

Revisiting the United Nations and the Micro-State Problem

Written by Archie W. Simpson

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ARCHIE W. SIMPSON, MAR 17 2020

This is an excerpt from *The United Nations: Friend or Foe of Self-Determination?* Get your free copy [here](#).

The micro-state problem emerged in the late 1960s as many newly independent but very small states applied to join the United Nations (UN). These decolonised micro-states viewed UN membership as a means of confirming their sovereign status, affirming their equality with other states, supplementing their diplomatic connections, and as a means of furthering their security through the UN Charter. Following the principle of self-determination and through the inexorable processes of decolonisation, the post-war dismantling of European empires saw the creation of many new states around the world and by the late 1960s this included many micro-states. Duursma writes, 'due to the decolonisation process the United Nations was confronted with many potential new states of which a great number were rather small territories' (Duursma 1996, 135). The micro-state problem (or 'mini-state problem' or 'micro-state dilemma') was that these very small states (rightly) gained sovereign independence as colonialism ended but they were so weak that they lacked the wherewithal to fully carry out their UN obligations (Schwebel 1973, 109). There were also a number of European micro-states in existence that have not gone through post-war decolonisation, namely: Andorra, Monaco, Liechtenstein, San Marino and the Vatican City.[1] Membership in the UN would mean these micro-states would have the same standing as larger states like Brazil, Canada or India giving them a disproportionate international influence relative to their size. For many diplomats and bureaucrats at the UN this was a problem (Kohn 1967; Gunter 1977, 112–113).

This chapter outlines an episode of UN history that has been largely forgotten. The processes of decolonisation that occurred after 1945 included a wide number of micro-states, and these micro-states sought UN membership to further legitimise their self-determination. This chapter has several sections each detailing aspects of the micro-state problem. The first section offers definitions of micro-states in order to establish the main units of analysis. This is followed by a section that explores the nexus of statehood with self-determination and UN membership. From this, the third section details what the micro-state problem was and provides a detailed account of how the UN responded. A brief section on the post-Cold War period will demonstrate that the micro-state problem was essentially ignored as the size of UN members became irrelevant. The final section will offer some conclusions. The theme of this chapter is that the emergence of many micro-states reflected the norm of self-determination in international politics and that the UN played a significant part in promoting this.

Defining Micro-States

It has been noted by many that there is no consensus as to what constitutes a small state (Benedict, 1967; Amstrup 1976; Archer and Nugent 2002; Ingebritsen et al. 2006; Maass 2009; Archer et al. 2014) including micro-states. This is because there are many ways to define small states, there are many variables that can be used to define small states and because different academics are studying small states for different purposes. Archer and Nugent write, 'ultimately a judgmental element must creep into the exercise of categorising states by size' (2002, 5). Variables like territorial size, population and economic outputs are commonly cited as ways to define small states (Amstrup 1976; Ogashiwa 1991; Crowards, 2002; Ingebritsen et al. 2006; Maass 2009; Archer et al. 2014). Moreover, size is a

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relative concept in political science as all states are different sizes. Thus, Luxembourg is small compared to Belgium, which is small compared to France, and so on. David Vital (1967) proposed a two-fold means of defining small states involving a combination of industrial/economic capability and population size. Vital argued that small states were either advanced industrial states with populations of 10–15 million or under-developed states with populations of 20–30 million. While this template was formulated during the Cold War, it still has some resonance today.

