulnerability to sea level rise: various larger countries (including the USA and China) have extensive low-lying coastlines that are just as vulnerable, and particularly (as in the case of Bangladesh) where there are heavily populated areas near the coast. However, the problem is especially acute for small island states with fragments of finite, small and low-lying land areas because even a modest rise in sea level could mean total or near total submersion. These island populations have no hinterland to turn to, unlike larger countries. Their whole land area, especially in the case of atolls, consists in vulnerable coastline. The four smaller island states most seriously affected by this predicament are the Maldives, the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu and Kiribati.

Is the past instructive in any way? There have been some high profile evacuations of islanders in the 20th Century: notably from Tristan da Cunha in 1961 and from Montserrat in 1995, both with the connivance of the United Kingdom, and both due to volcanic eruptions. Yet, these two island jurisdictions are both overseas territories of the UK, and so the UK had a measure of responsibility to ensure their wellbeing. Both evacuations were temporary. Moreover, a volcanic eruption is a much more sudden and visually dramatic event than creeping sea level rise: perhaps the former more easily captures the imagination of sympathetic onlookers than the latter. The ravages of the 2004 'Boxing Day' tsunami, whose horrors were captured on amateur video and circulated worldwide via the internet, similarly galvanized considerable international attention, and from which affected islands were significant beneficiaries.

Unlike overseas territories like Tristan or Montserrat, smaller island states enjoy a sovereignty which seems to have excised the responsibility of other (larger, non-island) states from the consequences of sea level rise on the former islands' inhabitants. These smaller island states

appear to have resorted to a combination of technology, as well as bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, to seek a full and satisfactory resolution to their problem.

The Republic of the Maldives, a sprawling archipelago with a population of 311,000, is very much at the frontline, certainly on two of these three measures. Flooding in 1987 threatened the country. More flooding, this time associated with the 2004 tsunami, submerged the whole archipelago, albeit for a few minutes. The Maldives government had raised the issue before the 1989 *Small States Conference on Sea Level Rise*, which it hosted and at which the Association of Small and Island States was initiated with this concern foremost on its agenda. The country was also the first to sign the Kyoto Protocol. President Gayoon has been campaigning vigorously on the international stage for the acknowledgement of the predicament of his country and that of similar SIDS, as well as for calls for remedial action. His impassionate address to the United Nations at the June 1992 Earth Summit was poignant:

“I stand before you as a representative of an endangered people. We are told that as a result of global warming and sea-level rise, my country, the Maldives, may sometime during the next century, disappear from the face of the Earth. ...

Let this not be a time in the history of mankind when those who can really help decline to do so, while the very survival of the peoples of low-lying, small island nations is at stake. As I speak here today, there are 225,000 people in my country, and many tens of thousands more in other small island states, expecting strong and immediate international action to save our countries.” (Gayoon, 1992).

The latest, smaller island state to attempt a major diplomatic exercise is the Seychelles. Seychelles President James Michel has taken the lead in the setting up of the Sea level Rise Foundation in 2005 – a “global initiative to establish a platform of excellence on sea level rise” – and the Global Islands Foundation (GLISPA) which is trying to mount a common “global strategy” against the causes of sea level rise (<http://www.sealevel-rise.org/>).

But such “political solutions” do not seem to have gotten anywhere, except perhaps expand awareness: “[t]hat hasn’t done much yet to slow down sea-level rise” (Hamilton, 2008). And so the Maldives has turned to technological remedies: a massive sea wall, made up of concrete tetrapods, that surrounds the entire capital of Male (2km long and 800m wide); and now Hulhumale, a brand new, flood-resistant island (CDNN News, 2004; DEMA, 2008). Japan paid for the Male sea wall; international donors, one hopes, will pay for the human-made construction.

Such engineering strategies represent measures that could mitigate or postpone the effects of sea level rise; but they do not attack its causes. Nor is the solution necessarily a long-term one. They represent similar technology-driven measures being contemplated by developed countries threatened by sea level rise, such as the Netherlands. Of course, the Dutch have had to struggle against the infiltration of water for most of their history; they do not need any convincing as to the seriousness of the issue (Woodward, 2001; Palca, 2008).

The danger is that, as more states, small and not so small, consider adopting piecemeal engineering solutions to their own national problems, the urgency and thrust of a common collective position will be dampened. The resort to a global, largely diplomatic solution may no longer be seen as essential. And thus the pressure to reduce the causes behind sea level rise may fall. The belief in ‘science as miracle cure’ may thwart steps that would attack the root causes of environmental vulnerability. So much for Gayoon’s expected “strong and immediate international action to save our countries”. Indeed, the Maldivian story may be an example of the frustration in seeking a global concerted solution to a global problem, and the resort to the more familiar “chequebook diplomacy” game with which smaller states are familiar (and which is perhaps one key reason why they assiduously call themselves ‘*small states*’). Larger, typically donor, countries are also comfortable with this stance since it allows them to display and offer munificence and development assistance⁵. Could it be that the attempt to seek international visibility via the sea level rise platform is none other than a ploy to arm-twist donors into a new line of credit? Environmental vulnerability may be replacing economic vulnerability as the new justifying mechanism for maintaining ‘MIRAB’ economies (dependent on migration and remittances that finances private households and on aid that finances their government bureaucracies) running (Bertram, 2006). Or else, is it also possible that the official leadership of SIDS may have fully internalized patterns of thought that represent them as weak victims of global trends?

