

Part II

Dimensions of the Problem

Chapter 1

The Characteristics of Smallness

WHICH COMMONWEALTH COUNTRIES ARE “SMALL STATES”?

1.1 The dismantling of the various colonial empires that had been consolidated during the 19th century or even earlier has been one of the most significant developments of the post World War II era, transforming the political map by bringing close to 90 newly independent states into the international community within the space of 40 years. It was not, however, until the seventies that decolonisation started to be applied extensively to territories with only a few hundred thousand people. Among British colonial territories, for example, only 12 such countries had become independent by 1969; whereas, with the exception of three states, all of the 20 countries that have become independent members of the Commonwealth since 1970 possess small populations.

1.2 While there is clearly more than one criterion for defining a small state, we have taken population as the basis for determining which Commonwealth countries should be encompassed within our study. By so doing we are following what seems to have become general international practice. For although composite criteria combining population with other indicators like total national income or land area have sometimes been used in the various attempts made over the years to delineate a special grouping of small states for economic purposes, no accepted classification on this composite basis has emerged. Population is the one indicator common to all such definitions. It was also the sole criterion employed to determine the number of countries covered in the formative study on the “Status and Problems of Very Small States and Territories” by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research

(UNITAR) in 1969, which remains one of the most comprehensive examinations of the subject so far undertaken.

1.3 In using population as the key indicator of smallness—while conceding that this might perhaps ideally be too narrow a conception—the UNITAR study fixed an upper limit of around one million. This cut-off point of one million also appears to have gained a wide currency for the very good pragmatic reason that almost all states within this limit tend to experience the special problems particularly associated with small size. There is clear evidence that severely restricted human resources can be a crucial constraint on a country's overall capacity to function effectively as an independent member of the international community. All cut-off points are by their nature arbitrary, and may seem unfair to those just outside the limit. Certainly, from the standpoint of national security, many Third World states with much larger populations tend to confront a similar range of difficulties. But, equally, there is little doubt that these difficulties can become noticeably more acute when the population falls below the one million mark.

1.4 The one million limit is moreover of particular relevance in the Commonwealth context. Since Britain possessed the largest colonial empire at the end of World War II, it is not surprising to find that of the world's current total of 44 independent states with populations of around one million or less, 29 are Commonwealth members. Even more pertinently perhaps, no fewer than 15 of these 29 states have populations of under 200,000; and within this latter category of what might be termed 'mini-states', seven are 'micro-states' with populations of 100,000 or less.

1.5 This distribution of population in our view amply justified the Commonwealth Secretariat's decision, when launching its special programme for small and other specially disadvantaged states in 1979, to set an upper limit of around one million in identifying the small states which would benefit from the programme. We therefore had no hesitation in adopting the same cut-off point. However, since security issues constitute a major perspective of the study, we agreed it would be essential also to bring in both Jamaica (population over two million) and Papua New Guinea (population over three million), because they share many characteristics and also maintain integral links with all the small states in their respective regions. The 31 countries covered in our study are listed on the next page.¹

¹ The desirability of extending our study to include small territories that are currently dependencies of larger Commonwealth members was briefly considered, but it was felt that Heads' of Government unmistakable emphasis on the importance of respect for sovereignty and independence in effect precluded this option.

POPULATION OF SMALL STATES INCLUDED IN THE STUDY

Population (1983)

CARIBBEAN

Antigua & Barbuda	78,000
Bahamas	222,000
Barbados	260,000
Belize	153,000
Dominica	81,000
Grenada	114,000
Guyana	801,000
St. Kitts-Nevis	53,000
St. Lucia	125,000
St. Vincent & the Grenadines	102,000
Trinidad & Tobago	1,140,000
Jamaica	2,264,000

SOUTH PACIFIC

Fiji	670,000
Kiribati	61,000
Nauru	8,000
Solomon Islands	254,000
Tonga	104,000
Tuvalu	7,000
Vanuatu	127,000
Western Samoa	161,000
Papua New Guinea	3,197,000

AFRICA

Botswana	998,000
Gambia	697,000
Lesotho	1,437,000
Swaziland	688,000

INDIAN OCEAN

Maldives	168,000
Mauritius	999,000
Seychelles	65,000

MEDITERRANEAN

Cyprus	653,000
Malta	354,000

ASIA

Brunei	209,000
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Sources: The World Bank 1985, "The World Bank Atlas" Washington, D.C.; United Nations, 1984, "Population and Vital Statistics Report" New York.

GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING OF COMMONWEALTH SMALL STATES

1.6 Although small states all share the characteristic of extremely limited human resources, the particular difficulties each country faces in the context of national security are significantly determined by a combination of two sets of factors: certain types of physical features and the geopolitical consequences of their location within their respective regions. It is therefore essential first to try to identify the most important common and distinguishing geographical features that are likely to have a direct bearing on their vulnerability. The most obvious starting point is to divide the 31 countries into two groups: small states that are situated next to other countries on land masses, and those that are separated from other countries by being islands.