Within small state studies, the sub-field of micro-states also has a range of competing definitions. Lukaszewski (2011, 74) writes, 'in modern political science there is no consensus as to what might be called the ministates, microstates, small states and finally dwarf states.' A range of scholars have produced different definitions of micro-states including Blair (1967) who uses a population threshold of 300,000 and Plischke (1977) who sets out a two-fold format in which micro-states have populations of under 100,000 or between 100,000–300,000 and are UN members. Ali Naseer Mohamed (2002) suggests a threshold of 1.5 million, while Armstrong and Read (1995) use a population threshold of 3 million to define micro-states. However, many scholars indicate that a population threshold of 1 million is sufficient to constitute a micro-state. Scholars such as Gunter (1977), Anckar (2002), Harden (1985), Richards (1990), Warrington (1994), Christopher (2002) and Simpson (2008) use the one million residents or less as a means of identifying micro-states. Though Wivel and Oest (2010, 434) add that micro-states, '[are] permanently stuck as the weak party in asymmetric relationships.' The central point is that micro-states are *very small* states, usually in both population and territorial terms. Moreover, there are important consequences of this smallness such as having smaller governments, fewer economic resources, weaker bureaucracies, smaller militaries, and they are vulnerable to external pressures. Ogashiwa (1991, x) summarises, 'microstates which have very small populations and land areas also in most cases are economically, militarily and politically vulnerable.'

Statehood, Self-Determination and UN Membership

Initiated by President Woodrow Wilson in 1918, the concept of self-determination was and it became a guiding principle of his 'Fourteen Points' at the Versailles Peace Conference following the First World War. However, it became a principle of international law in 1945 at the insistence of the Soviet Union (Kirgis 1994, 304) and was incorporated into the UN Charter through Articles 1 and 55. Self-determination is, 'the search for full independence and sovereignty by a community with the result to redraw international boundaries at the expense of the existing state' (Danspeckgruber 2002, 3). This means that a 'people' or a 'nation' have the right to possess their own sovereign state. International law, according to Article 1 of the 1933 Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States,^[2] sets out four criteria of statehood: a) a permanent population, b) a defined territory, c) government, and d) capacity to enter into relations with other states (Harden 1985, 51; Simpson 2008; Coggins 2014, 30). Importantly, international law does not specify a minimum threshold for territory or population; this allows for micro-states.

An unwritten fifth criterion is constitutional independence (James 1986) which is essential to self-determination. In 1948 the International Court of Justice set out five criteria for UN membership, namely that applicants a) must be a state, b) be peace-loving, c) accept UN obligations as set in the UN Charter, d) be able to carry out these obligations, e) be willing to do so (Harris 1970, 28). With UN membership being by application, this placed conditions on membership e.g. the term 'peace-loving' was – in reality – political code for being part of the Grand Alliance that defeated Nazism, thus excluding many states including neutral states.

In 1960, UN membership increased by 17 as decolonisation accelerated and thereafter the rise in membership continued as European empires ended. Self-determination was becoming a norm in international politics and this was being endorsed by the UN. The Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples of December 1960 further promoted the ideals of self-determination and encouraged more decolonisation. While in 1961 the Special Committee on the Situation with regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples or 'Committee of 24' was established at the UN to further facilitate decolonisation regardless of state size. This committee offered advice, technical support, and monitored the progress of decolonisation. Throughout the 1960s, many new states gained independence and these states applied to join the UN to further confirm their newly gained sovereign status. By 1967 approximately 20 UN member states out of 123 had populations of less than a quarter million.

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In 1965, the UN Secretary-General U Thant in his annual report (United Nations 1965; also Gunter 1977, 110; Duursma 1996, 135) suggested there might be a problem regarding smaller member states. Later, in 1967, he wrote, 'it appears desirable that a distinction be made between the right of [ministate] independence and the question of full membership in the United Nations' (Gunter 1977, 111; Anand 2008, 166). Part of the difficulty was that UN membership activities and obligations were becoming increasingly diverse, more costly and involved more formal commitments such as maintaining permanent missions at the UN. For many newly decolonised micro-states this was problematic as most were economically underdeveloped with small populations, many lacked the diplomatic staff required, and they had domestic issues to deal with following independence. In addition, with the increasing numbers of micro-states joining the UN, there was a concern that UN voting might be distorted; that the micro-states would have a disproportionate influence in international affairs. In 1966 the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) began research into the problems and issues raised by smaller states and territories. The UN Security Council also established a committee of experts, a '*Mini-state committee*', to explore the issue and make recommendations (Gunter, 1977, 111; Harden 1985, 18; Anand 2008, 167). This committee met in secret, issued one interim report in 1970 (Duursma 1996, 136) but came to a stalemate over the micro-state problem, largely because matters of sovereignty and of the legal equality of states were perceived as being particularly sensitive, controversial and difficult. In the context of the Cold War, Soviet dominance in East Central Europe perhaps also illustrated why the committee met in secret.

