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Smallness and Vulnerability

2.1 There have always been small states in the international system. In some periods they have been the norm rather than the exception and have set the pattern of relations between states. In the current state system small states tend to be overlooked. This arises from the enormous disparities of power between states in the present system compared to previous systems. Such disparities expose them to threats they find difficult to counter and make them vulnerable to systemic shocks which they cannot control. At the same time it is important to recognise that subject to differing definitions of 'what is small', small states constitute between a quarter to half the number of sovereign states in the current international system. But they lack influence and this is particularly the case for the smallest among them. These have varied profiles but they also hold much in common. This chapter examines these issues identifying which states are 'small', why they are more similar than dissimilar to each other, and why they remain vulnerable.

Definition

2.2 No wholly agreed definition of a small state presently exists. Any definition is therefore to some degree arbitrary, although it may be less so if two considerations are borne in mind. First, economists have demonstrated that for small countries a high correlation exists between population and other measures of economic size such as total GNP and total land area, confirming that in economic analysis it is reasonable to define small states by population criterion alone. Second, that the concept of smallness, being relative, has continually undergone revision, reflecting the character of the international system at the time. Since the Second World War more than a hundred states have been created and the 89 countries with a population of five million or less are now just short of a numerical majority in the international system, leading to the need to distinguish within this broad category the particular interests of the smallest members.

2.3 In practice this has been achieved by defining a small state as one with a population of around one million or less. This was taken as the defining criterion in the 1985 *Vulnerability* report and has stood the test of time very well. It is familiar and it is widely used. At the same time world population has increased and a relative upward adjustment of population figures is necessary to take account of this fact. A revised upper limit of 1.5 million is taken as the new cut-off point. On current population figures there are 49 independent states with populations of 1.5 million or below, 28 of which are in the Commonwealth and 42 in the developing world.

2.4 An additional consideration is the importance of region. The *Vulnerability* report argued that the particular circumstances of the Caribbean, the South Pacific and Southern Africa warranted the inclusion of Jamaica, Papua New Guinea, and Lesotho because they shared many physical and economic characteristics with all the small states of their region. That conclusion still holds with the further addition of Namibia which has since joined the Commonwealth. The countries covered in the study are given in Table 2.1.

The Characteristics of Small States

2.5 While small states are very different from each other it is possible to identify certain features which many of the small states identified in Table 2.1 hold in common and which bear directly on their security. These have been identified as openness, insularity or 'enclaveness', resilience, weakness and dependence (Sutton & Payne, 1993). They can be positive as well as negative, providing a different balance of advantage or disadvantage to any individual state depending on the degree and mix of the various elements.

2.6 **Openness** is traditionally associated with the external focus of the economy in which international trade assumes greater significance than in larger states and in which diversification of production is markedly less. But it also has significant political and cultural manifestations. The former is witnessed in the penetrability of the political system, where a relatively greater shortage of managerial and technical capabilities allows for higher levels of expatriate staffing and increased reliance on external threat assessment than would be the case in most states. The latter is seen in the greater propensity to look outward and migrate than is the case in many other countries, combined with a readiness to adopt foreign cultural norms which encourages the erosion of values and identity. While this has obvious negative effects, there can also be positive benefits in the higher levels of sensitivity in such countries to changes in the international system which allow for adaptation and innovation. Openness stimulates competition and permits small states to exploit new opportunities in the emerging global economy provided by the mobility of international finance.

Table 2.1 Population of Small* Developing States Included in the Study

	Population (1995)
Caribbean	
Antigua and Barbuda	**65,000**
The Bahamas	**276,000**
Barbados	**261,000**
Belize	**216,000**
Dominica	**73,000**
Grenada	**91,000**
Guyana	**835,000**
St Kitts and Nevis	**41,000**
St Lucia	**158,000**
St Vincent and the Grenadines	**111,000**
Suriname	410,000
Trinidad and Tobago	**1,287,000**
Jamaica	**2,522,000**
South Pacific	
Fiji	**775,000**
Kiribati	**79,000**
Micronesia	107,000
Marshall Islands	56,000
Nauru	**8,000**
Palau	16,000
Samoa	**165,000**
Solomon Islands	**375,000**
Tonga	**104,000**
Tuvalu	**11,000**
Vanuatu	**169,000**
Papua New Guinea	**4,302,000**
Africa	
Botswana	**1,450,000**
Cape Verde	380,000
Djibouti	634,000
Equatorial Guinea	400,000
Gabon	1,077,000
The Gambia	**1,113,000**
Guinea-Bissau	1,070,000
Namibia	**1,545,000**
Sao Tome e Principe	129,000
Swaziland	**900,000**
Lesotho	**1,980,000**
Indian Ocean	
Comoros	499,000
Maldives	**253,000**
Mauritius	**1,128,000**
Seychelles	**74,000**
Mediterranean	
Cyprus	**734,000**
Malta	**372,000**
Middle East	
Bahrain	548,000
Qatar	642,000
Asia	
Brunei Darussalam	**285,000**

*Member countries of the Commonwealth are shown in **bold.**

Source: Commonwealth Secretariat, *Small States: Economic Review and Basic Statistics* (1997).