(i) *The continental states*

1.7 Only seven Commonwealth small states belong to the first group. In the **Caribbean** region, Belize is situated on the east coast of the central American peninsula with Guatemala and Mexico as neighbours on either side, while Guyana, on the north-east coast of South America, is flanked by Venezuela and Suriname with Brazil to the south. In **Africa**, The Gambia extending inland from the west coast for some 320 km. on both sides of a major river, is a narrow strip of terrain which, except at the coast, is entirely surrounded by Senegal. Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland are situated in the heart of Southern Africa, all of them lacking any access to the sea and one an enclave within the territory of the Republic of South Africa. Lastly, in **Asia** Brunei is located on the north-western tip of the island of Borneo, flanked by two states that are part of the Federation of Malaysia.

1.8 The key factor common to all seven countries is shared borders with at least one other much larger contiguous state, while for three of them the most important geographical disadvantage is their landlocked situation. It might also be worth noting that Botswana is roughly the size of France and therefore considerably bigger than any of the few other Commonwealth small states, whether continental or island, that have a fairly substantial land area.

(ii) *The island states*

1.9 The 24 Commonwealth small island states are both too numerous and too diverse in nature to characterise individually. Only a very few of them are single- or even two-island states. The majority are multi-island entities, in some the component islands are dispersed over vast distances

whereas in others they are relatively close together; and in several—The Bahamas, Maldives and Fiji, for example—the islands number in their hundreds. As might be expected, in most of these multi-island states there is a considerable variation in population density among the component islands, many of which may have never been inhabited. Variables of this kind can be highly relevant in assessing the geopolitical implications of the island states' regional setting and the different types of external security threats that may be associated with a particular region.

1.10 In the most numerous regional group, the significant geographical feature of the ten **Caribbean** island states is their distribution, over some 1,600 km., on a curve in the waters separating the United States' Florida peninsula from the northern tip of South America. The Bahamas at the northern end of this chain is no more than about 288 km. from Miami, while Trinidad and Tobago at the southern end is less than 28.8 km. from the coast of Venezuela, and the islands on the Atlantic edge of the curve—Antigua, Barbuda and Barbados—lie at a maximum distance of some 1,600 km. east of the mainland. Most of the islands fall within the seasonal hurricane belt and are therefore prone to a type of natural disaster that can do enormous damage to their economies.

1.11 The geographical situation of the **South Pacific** island countries provides a considerable contrast in a number of respects. Generally speaking, they are more remote from larger population centres. The distance of these island states from their nearest larger neighbours, Australia and New Zealand, is roughly twice that separating the Caribbean islands from the Americas. Papua New Guinea,² the most westerly state of the group, is closest to Australia, but 800 km. or so from the nearest coastal point, while Western Samoa, the group's outermost state in the South Pacific Ocean, is over 4,320 km. away; almost exactly the same distance separates Kiribati, the northernmost state, from the nearest point on the New Zealand coast.

1.12 Many of the South Pacific states are made up of widely scattered component islands. In consequence, although the capital islands are separated from each other by an average of upwards of 1,120 km., in several cases the outlying islands of two states may be less than 400 nautical miles apart. This can give rise to problems of the delimitation of their respective 200-mile exclusive economic zones (EEZs) as defined by the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention and recognised by customary international law. Nevertheless, compared with the Caribbean countries,

² Although Papua New Guinea is usually designated as, and indeed considers itself to be, an island state, by far the largest sector of its extensive terrain lies on the eastern half of the huge land mass of New Guinea, the western half being the territory of Irian Jaya which is part of Indonesia. Thus it constitutes a paradoxical and unique case of an island state that is at the same time contiguous with a much larger nation.

the wider dispersal of the South Pacific island states as a group ensures that each has a much less restricted sovereign access to the valuable resources of their surrounding waters.

1.13 The three **Indian Ocean** island states likewise experience the advantages and disadvantages of geographical isolation, even though they are situated in an area that is of primary strategic importance for so many major powers, including the two super powers. The Republic of Maldives is some 800 km. from Sri Lanka; Mauritius lies over 3,200 km. to the south, close to the small island territory of Réunion and only 224 km. from Madagascar; at roughly the midway point is Seychelles, situated literally almost 1,600 km. from any other country in every direction. Given the vast distances separating the three nations, they form a regional grouping only in a nominal sense. As is shown later, in the absence of geographical cohesion, each has tended to pursue its own individual course in establishing economic and political relationships with other countries.

1.14 The geographical situation of the two **Mediterranean** island states of Cyprus and Malta, the former located close to the Turkish and Syrian coasts and the latter close to Sicily, clearly does not resemble that of any of the other Commonwealth island countries. In both cases their access to the 200-mile EEZ is significantly more restricted. As against this, neither of them faces the difficulties of having to administer and safeguard a complex of component islands; Malta comprises only three adjacent islands and Cyprus is one of the few single-island states.