Tuvalu has been trying a diplomatic route similar to the Maldivian one, though with a few other twists. The island archipelago’s total population is just 11,000, who live on nine coral atolls totaling 10 square miles. The country, securing independence in 1979, became a member of the United Nations in 2000 and maintains a mission at the UN in New York. Tuvalu’s only other diplomatic office is its High Commission in Suva, Fiji. The promotion of concern about global warming and sea level rise is Tuvalu’s “major international priority” (US State Department, 2007). Tuvaluan government representatives have been vocal advocates of the Kyoto Protocol, as well as champions of a global mitigation of climate change through reduced emissions. They have also expressed public disappointment with those governments that fail to manifest similar support (Sopoanga, 2003). As Acting Prime Minister Toafa observed:

“We in Tuvalu live in constant fear of the adverse impacts of climate change and sea level rise. With a height of a mere 3m above sea level, of livelihoods and food security are already affected badly, with increasing salinity in ground water, land erosion, coral bleaching and total anxiety. The threat is real and serious, and is of no difference to a slow and insidious form of terrorism against Tuvalu” (Toafa, 2004: 4).

The attempt to portray Tuvaluans as victims of terrorism does not seem to have triggered the expected response, however. Back in 2002, Tuvaluan Prime Minister Koloa Talake even raised the prospects of pursuing legal redress for climate change damage in international tribunals and

⁵ The typical ‘small state – large state’ display of largesse these days arises in the context of the diplomatic recognition of either the People’s Republic of China or the Republic of China/Taiwan. See Harris (2006) in the Caribbean. This has replaced the Cold War polarity for smaller states and affords them a continuing opportunity to seek critical foreign aid “to the highest bidder”. In fact, “governments have fallen and elections have been fought on the issue of whom to support” (Nadkarni, 2007).

the domestic courts of the USA (the main terrorist threat?); so far, no litigation proceedings have been commenced (Farbotko, 2005a).

More ingeniously, Tuvalu has appealed to Australia, the hegemon in the South Pacific, to arrange for the acceptance of its citizens as “climate refugees”. But Australia – during a period when there was much public debate about the country’s policy towards asylum seekers – refused even to discuss the matter, claiming that there is as yet no international recognition of such a refugee category. When Tuvalu turned to New Zealand for help, that country agreed to accept the whole of Tuvalu’s population but only when that country becomes uninhabitable. Meanwhile, current applicants for entry to New Zealand remain subject to the conditions of the Pacific Access Category that covers Tuvalu, Fiji, Kiribati and Tonga. The PAC only allows 75 people to emigrate from Tuvalu to New Zealand per year and imposes a series of stringent requirements (Kenny, 2007).

The diplomatic efforts continue. Enele Sopoanga, Tuvalu’s Ambassador to the UN, (and one of Tuvalu’s two ambassadors) addressed a climate change conference in Nairobi:

“The delegate from the tiny Pacific nation of Tuvalu proposed a thought experiment as he addressed the United Nations summit on climate change on its final day in Nairobi.

Imagine the world knew global warming was about to destroy 43 nations – “*but not which 43*”, Enele Sopoaga, Tuvalu’s UN ambassador, told the summit on Friday. If that were the case, “we suggest that all parties would be striving for big reductions in greenhouse gases”.

Instead, the 43 that could be wiped out by rising sea levels are the small island states - among the most powerless in the world. “What will history say of us if we let whole countries disappear?” asked Mr Sopoaga in a plea that moved delegates to applause” (Button, 2006).

Discussion

The reportage of the above episode in the *Sydney Morning Herald* deserves some critical commentary. The reference is to a “thought experiment” by the delegate of a “tiny nation”, “amongst the most powerless in the world”. The article is titled ‘Tiny Tuvalu Packs a Powerful Punch’. The delegate’s “plea” is moving; and is met by “applause”.

And so, paradoxically, those who would love islands do not stand up to be counted when called upon to take actions that could mitigate global warming. Indeed, Farbotko (2005b) has shown, in her gripping analysis of the representation of Tuvaluans in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (as above), that these islanders are often portrayed in the metropolitan press as victims of tragic circumstances beyond their control. They fit easily into quaint stereotypes of dehistoricized vulnerability and ‘paradise in peril’, which the rest of the world can watch - absolved of any responsibility - as they unfold, almost like a slow-motion movie, and presumably from a safe and distant vantage point (DeLoughrey, 2007: 214). Island life is treated as “an eccentric curiosity . . . caricatured as naïve and idealistic” (Tallack, 2008). For those who want a closer experience,

certain island jurisdictions – like Greenland, and the Maldives – have actually started marketing their tourist industry with a dark twist: appealing to those who wish to visit paradise “before it is too late” (Farbotko, 2005b: 285).

