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## Small Nations at the United Nations: The Experience of Singapore

### Keywords

United Nations

# SMALL NATIONS AT THE UNITED NATIONS: THE EXPERIENCE OF SINGAPORE\*

S. JAYAKUMAR\*\*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The 26th General Assembly session witnessed the admission of five new states to membership of the United Nations — Bhutan, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and the United Arab Emirates. Their admission raised anew the question of small nations in the organization. The term “small nations” is used here in a general sense to refer to those independent nations which are very small in area, population, and human and economic resources.<sup>1</sup>

From time to time, scholars outside the United Nations, as well as delegations within the world body, have expressed concern over the growing preponderance of small nations in the organization. This is understandable. One of the most outstanding developments within the United Nations in the past two decades has been the rapid increase in its overall membership. From 51 original members, the membership rose to 76 in 1955, to 100 in 1960, and to 132 in 1971. A significant proportion of these new members are the small, developing nations.

Two kinds of general questions may be raised with regard to the relationship between small nations and the United Nations. The first concerns the role of these small nations, individually or collectively, in contributing to the effectiveness and success of the United Nations. Do they strengthen or weaken it? The second concerns the advantages and benefits, if any, that may accrue to a small nation from membership and representation in the United Nations.

Much has been contributed regarding the first question and the role of the small nations in assisting the organization to discharge its primary obligations. For instance, everyone is familiar with the debate concerning the mini-states prob-

\* Adapted from an address to the Asia Society, New York, April 26, 1972.

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<sup>1</sup> An adaptation of U Thant's definition of micro-states in the INTRODUCTION TO THE ANNUAL REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON THE WORK OF THE ORGANIZATION 1966-67, U.N. Doc. A/6701 Add. 1 (1967).

lem, the one-state-one-vote principle, proposals for weighted voting and related matters. The advantages and benefits that a small nation may obtain through representation at the United Nations are not as well known. One may, indeed, be tempted to believe that in view of the numerous weaknesses of the United Nations and its frequent inability to solve some major crises there are no significant advantages at all.

The question is not an academic one; certainly not for the small nations. Representation at the United Nations involves considerable expenditures for each member and include:

- a) Contributions to the United Nations budget. For instance, the Singapore assessment for 1972 is \$88,846 — representing 0.05 percent of the regular budget.<sup>2</sup>
- b) Rental or purchase of office premises as well as residences for home-based staff.
- c) Salaries, medical treatment and other aspects of welfare of the home-based staff.
- d) Salaries for locally recruited staff.
- e) Transportation within New York as well as between the home capital and New York, Geneva or elsewhere to attend various meetings and conferences.
- f) Communications systems between New York and the respective home capitals which, as a minimum, would consist of weekly airflown diplomatic bags, telex, cable and telephone facilities.

For a small nation, the total amount incurred can be a staggering figure representing a significant portion of its limited resources. Are the advantages commensurate with the expense? A rather cynical ambassador once stated that the reasons why small nations sought membership in the United Nations were *first*, that it was fashionable to do so and that no small nation would want to be the odd man out; *second*, that it was a symbolic expression of support for the laudable objectives and activities of the United Nations in trying to make the world a less dangerous place to live in; and *third*, that membership of the United Nations was probably the best evidence of statehood and sovereignty.

There are other, more distinct, advantages which make United Nations membership extremely useful and beneficial

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<sup>2</sup> G.A. Res. 2654, 25 GAOR Supp. 28, at 106, U.N. Doc. A/8183 (1970).

for small nations. These advantages, each of which will be discussed in turn, include:

- a) The advantage of economic and technical assistance;
- b) The United Nations as a sensor of world trends;
- c) The United Nations as a source of data and scientific knowledge;
- d) The promotion and protection of national interests;
- e) The development of international law;
- f) The United Nations as a modality for bilateral diplomacy;
- g) The United Nations as a training school for young foreign service officials.

## II. ECONOMIC AID AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

The first advantage is the technical assistance and aid provided through various subsidiary organs such as the United Nations Development Program (U.N.D.P.) and the specialized agencies. For small developing nations this is probably the most important.