Explaining the Micro-state Problem

In 1919 and 1920 San Marino, Monaco and Liechtenstein applied to join the League of Nations despite membership being by invitation only (Gunter 1974, 497; Thorhallsson 2012, 144; also, Bartmann 2002, 362). Luxembourg made a successful bid. Monaco failed to supply information to the League and San Marino withdrew its application, but Liechtenstein pursued the matter (Gunter 1974, 497; Harden 1985, 15). The League explored the application asking five important questions (Gunter 1974, 498):

- Is the application in order?
- Is the government recognised *de jure* or *de facto* and by which states?
- Does the country have stable government and settled boundaries?
- Is the country *fully* self-governing?
- What has been the government conduct and assurances over 'international obligations' and 'armaments'?

It was the questions over 'self-governing' and assurances over international obligations (Gunter 1974, 498) that scuppered the application. The Fifth Committee (admissions) concluded that Liechtenstein was a sovereign state but that some, '*attributes of sovereignty*' were carried out by other neighbouring states (Austria and Switzerland) including control of customs, administration of telecommunications, diplomatic representations and decisions in some judicial matters (Gunter 1974, 498; Anand 2008, 164–165). It was also noted that Liechtenstein did not have any armed forces (Bartmann 2002, 362). Such evidence undermined the application and it was concluded that the Principality lacked the capacity to fulfil the obligations of the League. In December 1920 a vote on Liechtenstein's application saw 28 votes against, 1 vote for and 13 abstentions (Gunter 1974, 499). This illustrates that statehood alone was not sufficient in itself for membership; the size of Liechtenstein constrained its capacity to fully adhere to being able to carry out the League's obligations.

A year later, a sub-committee of the Assembly explored the issue of small state membership and suggested three proposals: a) 'associate' membership in which small states had full participation but no voting rights, b) they could be represented by others, and c) 'limited participation' with membership privileges being limited in alignment to cases where their own interests were involved (Harden 1985, 15; Gunter 1974, 499–500). These alternatives were not explored further, and the matter fell into desuetude. Such debates and proposals were replicated by the UN in the late 1960s as the numbers of small states and micro-states increased as a consequence of decolonisation. The micro-state problem for both the League of Nations and the United Nations was that on one hand they were open to sovereign states but on the other hand, the micro-states were less likely or unable to fully fulfil the concomitant obligations that membership required.

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After the Second World War, Luxembourg and Iceland joined the UN in 1945 and 1946 as they had sided with the Allies. These micro-states also joined NATO as the politics of the Cold War evolved. In 1949 Liechtenstein applied to become party to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) (Kohn 1967, 556). Members of the UN are automatically party to the ICJ though they can opt-out, but non-members could also be party to the Court subject to recommendations of the Security Council (International Court of Justice 2019). The UN Security Council debated the application and both the Soviet and Ukrainian delegates questioned the sovereignty of Liechtenstein. Their comments echoed the earlier debate of the League of Nations. Kohn (1967, 547) reports that the Ukrainian delegate said,

Attention must be called to the fact that Liechtenstein does not have an army of its own, as state-like organisations have. At the same time, Liechtenstein has entrusted Switzerland with the function of representing it in its foreign relations. The relationship of Liechtenstein and Switzerland towards each other is not entirely clear to us. We are aware that postal and customs unions exist with Switzerland. But we are not at all clear what considerations led Liechtenstein to entrust Switzerland with its representation abroad – one of the prerogatives of national sovereignty.

