

Part I

Focus of the Study

Introduction

1. This study is the result of a decision by Commonwealth Heads of Government at their 1983 Meeting in New Delhi, following their discussion of the situation created by the military intervention in Grenada in October of that year. However, although the study was requested in the context of the security implications of the Grenada crisis, it was also conceived in the wider framework of the Commonwealth's long-standing concern with the special economic problems of its very many small member countries.

2. Commonwealth concern with 'small states' was first given formal expression at the meeting of Finance Ministers in 1977 in Barbados. Having noted the special characteristics of small island economies, particularly their extreme dependence on exports and imports, high dependence on capital inflows, and in some cases their lack of natural resources, the Ministers urged the international community to adopt a more flexible approach to the requirements of these countries as well as special measures to assist them. The following year, at their first regional Meeting, Commonwealth Heads of Government from the Asia/Pacific region asked the Secretary-General to seek support for Commonwealth-wide programmes to counteract the particular difficulties that beset the growing number of small members, particularly the island developing countries.

3. In response, the Secretariat prepared a programme designed to assist in overcoming "the disadvantages of small size, isolation and scarce resources which severely limit the capacity of such countries to achieve their development objectives or to pursue their national interests in a wider international context". This was endorsed by Commonwealth Heads of Government at their 1979 Meeting held in Lusaka and its importance was reaffirmed at their 1981 Meeting held in Melbourne. Since that time it has continued to be expanded on a pragmatic basis; a small states perspective now informs the work of all of the Secretariat's functional Divisions.

4. Meeting in New Delhi in November 1983, with the political repercussions of events in Grenada still resonant, Commonwealth leaders felt that the problems of small states “deserved consideration on a wider basis, including that of national security”. They accordingly requested the Secretary-General, drawing as necessary on the resources of member states, to undertake a study of the special needs of small states “consonant with the right to sovereignty and territorial integrity that they shared with all nations”. It was in pursuance of this that the Secretary-General established our Consultative Group whose 14 members, drawn from both large and small member countries, have carried out the study requested.

5. At our first meeting, held in London in July 1984, we reviewed the scope of the study within the terms of reference set out in the New Delhi Communiqué and agreed our procedure of work. In view of the sensitive nature of the subject and its complexity, we felt we should supplement our own deliberations by drawing as widely as possible not only on the views of Commonwealth governments but also on informed opinion in member countries. To facilitate this, we invited the Secretariat to convene three regional colloquia, with both governmental and non-governmental participation, each attended by some members of our Group.

6. All the colloquia had the support of both governments and non-governmental sectors in the countries belonging to the regions involved and were characterised by a wide-ranging discussion of the main issues of regional concern. The first one, covering the South Pacific, was held in New Zealand in August 1984. The other two took place early in 1985: the African/Indian Ocean colloquium in Seychelles in January, and the Caribbean colloquium in The Bahamas in February. We held our second meeting, again in London, at the beginning of March. After considering the views expressed at the three colloquia, we agreed on the substance and the main themes of our Report, which we finalised at our last meeting in London at the end of July 1985.

7. We note that a number of important non-governmental institutions, including the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, have prepared their own studies on the subject. As we proceeded with our work we were much impressed by the widespread interest the whole issue of the vulnerability of small states has generated.

Terms of reference

8. When requesting this study Heads of Government had a number of considerations in mind which were set out in paragraph 11 of the New Delhi Communiqué. Since these form part of our overall terms of reference, we quote the paragraph in full:

“Time and again in their discussions, Commonwealth leaders were recalled to the special needs of small states, not only in the Caribbean but elsewhere in the Commonwealth. They recognised that the Commonwealth itself had given some attention to these needs in the context of economic development but felt that the matter deserved consideration on a wider basis, including that of national security. Recalling the particular dangers faced in the past by small Commonwealth countries, they requested the Secretary-General to undertake a study, drawing as necessary on the resources and experience of Commonwealth countries of the special needs of such states consonant with the right to sovereignty and territorial integrity that they shared with all nations.”

9. In addition, we felt we needed to take into account certain related considerations expressed in the following paragraph from the Goa Declaration on International Security which accompanied the New Delhi Communiqué:

“We are particularly concerned at the vulnerability of small states to external attack and interference in their affairs. These countries are members of the international community which must respect their independence and, at the very least has a moral obligation to provide effectively for their territorial integrity. We have separately agreed on an urgent study of these issues. Additionally, however, we will play our part in helping the international community to make an appropriate response to the UN Secretary-General’s call for strengthening of collective security in keeping with the Charter.”

Scope of the mandate

10. Heads of Government thus gave us an essentially unrestricted mandate: we were to examine the special needs of small states on a wider basis than that of economic development alone and include specifically issues relating to national security. Accordingly, the relevant questions were: Should national security be regarded merely as one element among many others to be taken into account, as *primus inter pares* in other words? Or should it be seen as the key element to which everything else should be related? And, since the Secretariat had already carried out an intensive analysis of small states’ special economic needs, how much emphasis should be placed on this aspect in the present study? In arriving at an agreed interpretation of our mandate we were greatly assisted by the Secretary-General. His inaugural address, which we have appended to our Report, provided valuable pointers to guide our deliberations.

11. We have proceeded on the basis that Commonwealth Heads of Government intended the ‘vulnerability’ of small states to be the essential

concept informing the enquiry; that issues of national security were of primary relevance; but that economic factors were also of direct concern both as elements of vulnerability in their own right and as contributing to national security problems. We feel, moreover, that security and development are necessarily interrelated, given that development may be seen as a widely based process encompassing the improvement of all aspects of a nation's capacity to perform effectively.