It is quite disheartening and unsettling to discover that the interests of the First World in the lives of small state islanders can continue to be held, even if tentatively, when islands and islanders are depicted much like threatened exotic *curiosa* in a grand walkthrough museum of civilization. Bikini, the Pacific atoll that gave its name to a sexy swim suit, is far better known internationally as a byword for erotic seduction than as a site of radioactive fallout and agonizing death (Gillis & Lowenthal, 2007: iv). Some islanders may be silently thankful that even a perverse interest by the international community is better than no interest at all (Baldacchino, 2008). Like ‘paradise’, the attributes of ‘small size’ may ensure some visibility, but the representation of that visibility is stymied and trivializes the subject matter to grotesque lows, possibly below the surface of the waves.

The way in which the world, including the smaller states themselves, think and speak about small states, and how the latter conceive of themselves as foreign policy recipients, rather than actors, remains thoroughly contaminated by their exclusive uni-dimensional portrayal as (albeit cute) victims of global trends (climate change, trade liberalization, financial regulation, drug cartels . . .). This tendency to emphasize weakness and fragility continues to be reflected in documents produced by the very same organizations that speak on their behalf. They are now firm believers in their own chronic vulnerability, and are looking for ‘resilience’ and ‘capacity building’ to mitigate their handicap. Many of the ruling elites of smaller states play along in this social construction of negative identity since this ensures them greater access to (dwindling?) official development resources. It is bitterly ironic, therefore, that the very reason why smaller states and their condition has gained the attention of global organizations seems to prevent the world as much as *the smaller states themselves* from appreciating capacities for proactive action and foreign policy initiatives⁶. Perhaps Mintoff and Jóhannesson considered themselves to be lions, rather than mice. It appears that the ‘tyranny of the weak’ is an unfortunate consequence of amnesia.

Conclusion: That Sinking Feeling

So who provides the correct analysis for smaller state diplomatic behaviour: Thucydides or Kissinger? The USA debacle in Vietnam certainly suggests that might can be proved wrong; and Thucydides goes on to describe how, although the Melians lost the ‘battle’ and were decimated, they still managed to portray the Athenians as morally degenerate, and Athenian democracy collapsed not long afterwards.

The pattern which appears to emerge is that smaller states are especially good in diplomatic adventures where (1) they are essentially bilateral [one-on-one]; (2) the smaller state commands the moral high ground such that it whips up domestic support and distorts the international media campaign in its favour, drumming up sympathy even from non-state actors; and (3) the issue at stake is essentially financial or economic. A broadly similar set of explanations may pertain equally well to the recent *Antigua versus USA* rulings by the WTO (PokerPages.com, 2007).

⁶ I am grateful to Philip Nel for these ideas.

Locating the issue within the geo-strategic considerations of superpower conflict raises the stakes. The best theatres for this to unfold in contemporary times are: (1) the China-Taiwan struggle for international recognition; and (2) in the voting patterns of the International Whaling Commission, where the commercial whaling interests of Japan could be seen to match the funding requirements of various smaller states (e.g. BBC News, 2006; Bertram & Poirine, 2007: 365). In spite of the considerable number of smaller states on the world stage, and their ability to make their presence - and their plight - felt in international fora, especially at the UN through AOSIS, and more recently through GLISPA, their lobbying has not generated much tangible benefit beyond rhetoric, sympathy and applause. Concern about such foreign policy failure was already evident in the Mauritius International Review Meeting of 2005; and while a study concluded that it would be unfair to say that AOSIS has failed, “the underlying goals of the coalition . . . were not achieved” (Chasek, 2005: 135). Cooperative, smaller state, multilateral diplomacy has proved largely futile, *not* so much because smaller states have limited policy capacity, but mainly because no larger country has been embarrassed to act through its failure to respond to smaller state concerns, and no larger country has deemed its own economic or strategic interests unduly threatened by the slow sinking of the “languid sensual world” of tiny Tuvalu (Pollock, 2005), or even of a slightly less tiny Maldives. The Tuvaluans are meanwhile voting with their feet; already, there are more Tuvaluans living overseas than on their doomed archipelagic homeland. In spite of the islanders’ attempts, the dangers posed to their smaller low-lying jurisdictions by climate change may not have turned them (yet?) into “the ecological conscience” of climate politics (Oberthür & Ott, 1999: 26; Payne, 2004: 633).

One remains hopeful that the Netherlands should not prove averse to granting some technical and other development assistance on favourable terms to the Maldivian Government, enabling the Dutch to showcase some of their coastal barrier know-how on Hulhumale.

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