The modalities of such assistance vary and may consist of the provision of experts, fellowships, supplies, or equipment. Equally useful is the availability of and access to training institutions, regional training centres, seminars and group study tours. It is possible to receive some of this assistance without being a member of the United Nations, but membership is definitely an advantage in being able to participate in, and to influence, the decision-making in the United Nations regarding aid and technical assistance.

It is, of course, no secret that developing countries would want even more than what is presently being done under the auspices of the United Nations. But there can be no doubt that many small nations have benefited immensely from this facet of United Nations activities. To give an example relating to Singapore, the 1969 Yearbook of the United Nations discloses that the Pre-Investment Assistance provided in 1969 to Singapore under the Special Fund component of the U.N.D.P. totalled \$975,000.<sup>3</sup> There were a total number of 35 experts who were sent and three fellowships were awarded. The value of equipment involved was \$331,000.

The Singapore delegation has consistently maintained that

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<sup>3</sup> 1969 YEARBOOK OF THE UNITED NATIONS 309.

the failure to promote rapid economic development is one major reason why small nations have failed to achieve internal stability and modernization and why they easily succumb to the designs of the big powers. As Singapore's Foreign Minister, Mr. S. Rajaratnam, stated in his speech at the 26th General Assembly:

We cannot build immunity against manipulation by great and wealthy states so long as we remain economically weak and are beset by all the ills of underdevelopment . . . . It is vital for small nations . . . to approach the problem of economic development with a new sense of realism and urgency . . . . For a start we should develop an obsession about economic development.<sup>4</sup>

It is also significant to observe that it is not only the quantum and extent of the assistance which is beneficial, but also the character of technical assistance channeled through the United Nations. It is well known that small nations would like to limit the extent to which they are recipients of such assistance from individual countries on a bilateral basis, and thus avoid any obligations which could lead to delicate or embarrassing situations. Assistance from the United Nations eliminates such problems. There is a comforting cloak of anonymity: it is an organization, not a specific country, that is providing the aid. It is true that several contributing countries may be involved in the United Nations' efforts, but as this assistance is being provided by the United Nations, the recipient small nations do not feel that their interests are being compromised.

### III. THE UNITED NATIONS AS A SENSOR OF WORLD TRENDS

The second advantage is that the United Nations is a helpful gauge for monitoring and assessing current world trends. In today's world of fast-moving events and interdependence among nations, it is important for all nations to keep abreast of world trends and developments, both on the political and economic fronts. Assessment of world trends is important in order to predict future events so that one can plan ahead with confidence, to be prepared to adjust to major changes and avoid being caught by surprise. This may be far more important to small nations than to the larger and more advanced countries which would find it easier than small nations to cushion themselves against the shocks of traumatic world events. Small nations, further do not have the resources to establish as sophisticated and large an organization of diplo-

<sup>4</sup> 26th General Assembly, Plenary Session 1960, Oct. 11, 1971.

mats, analysts, experts, or intelligence services as do the larger nations. In this connection, the United Nations can prove most useful to the small nation. It is an excellent place for sensing important world political trends, and an ambassador at the United Nations could assist his country immensely.

*The Debates.* Many of the debates and discussions in the various United Nations committees can frequently reveal the attitudes of certain powers, give an insight to significant changes in policies of some states, or reveal a shifting of relationships between states. This is not only true in the political arena for it must be remembered that in the General Assembly, there are the following main committees:

- 1st Committee and  
Special Political — dealing with political and  
Committee security matters;
- 2nd Committee — dealing with economic and  
financial matters;
- 3rd Committee — dealing with social, cultural  
and humanitarian matters;
- 4th Committee — dealing with colonial and  
trusteeship matters;
- 5th Committee — dealing with budgetary and  
administrative matters;
- 6th Committee — dealing with legal matters.

At the United Nations a wide spectrum of international questions are discussed with more than 130 nations participating in this discussion. By observing the debates, the politics, the lobbying, the alliances formed between certain states to press or to defeat certain proposals, one may discern some new trends and tendencies. Thus, if a small nation sent a competent and conscientious delegation to the General Assembly, it would receive incisive reports which would assist the government considerably in assessing trends, as well as in being informed on specific topics and on specific countries. This would enable the government to constantly review and adjust its policies in the United Nations or towards certain countries.