The dependence on Switzerland^[3] by Liechtenstein with its Western-orientated outlook was problematic for the Soviet Republics and Soviet Union (Kohn 1967, 547–548) given the context of the Cold War. Nevertheless, they did not veto Liechtenstein's admission to the International Court of Justice. Being party to the ICJ allowed the Principality a means to settle disputes with other states and to participate in the wider UN system. But full membership in the UN would occur *after* the end of the Cold War for Liechtenstein and several other European micro-states. However, Monaco gained observer status at the UN in 1956.^[4] (Permanent Mission of Monaco, 2019).

UN membership steadily grew as, 'during the twentieth century, 150 new states entered the international system' (Coggins 2014, 5). This membership accelerated in the 1960s with many smaller states and micro-states gaining independence. This included Trinidad and Tobago in 1962, Malta in 1964, the Maldives in 1965, Barbados in 1966 and Swaziland in 1968. Self-determination was now a norm in international politics as these examples demonstrate. These new states joined the UN and by the late 1960s questions over micro-state membership were raised. The *Mini-state committee* was created to help resolve the micro-state problem.

The *Mini-state committee* received two proposals about dealing with micro-state membership. The first proposal came from the US in 1969 suggesting that a new form of UN membership should be permitted, that of 'associate member' (Anand 2008, 167). This involved five elements (Gunter 1977, 113; Anand 2008, 168):

- a) Enjoy the rights of a member in the General Assembly except to vote or hold office.
- b) Enjoy appropriate rights in the Security Council upon the taking of requisite action by the Council.
- c) Enjoy appropriate rights in the Economic and Social Council and in its appropriate regional commission and other sub-bodies, upon the taking of requisite action by the Council.
- d) Enjoy access to UN assistance in the economic and social fields.
- e) Bear the obligations of a member except the obligation to pay financial assessments.

This proposal was very similar to earlier suggestions by the League of Nations sub-committee of 1921 on the same issue. However, the proposition was contrary to the one-state one-vote principle that is central to the legal equality of states. In 1970 the British presented an alternative plan in which micro-states would 'renounce certain rights (in particular voting and election in certain United Nations bodies)' (Anand 2008, 168) on a voluntary basis. In addition, 'in return its financial contribution would be assessed at only a nominal level' (Harden 1985, 18). Essentially, the proposal was that the micro-states would voluntarily give up voting rights and consequently pay less for UN membership. The British added that the micro-states could regain these rights if they gave a year's notice and revised their financial contributions. Both the US and Britain argued that their proposals would not require changes to the UN Charter (Anand 2008, 169) although the UN legal counsel thought that the proposals would be difficult to

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equate with the principle of sovereign equality of states (Thorhallsson 2012, 145). The UN legal counsel also felt that some UN rights were so fundamental that they could not be renounced. A further (political and legal) difficulty was in defining 'micro-states'; the UNITAR study (Rapoport et al. 1971) that began in 1966 included various definitions but the French delegate said, 'that the Committee would have great difficulty in producing any definition at all of a micro-state' (Gunter 1977, 116).

The *Mini-state committee* was established to explore the problem of small states joining the UN because of decolonisation. Two sets of proposals on the issue were produced but neither set of recommendations were commensurate with the UN Charter, and they were unpopular with many small states. In addition, by the time these proposals were made, there were already a number of micro-states in the UN. The micro-state problem could not be resolved, and decolonisation continued into the 1970s. More micro-states joined the UN including Fiji in 1970, Qatar in 1971 and Grenada in 1974. Membership in the UN was viewed as a confirmation of sovereignty and with that, legal equality with other states in international politics. For the micro-states this was particularly important given their diminutive size. This meant that any demotion to *associate status* within the UN was unacceptable to the micro-states. The failure to unravel the micro-state problem became a nuanced historical artefact that had no significant impact upon micro-state membership in the UN.