12. Recognition of the link between security and development inevitably brought us face to face with the much more sensitive question of how far it would be legitimate within our mandate to take account of the internal political difficulties of small states. We discussed at some length the implications of the fact that in many cases military intervention in Third World states, whether large or small, is triggered by an unstable situation which a neighbouring country may genuinely perceive as creating a threat to its own security or else cynically use as a pretext for initiating either direct or indirect military operations. Since it seemed to us that visible signs of internal unrest, or even the absence of a strongly projected sense of national cultural and social identity, could well have the effect of actively encouraging intervention, we concluded that it would be desirable to include recommendations designed to assist small states to strengthen their inner cohesion.

13. In the light of the above, it was clear to us that the concept of vulnerability should not be interpreted in a strictly military sense. We decided to adopt a comprehensive approach to the special needs of small states and to consider their 'vulnerability' in all its relevant aspects—military, political, economic, technical, social and cultural.

Underlying principles of the Study

14. The reference in the New Delhi Communiqué to small states' right to sovereignty and territorial integrity which "they share with all nations" implicitly touches on a fundamental principle of contemporary international relations as defined under the Charter of the United Nations. This is the principle of the sovereign equality of all nations in terms of their legal rights as independent members of the Organisation. In other words, Commonwealth leaders were signalling their own collective recognition that the accepted international precept of respect for national sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence, underwritten in the United Nations Charter, is no less applicable to small states than to larger nations more capable of defending the vital attributes of their sovereignty. At the same time, in the Goa Declaration, they went out of their way to stress the view that the international community has the moral obligation to provide effectively for the territorial integrity of

small states, thereby tacitly acknowledging that small states are inherently less able to defend their integrity themselves.

15. Prior to the establishment of the United Nations the answer to the question whether the capacity for self-defence should not itself be regarded as a necessary characteristic of sovereign statehood would almost certainly have had to be “yes”. The United Nations Charter, however, outlaws war. It also stipulates, under Article 51, that nothing “shall impair the inherent right of individual and collective self defence if an armed attack occurs against a member state, *until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security*”. (italics added.) Article 51, moreover, goes on to state that measures taken by United Nations’ members in exercise of this right “shall not in any way affect the authority and responsibility of the Security Council to take such action as it deems necessary in order to maintain or restore international peace and security”. The significance of this qualification on the right of self defence is that Article 51 is placed at the end of Chapter VII of the Charter which provides for the establishment of a United Nations collective security system, including possible enforcement measures, precisely in order to safeguard individual nations against attack and thus eliminate the need for each state to look to its own defence.

16. Some might argue that when it became apparent, only a few years after the United Nations’ inception, that the Charter’s collective security system would in all probability never be fully implemented, steps should have been taken then to discourage the decolonisation of very small territories which would obviously be unable to defend themselves militarily. This is not a contention we could accept, or even countenance. The decolonisation process, inevitably and rightly, increased in momentum down the years. Particularly after the adoption in 1960 of the United Nations Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, it came to be seen as clearly applicable to all territories wishing to exercise this option. Moreover, the United Nations Charter itself does not provide for any limitation on admission to membership relating to size.

17. It is true that during the sixties, when it was realised that the number of very small newly independent states was likely to increase substantially, consideration was given to ideas for creating a special membership status for them. It is significant, however, that their vulnerability in security terms did not feature prominently in those discussions, which were more concerned with economic viability and the political issue of giving ‘mini-states’ equal voting rights in the General Assembly. In the event, the whole debate was abandoned before the end of the decade, not least

because of the difficulty of legally accommodating a special association status within the provisions of the Charter.

18. It is relevant to recall that British policy supportive of the right to self-determination played a major role in making the modern Commonwealth possible. During the sixties the Commonwealth itself considered proposals for creating a special category of associate membership applicable to very small states. Since, unlike the United Nations, the Commonwealth did not have to reconcile new membership procedures with the provisions of a written constitution, it would have been possible to devise a new class of membership without major difficulty. Nevertheless, it was decided that the Commonwealth should not impose a special membership status on small countries that wished to become full members. Instead, the option of special membership was left open to all eligible newly independent countries wishing to avail themselves of it. To date, only four countries (Republic of Maldives, Nauru, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Tuvalu), all of them very small, have chosen to do so and two of them (Republic of Maldives and St. Vincent and the Grenadines) have recently applied for and been granted full membership.

19. The history of these limited endeavours to offer small states a less than full political status within the international community underscores the recognition by Commonwealth leaders of the international community's moral obligation to provide for the territorial integrity of small states. This obligation rests on the fact that these defenceless countries have been welcomed into the community by all its members, including the major powers principally responsible for the failure to implement the collective security system for which the United Nations Charter provides.

20. It is also pertinent to observe that, in practice, no nation ever seeks to defend itself entirely unaided. Even the two super powers have deemed it necessary to build up military alliance systems supplemented by a network of other 'friendly' nations on whose goodwill and active support they feel they would need to rely if the moment arrived when they had to defend their territory. The truth is, as every government will recognise, that in an interdependent world no nation "can be sufficient and entire unto itself"—in the military sphere, no less than the economic. Even so, it is clear that the extraordinary degree to which small states must rely on assistance from other countries as well as international bodies for preserving their security does put them into a quite separate category. The awareness of their extreme dependence inevitably engenders in small states a much deeper sense of vulnerability than is experienced by larger nations.

21. We have, therefore, been set a difficult task: that of reconciling the acknowledged 'specialness' of small states with the recognition of their

equality as sovereign members of the international community. We have done our best to achieve this by trying to ensure that our recommendations not only avoid implications that might diminish the sovereign status of small states but also give due expression to the accepted international principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of nations. To assist us in this endeavour we formulated a working definition of national security as “the absence of threat to the exercise of the capacity to govern, protect, preserve and advance the state and its peoples consistent with the principle of respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other states”.