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Challenges Facing Small States at the UN

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Let me begin by thanking the Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS) for inviting me to its Annual Meeting and to participate in this plenary session on “Small States at the UN.” It is befitting that this discussion on small states is taking place in Trinidad, in the Caribbean, a sub-region composed entirely of small states. On a personal note, let me say how happy I am to be here. You may not believe this, but it is my first visit to the Caribbean (excluding Cuba). More importantly, it is a sub-region with which Singapore, another small state, shares a strong sense of kinship. I have also always considered my CARICOM colleagues (together with my South Pacific colleagues) as being amongst Singapore’s best friends at the UN.

President John F Kennedy, in an address before the Irish Parliament on 28 June 1963, reminded us of the varied and invaluable contributions of small states by invoking the words of a great English orator who had made the following observation:

*“All the world owes much to the little ‘five feet high’ nations.
The greatest art of the world was the work of little nations.
The most enduring literature of the world came from little nations.
The heroic deeds that thrill humanity through generations were
the deeds of little nations fighting for their freedom.”*

While these words were uttered in Ireland, they are equally applicable to other small states, and especially true for this part of the world. The countries of the Caribbean might be “five feet high” nations but between them, they have produced four Nobel Laureates. On a per capita basis, I don’t think there is any other sub-region which can claim to be as prolific as the Caribbean based on this measure of achievement.

One might be tempted to extrapolate this line of thinking to the performance of small states at the UN and to assume that they have done as well at the UN in securing their political and economic interests. After all, of the 192 member states of the UN, at least 100 countries are deemed to be small, being members of the special informal grouping in the UN called the Forum of Small States (FOSS). (FOSS is a loose non-ideological and non-geographical coalition of small states. It is coordinated by Singapore and is based on common interests. Members meet regularly to exchange views and coordinate positions.)

However, I am sorry to disappoint. The record of small states at the UN has been at best mixed. Often, we don’t bring our collective influence to bear on any issue. Why is that so? What are the problems confronting small states and which prevent them from operating more effectively at the UN? I can think of several reasons.

First, there is the problem of resources and coverage. Small states invariably do not have the manpower to cover comprehensively all the issues and committees at the UN, let alone have people running about to ferret out information and do political analysis.

Small states with small delegations may not have as many “feelers” as compared to larger delegations. (Some of the larger Member States may have two or three delegates per Committee.) This could be a disadvantage when gathering information. And, as you know, information can mean power and influence, especially at the UN.

It also means spotty attendance at meetings, missing out on the informal processes which are an important aspect of UN work, including discussions in the corridors and participating in smaller working groups, and an inability to engage in robust debate either because they do not know what is going on or do not have a sufficiently good picture of what is going on vis-a-vis many issues at the UN. As a result, small states sometimes display a lack of self-confidence, questioning their own ability to provide credible input, since they have not been following the discussions as thoroughly as other bigger delegations.

This resource and concomitant coverage problem means that most small states end up being led by their noses by the larger delegations that know what they are talking about.

And because many small delegations are not able to be present at various meetings, the problem gets further compounded. During negotiations in particular, other delegations want to work with States that they can rely on and which they know will be present at the meetings. So, if you are not seen as being reliable, that is, not there all the time to lend support to a position, you get cut off and become a nonplayer. You end up being marginalised.

The second problem is one relating to access. Small states are generally excluded from the real discussions. The UN Security Council is the most egregious example with the Permanent 5 members dominating in small groups and stringing the others along. But this probably holds true for all sorts of other fora like the Green Room of the WTO in Geneva, the General Assembly President’s small consultations, and other consultations. I am particularly reminded of what happened during the final round of negotiations on the Outcome Document for the High-Level Summit in conjunction with the 60th anniversary of the UN (2005). In the final stages, the President of the GA decided to confine negotiations to just 20 or so delegations, leaving out the small states (with the exception of the facilitators, some of whom like Ambassador Christopher Hackett from Barbados were from small countries, but who were there in their personal capacities). To some extent, this is the fault of small states too. They are not knowledgeable or perceived to be knowledgeable; hence they are deemed to be unable to contribute constructively. Most do not speak so they are ciphers that can be ignored. One needs not only to have constructive inputs but also to be prepared to make oneself heard and sometimes make a pain of oneself – rant and rave and push one’s way into the small group negotiations! Most small states don’t feel secure or comfortable enough to do that.

The third problem is one of heft. In this regard, small states have none unless they band together. But unfortunately they very often do not do that. Because they are poor, or weak, or unfocused, they allow themselves to be peeled off individually and literally “bought off”. This is done by the big countries and blocs comprising developed countries. Just look at FOSS – the Forum of Small States. We meet informally but invariably never attempt to develop common positions on any of the issues which are discussed at the UN. If we start doing that, some will have to toe the European Union position (e.g. the small European members of FOSS), while

others would be bound by Organization of Islamic Conference or Non-aligned Movement positions.

Unless we develop heft, by which I mean becoming less dependant on the West for economic aid and technical assistance, the small developing states will find it difficult to stand up for what we believe in or to band together to promote the collective interests of small states. On some issues like stem cell research or the death penalty, I have witnessed for myself what pressure can do to dissuade a small state from voting for what it believes in. Sometimes, these small states even take positions at the UN contrary to what is spelt out in their national legislation! When asked, they will tell you sheepishly and in private that as much as they would have liked to support some of us as a matter of principle, they had been instructed by their governments to vote differently because of pressure being brought to bear upon them by the developed countries!

In short, the small states will not be listened to unless they do something like withholding votes from larger delegations and acting according to principles. But, unfortunately, life isn't as simple as that. With aid and economic assistance on the line, most small delegations know where their bread is buttered. Duress and pressure tactics work in the UN. What that pretty much means is that small states today are an ineffective caucus.

Does that mean that small states will forever remain ineffective? I hope not and believe that the situation can be quite different. To be more effective, a small state could do the following:

(a) Prioritising: Delegates from small States may choose to focus on one/two particular issues and become a major player in that area (e.g. Barbados on climate change issues; Marshall Islands on sustainable development issues or the Small 5 on UNSC working methods). A clear sense of priorities helps small countries prepare intensively and coordinate with like-minded delegations.

(b) Always try to be well-prepared and well-organised (to the best of one's ability) for discussions and negotiations at the UN. A small state which is well prepared and well organised for its work at the UN, which has a political commitment to principles and international law, which is active by inclination and constructive in its initiatives can play an extremely important role in the work of the UN.

(c) Team work: Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) and CARICOM often work together as a group to push their common agenda. The PSIDS also update each other on issues being discussed at the UN which others might have missed out on. During the Saint Lucia Presidency of the UNGA (2003 – 2004) and during Antigua's Chairmanship of the G77 (2008), the CARICOM countries got together to provide logistical and manpower support to these two delegations, thereby enabling them to play effective roles at the UN.

(d) Perhaps, most importantly, for small states to play an effective role at the UN, one has to be quite self-sufficient in that one should not be dependent on others for economic assistance or financial aid. Of course, none of us can claim to be completely self-sufficient economically, especially in today's integrated and globalised world. But, the more autonomous each of us are, the more likely that we would be able to speak our minds and act according to our principles.