An example of this is the sharp Soviet-Chinese verbal attacks against each other last year in the Security Council and General Assembly.<sup>5</sup> Most ambassadors would write reports on this to their home governments for at least three reasons: first, it suggested the emergence of a new cold war at the United

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<sup>5</sup> U.S. News, Oct. 30, 1972, at 64.

Nations reminiscent of the cold war of the fifties between the United States and Soviet Union; second, it gave confirmation of China's present attitudes and feelings toward the Soviet Union; and, third, it enabled the governments to predict what this augurs as to events both within and without the United Nations.

One must, however, be cautious here, and as my predecessor, Ambassador Koh, stated, the reality mirrored in the United Nations is often at odds with objective reality or with the reality in the world. This is because many delegations sometimes say things they do not mean and some important political problems are not reflected in the United Nations at all. Another note of caution is that the ambassador who concentrates on the formal discussions and open debates may be wasting his time, for not infrequently the most interesting information can be picked up in the corridor conversations and at cocktail parties. Indeed, one suspects that this may be one of the reasons why ambassadors religiously attend cocktails, often taking in as many as four cocktail functions in one evening.

*Information from Missions.* At the United Nations there are more than a hundred missions which are constantly issuing statements, announcements and press releases which are distributed to all other missions. In each morning's mail, for instance, the Singapore mission receives countless communications from various other missions. Most of these are routine such as those informing of changes in the staff of the mission. On the other hand, some of these communications are important statements of policy which may interest governments at home.

*The United Nations Press Corps.* There is a unique collection of pressmen at the United Nations. They are a fantastic source of information not only about the U.N. events but also about the events and policies of various countries. The U.N. Correspondents Association lists at least 200 accredited journalists from more than 150 publishers from all regions of the world. They are extremely competent and knowledgeable persons who have fairly good relations with most delegations. Thus, if an ambassador does not know much about what is going on in a certain country or does not have good relations with the ambassador of that country, he may nevertheless find out the latest from a friendly U.N. journalist who has recently had an interview with the ambassador of that country. This is one reason many ambassadors strive to maintain good relations with the United Nations press corps.

It may be true that nations are no longer placing too



much emphasis on bilateral diplomacy as a means of assessing international trends. The importance of traditional diplomacy, in this regard, has been diminished by the rapid advances in communications technology and with the wide distribution of the various international news services. The United Nations is an exception and, for the reasons given, it will continue to be used by nations to evaluate the international climate.

#### IV. THE UNITED NATIONS AS A SOURCE OF DATA AND SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

The incredible bulk of documentation at the United Nations is well known. A great percentage of this documentation is unnecessary and serious efforts must be made to stop the proliferation of U.N. documents. However, some of these publications are extremely valuable to governments, especially the smaller developing nations. United Nations publications, generally speaking, fall into the following categories:

- a) Official reports of proceedings of various United Nations organs or verbatim records;
- b) Various documents tabled at meetings of these organs including draft resolutions or preparatory documents issued by the Secretariat;
- c) Reports of seminars and meetings held by the United Nations at a regional or international level;
- d) Studies and Reports prepared by the Secretariat and other bodies such as UNITAR, ECAFE, on various topics including industrial development, scientific and technological development;
- e) Statistical documents such as the Yearbook of International Trade Statistics.

Several of these publications are extremely valuable and can aid developing nations in planning their development policies.

For example, the Secretariat recently issued a paper explaining how remote satellite sensing surveys could be useful to developing countries; such surveys can identify certain features of the natural resources on land and water which would otherwise take years to discover. This interested many developing countries in the work of the United Nations Working Group in Remote Sensing by Satellites.<sup>6</sup>

The Singapore mission each week examines the pile of U.N. documents to select those which we think can of be

<sup>6</sup> G.A. Res. 2778, 26 GAOR Supp. 29, at 28, U.N. Doc. A/8528 (1971).

of assistance to different departments of our government. We send these documents directly to the different ministries which, in turn, have often confirmed that they have found these documents useful and have urged us to continue sending further publications.

#### V. THE PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF NATIONAL INTERESTS

The debates, resolutions and policies involved at the United Nations can often have long and short term implications for a nation's interests. These consequences may be direct or indirect and they may be beneficial or adverse for a particular nation depending on the problem, the decision of the United Nations and on how the nation perceives its national interests. Membership in the United Nations, in this sense, is imperative for all nations, large or small, so that they may protect or advance their national interests. Small nations would suffer by default if they were not represented at the United Nations to express their particular viewpoints on the diverse activities which could affect them.