2.7 **Insularity** is especially associated with small states. Thirty-two small states are islands and when the islands are also small much of life is conditioned by an awareness of insularity. This is often manifest in a close association with a sense of place which gives preference to individual identity over collective solidarity, making co-operation between islands problematic and secession an ever-present possibility. Other common characteristics are remoteness, which has considerable economic and administrative costs, environmental precariousness, which is seen in the dangers of frequent natural disasters, and acute indefensibility posed by the problems of meeting a multitude of potential or actual threats from the sea with limited resources. At the same time many island states have benefited from the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) which gives them rights to resource-rich Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) which extend over tens of thousands of square kilometres and promise considerable economic benefits in years to come. Many are also well situated geographically and climatically to benefit from the fast-growing tourist market.

2.8 **Resilience** is a property associated with the political and social systems of small states. There is a strong measure of institutional coherence in many small states which has encouraged constitutional development and the spread of democracy. Small states are more likely to be democratic than large states, irrespective of levels of economic development. This suggests a greater measure of political consensus and of social cohesion than applies in larger societies. The predominant political culture is one of 'concerted political harmony' which sees incremental change as the most effective way to promote political legitimacy and deliver efficient administration. In consequence, and in comparison to other states, small states exhibit an enviable record of political stability. Nevertheless, political order does, on occasion, break down and examples of small states with repressive political systems can be found. However, the comparative rarity of such cases confirms the general rule: the political regimes of small states tend to be pragmatic and robust, able to withstand significant challenges which larger states would find difficult to meet. They are also significantly better performers in delivering human development than larger states, with many of them to be found in the upper ranks of the listings for the developing world set out in the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index.

2.9 **Weakness** derives from an international system based largely or in part on power. Small states have very low military capabilities and cannot do much individually to defend themselves from aggression. Accordingly, they must rely more than other states do on the international system to maintain their security. This provides three alternative strategies at the present time: (1) neutrality; (2) alliance with the superpower or one or more of the major powers and/or regional powers; (3) collective security, in a universal and/or regional organisation. Neutrality is a difficult legal status to gain and sustain and is usually related to exceptional conditions pertaining to the state. Alliances are treated with caution since the asymmetry of power between the partners introduces greater uncertainty and risk for the smaller state than the larger. Nevertheless, many small states have sought informal understandings on their security with major powers or regional powers to provide them with an 'umbrella' under which their survival in the face of extreme threats can be assured. Finally, while the established guarantee of security for a small state is a universal collective security system prepared to resist aggression on their behalf, an alternative route at present is through various regional arrangements in which the small state can hope to have its particular security needs identified and accepted.

2.10 **Dependence** is a general condition affecting many developing countries. For small states, and particularly the smallest among them, it is a way of life. This has led to their orientation being more often outward than inward, especially in the economic sector, where it is most clearly evident in their reliance on invisible income from remittances and tourism, their relatively greater levels of official development assistance (ODA) per capita than in larger states, and in their need to maintain preferential trading arrangements to ensure the continuing access of their products to metropolitan markets. These features have rendered small states vulnerable to adverse developments in the economy, domestic politics and foreign policy of the larger states and great powers with which they have had close ties. At the same time, it is important to note that dependence is not a static concept and that changes in the international system can provide new opportunities for both sets of partners from which each can benefit, as in the promotion of offshore financial services or greater awareness of the needs of environmental protection.

2.11 These characteristics are interrelated and provide an overview of the most important elements of security for the majority of small states. None of them individually are exclusive to small states, but collectively they provide insights into why the security of small states is different in degree rather than in kind to larger states. All of them will be examined at greater length elsewhere in the study with particular reference to three dimensions: the economic, the environmental and the political. In each dimension small states will have to meet and overcome the constraints which have been sketched out if they are to maintain or advance their security. It is not, however, entirely a negative story. Many small states possess significant advantages. They have resilient political structures, good social capital, large EEZs and an openness to the outside world which allows them to adapt to changed circumstances. This provides them with the opportunity to fashion policies which minimise disadvantage and maximise potential. The record of success in small states shows they can achieve levels of security and development above the average. While small states remain vulnerable, they do not remain helpless.