The Post-Cold War Era

When the Cold War ended in 1989, an opportunity for the European micro-states to join the UN emerged. Seven states joined the UN in the 1980s and six of these were micro-states or small states (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, Vanuatu, Saint Christopher and Nevis, and Brunei Darussalam) taking membership to 159 states by 1984. This showed that self-determination remained an important principle and was now an established norm. The difficulties of being a micro-state that were central to the micro-state problem were now deemed less relevant. In effect, the outcome of the micro-state committee became more of an academic exercise than anything else. Liechtenstein began lobbying for membership in 1988 and was able to gain membership in August 1990 (Ingebritsen 2006, 120–121). This encouraged other European micro-states to apply for membership. As Duursma (1996, 205) writes,

Liechtenstein's international behaviour has been in a certain sense a pioneer work for the other European micro-states, because it was the first European micro-state to enter actively into the Council of Europe and the United Nations.

Following Liechtenstein membership, other European micro-states were able to join including San Marino in 1992 and both Andorra and Monaco in 1993. In the 1990s, UN membership saw further increases in membership as the dissolution of the Soviet Union saw the creation of 15 new states including Russia, the velvet divorce of Czechoslovakia occurred and the wars in Yugoslavia further catalysed state creation. While decolonisation was a reason for new states during the Cold War, secessionism became the main reason for new states in the post-Cold War period (Coggins, 2015). Other states were able to join the UN including the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia, both micro-states. Other micro-states like Palau in 1994 and Kiribati, Nauru and Tonga joined the UN in 1999. This suggested that the micro-state problem of the 1960s–1970s had been forgotten in the post-Cold War world. However, it also shows that the principle of self-determination remains an ongoing factor in the establishment of new states.

Conclusions

Membership in the UN became universal after the end of the Cold War and the UN now has 193 member states including 44 micro-states and the Vatican City (United Nations, 2018). As a promoter of self-determination and as an instrument for peace and security in global affairs, the UN provides micro-states with an endorsement of their sovereignty. As micro-states have an inherent diminished capacity due to their small size and lack of resources in relation to other states, membership in the UN becomes particularly important. This importance is partly to augment their diplomatic abilities, partly to acknowledge their legal equality with other states, and partly to provide a level of security. The principle of self-determination that became prominent after 1945 was central in establishing many micro-

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states in the twentieth century. Following decolonisation, membership in the UN was seen as a way in which these micro-states could participate in international politics. It was also seen as legitimising and acknowledging their membership in the international community.

The broader purpose of self-determination when it was established after the First World War was to encourage peace by allowing nations to achieve statehood. In the post-war era, self-determination became an international norm as many new states (large and small) were created as decolonisation occurred. This was encouraged by the UN through various committees, advice given to prospective states, and by the opportunity to join the organisation. As the norm of self-determination encouraged the creation of new states, the UN became the global fulcrum for this encompassing states of all sizes, including micro-states. By promoting self-determination, the UN was successfully empowering colonised territories to achieve sovereign independence. Coggins notes that the international community, '...has swelled to nearly two hundred states' (2015, 15).

The micro-state problem of the late 1960s illustrates that UN membership was not necessarily an automatic process for old or new micro-states. The politics of the Cold War, bureaucratic doubts and the capacity of micro-states to fulfil associated obligations opened up a debate about the micro-states. The existence of European micro-states like Liechtenstein demonstrate that diplomats and bureaucrats at the UN (and previously at the League of Nations) had concerns over whether such micro-states could, in fact, fulfil their international obligations. Such concerns were genuine; however, the ideals of self-determination were, in the long term, a greater catalyst for the growth of micro-states and in UN membership than apprehensions about the capacity of the micro-states. With the constraints of the Cold War over, the (non-decolonised) European micro-states were able to gain UN membership alongside many decolonised micro-states. This contributed to the universal membership of the UN that we recognise today.

Notes

[1] See: <https://holyseemission.org/contents//mission/mission-55e37172a07413.52517830.php>.

[2] See: <https://www.ilsa.org/jessup/jessup15/Montevideo%20Convention.pdf>.

[3] Switzerland was not a member of the United Nations until 2002 largely to maintain its neutrality.

[4] See: <https://mission-un-ny.gouv.mc/Monaco-and-the-UN>.

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