An example of this is the present discussion on the law of the sea, especially the seabed and ocean floor.<sup>7</sup> The General Assembly has formally declared that the seabed and ocean floor and subsoil thereof, beyond the limits of national jurisdiction, constitute the common heritage of mankind. The exploitation of this international area and the profits thus derived are to be for the benefit of mankind as a whole. Now the problem is one of defining the international area, because so far there has been no agreement on permissible limits of national jurisdiction. This is one of the debates at the United Nations. The extent of seabed areas claimed by coastal nations will in turn determine the so-called international area. Quite a few coastal nations and especially those with long coastlines are pressing for national seabed zones up to 200 miles.

Singapore is a shelf-locked state; that is, it is physically unable to extend its claims to national seabed jurisdiction beyond its present limits. Therefore, it has a vital interest in the concept of a common heritage. Along with other shelf-locked states and landlocked states, it is urging that the international regime should be as broad as possible. The reasons are obvious: the greater the international area, the greater the revenue and benefits which will accrue to mankind of which Singapore is a part. It is too early to say if the smaller nations

<sup>7</sup> G.A. Res. 2749, 25 GAOR Supp. 28 at 24, U.N. Doc. A/8097 (1970).

will succeed, but at least they are being heard and have the opportunity of persuading other countries to accommodate their views.

In this sense, membership at the United Nations is an advantage in that the opportunity exists for small states to try to advance their national interests or to try to modify certain actions which may be detrimental to a country's national interest.

## VI. THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERNATIONAL LAW

The advantage concerning the development of international law is closely related to the question of national interests. Many of the newly independent nations have questioned some of the traditional rules of international law on the ground that this body of international law had been formulated by the small handful of western nations. It is argued that such law does not really reflect the needs, interests and practices of the contemporary international community. There is some force in this argument, for if international law is to be effective, its rules must be supported and recognized by the majority of nations. Just as national laws are not static and are constantly undergoing change and reform, the same is true of international law.

Over the years the United Nations has become an important vehicle for the reform and updating of international law. The discussions in the International Law Commission, the Sixth Committee of the United Nations as well as other organs of the United Nations can and often do lead to the adoption of multilateral treaties which either replace previous instruments or introduce rules on matters which had not been specifically regulated by law. These treaties may cover a wide range of subjects. Examples are numerous: the 1958 Geneva Conventions on the Law of the Sea,<sup>8</sup> the 1961 Vienna Convention of Diplomatic Relations,<sup>9</sup> the 1965 Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination,<sup>10</sup> the 1966 Covenants on Human Rights,<sup>11</sup> the 1969 Vienna Convention on the Law of

<sup>8</sup> Convention on the High Seas, Sept. 30, 1962, 13 U.S.T. 2312, T.I.A.S. No. 5200, 450 U.N.T.S. 82 (*done*, April 29, 1958); Convention on the Continental Shelf, June 10, 1964, 15 U.S.T. 471, T.I.A.S. No. 5578, 499 U.N.T.S. 311 (*done*, April 29, 1958); Convention on the Territorial Sea, and Contiguous Zone, Sept. 10, 1964, 15 U.S.T. 1606, T.I.A.S. No. 5639, 516 U.N.T.S. 205 (*done*, April 29, 1958).

<sup>9</sup> 547 U.N.T.S. 358, *done*, April 18, 1961.

<sup>10</sup> U.N. Doc. A/RES/2106 (1966), *also* 5 INT'L LEGAL MATERIALS 350 (*done*, Nov. 20, 1963).

<sup>11</sup> 21 N. GAOR Supp. 16, at 49-60, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), *also* 6 INT'L LEGAL MATERIALS 368 (*done*, Dec. 19, 1966).

Treaties.<sup>12</sup> All are treaties which owe their existence to the United Nations deliberations. This is not to suggest that the mere adoption of these treaties automatically alters general international law. This would turn on many other factors such as the number of states which adhere to the treaty.

What should be stressed is that these law-making aspects of U.N. authority provide the opportunity for the small nations to express their point of view and, where possible, to bring about the modification of certain rules which they regard as anachronistic in the twentieth century.