The Concept of Vulnerability

2.12 To be vulnerable is to be especially susceptible to risk of harm. Since all societies are subject to risk, all societies are vulnerable. What makes vulnerability a focus of concern is that some societies are more at risk than others. The baseline for comparison can be societies in general or some comparator group of societies. In the current context the vulnerability of small states is a subject of concern because of the presumption that small states are more at risk than states in general or more at risk than 'big' states. This was a proposition advanced in the *Vulnerability* report which referred to 'the inherent vulnerability of small states' in the contemporary international system due to their limited human resource base and low economic capacity to meet threats.

2.13 What is being addressed here is the significance of the internal properties of a country. A given state, society or ecosystem may be subject to many threats and exposed to many risks but may have the ability to resist them or, if it cannot, it may have the ability to return to a prior path of social, environmental, economic and political development, i.e. to reconstruct itself without major disruption. The concept of vulnerability therefore has to take into account the ability of a country to respond to risk. At the same time it is also clear that vulnerability is increased if a country is exposed to high levels of threat and multiple sources of risk. The important determinant here will be the external environment in which it is located as some areas of the world are more inhospitable or more prone to conflict and turmoil than are others.

2.14 Vulnerability is thus the consequence of the interaction of two sets of factors: (1) the incidence and intensity of risk and threat and (2) the ability to withstand risks and threats (resistance) and to 'bounce back' from their consequences (resilience). A country may therefore be highly vulnerable in the narrow sense, i.e. be especially at risk, but may not be vulnerable because of its ability to resist the risk. An example might be a country especially at risk from hurricanes, but which has high standards of building such that buildings damage and risks to human life are minimised. In the same way, a country may be at risk from hurricanes but may have a well-functioning administrative procedure for coping with the consequences, allowing it to provide relief and rehabilitation without massive upheaval. Somewhat differently a country may be at risk from drug traffickers or mercenaries but have in place such a sure system of detection and such a draconian range of penalties that it is not threatened by them. One obvious implication of this understanding of vulnerability is that societies that are poor in human and economic resources are likely to be vulnerable relative to any given risk they face. They will tend not to have the ability to resist or reconstruct rapidly. Equally it follows that countries which can anticipate threats but do little to deter them are more at risk than those that do take appropriate action.

2.15 Vulnerability thus always implies susceptibility to something and by something. Physical vulnerability will tend to relate to the risks faced by ecological systems and by the human-made environment to climatic events, other natural disasters (such as earthquakes) and to human-made pollution. Economic vulnerability will refer to the susceptibility of economic sectors, such as agriculture, and of the economy as a whole, to both internal and external risks. Social vulnerability relates to the exposure of individuals and social groups to risks of climatic events (hurricanes, sea-level rise etc.), disease, economic events (such as sudden increases in the price of imports or falls in the price of exports) and political events (such as ethnic conflict and the breakdown of law and order). Political vulnerability relates to threats to territorial integrity, core values and internal cohesion from forces outside and inside the state. The extent to which susceptibility becomes vulnerability depends on the ability of the receiving agents to respond to risk by resistance (including deterrence) and resilience.

Size and Vulnerability

2.16 Given that resilience has been identified as a feature of many small states their vulnerability, in some respects, is correspondingly reduced. At the same time it is clear that resistance to threats is governed by size, especially when one considers the number and magnitude of risks and threats faced by small states. Some small states will face high levels of risks/threats which they will be unable to resist: they will be acutely vulnerable to harm. Others will face lower levels of risks/threats which they can manage with difficulty but without irreparable harm: they will be moderately vulnerable. Finally some will face minimal threats or be sufficiently resistant to them to avoid significant harm: they remain inherently vulnerable even though they are not significantly at risk.

2.17 What most will have in common, however, is a susceptibility to risks and threats set at a relatively lower threshold than for larger states. This is the product of size. It is the consequence of the interrelationship between the characteristics of small states identified earlier and while it has political and environmental dimensions, it is most readily identifiable in the economy. Pioneering work by Briguglio (1995) demonstrated a relationship between economic vulnerabilities and SIDS which disadvantaged them but which was insufficiently recognised by the international community in assessing the development needs of such states. Preliminary work on a composite vulnerability index for all small states has been undertaken by the Commonwealth Secretariat. That work appears to confirm that Briguglio's finding is applicable to all small states and highlights the need to adjust the per capita income figures for small states in a downward direction to take their vulnerabilities into account. Additional studies by the Secretariat are currently underway to refine the index with the example of the widely-used Human Development Index very much in mind. While the findings from these studies are at the moment tentative they do verify what has been argued in the *Vulnerability* report and elsewhere: that small states face external constraints, risks and threats that impact on them to a degree both qualitatively and quantitatively different from other states, making them especially vulnerable.