In a negative sense, on this point, it should be mentioned that participation in these activities would also enable a nation to observe any moves by other states to create certain new rules which could conflict with that nation's vital interests. In such a situation there would be an opportunity for that state to protest, adduce arguments against the proposed rule and, if necessary, to combine efforts with other states with similar interests to counter such moves. In this sense no nation, whether large or small, can afford to opt out of such activities.

#### VII. THE UNITED NATIONS AS A MODALITY FOR BILATERAL DIPLOMACY

It is often said that the United Nations represents multi-lateral diplomacy or conference-orientated diplomacy. The point not commonly realized is that in practice a great deal of bilateral diplomacy goes on. Many small nations find in the United Nations excellent opportunities for establishing contacts, conducting transactions with nations with which they do not have formal diplomatic relations or to improve relations with such countries.

This can be visualized once it is appreciated that there are 132 member nations at the United Nations and six observer nations. Nearly all of them have representatives resident in New York with an operational staff and office. There is no other place in the world where so many nations are represented on a permanent basis.

In the conduct of bilateral diplomacy small nations, because of their limited resources, have to limit their overseas diplomatic missions, unfortunately, to only a handful of countries. Singapore, as an example, presently has a total of 26 diplomatic missions (excluding our U.N. mission). The number of diplomatic and consular missions of other countries in Singa-

<sup>12</sup> U.N. Doc. A/CONF. 39/27 (1969), also 8 INT'L LEGAL MATERIALS 679 (done, May 23, 1969).

pore totals 49. Thus, it is clear that Singapore does not have formal diplomatic relations with the vast majority of nations. The United Nations is an ideal place where this gap can be overcome. First, by personal friendship and cooperation, one can promote close links and understanding with many of these countries. Secondly, whenever there is a need to transact any diplomatic business with a country, this can be done through the respective missions of the two countries.

This unofficial bilateral diplomacy is facilitated by the fact that there is far less protocol in the United Nations than in the bilateral diplomacy conducted in various countries. This seems to be the consensus of other permanent representatives who have served as ambassadors in bilateral diplomatic posts. It is their opinion that there are less artificial rituals and ceremonies at the United Nations and an ambassador here has easier and more informal access to his colleagues from other countries.

#### VIII. THE UNITED NATIONS AS A TRAINING SCHOOL FOR YOUNG FOREIGN SERVICE OFFICIALS

One of the problems of small nations in their efforts to build an efficient foreign service is the lack of resources and facilities to train their recruits to the foreign service. More often than not their foreign services are understaffed and the new recruits have to start work almost immediately without adequate training. While some of the bigger and more advanced nations can afford the time and expense to establish ideal training programs, for the smaller nations the question usually is one of giving the maximum training in a minimum amount of time.

This intensive training takes place at the United Nations itself. A small nation would be well advised to send its new recruits to be attached to its mission at the United Nations for a year, or if that is not possible, to expose them to the General Assembly session which lasts for three months. It is doubtful that there is any other place where one can observe first hand both bilateral and multilateral diplomacy at work. The experience one obtains at the United Nations is valuable:

- a) One observes first hand how nations operate, how they lobby to promote or oppose a proposal;
- b) One learns the tactics and strategies employed;
- c) One obtains experience in assessing the implica-

tions of various proposals in relation to one's national interests;

- d) One learns how to make quick decisions. In fact, at the United Nations, one cannot get away from making decisions since countries are called upon to publicly announce their voting positions. On some occasions, one may have instructions; on others, decisions would have to be made on the spot;
- e) One has to quickly develop a flair for tactful and diplomatic relations with representatives of friendly countries. Whichever way a nation votes it is bound to make some country unhappy and disappointed and here it is important to be diplomatic, friendly and, in a persuasive manner, to explain one's position to that country without jeopardizing friendly relations.

In short, the highly intense, pressurized political and diplomatic activity in the United Nations offers an ideal training ground for foreign service officials.

#### IX. CONCLUSION

These are the advantages which small nations can obtain through membership at the United Nations. Most of these advantages stem from:

- the unique character of the United Nations;
- the unusual number of states represented;
- the wide spectrum of matters discussed in the organization;
- the importance of some of the U.N. activities;
- and,
- the fact that while the United Nations mainly represents multilateral diplomacy, in practice much bilateral diplomacy is also prevalent.