


# Can the domestic politics of small island states lead to international in/stability? A Case Study of Malta

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## **Domestic Politics, Regional Repercussions:**

### **Can the domestic politics of small island states lead to international in/stability?**

#### **A Case Study of Malta**

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Small islands have always played a role in the safeguarding and enhancing the security interests of empires, superpowers and regional powers. Former maritime empires retained control over small islands or archipelagos thus allowing them to control and influence events in the region while serving as either trade or defence stations in areas of strategic importance.

The notion that small islands could claim sovereignty within the international community emerged with decolonisation. Territories which previously had no experience of sovereignty found themselves as legal actors within the international community. This led to an academic interest in the behaviour of small independent states. Islands have a distinct role to play in terms of security and stability, and this paper will attempt to draft a framework which helps to analyse the role these

polities play within the international system. It will then apply this framework to the case of Malta in order to identify whether domestic politics can have regional repercussions.

### **Small States vs. Small Islands**

Islands and small states share several similarities: they are viewed as lacking considerable power and clout and are perceived to be dependent, weak and unable to guarantee their sovereignty. Their limited logistical capacity may hinder their activities in the international arena. Such a view is corroborated by the World Bank/Commonwealth (2000) which also lists factors such as the high level of openness and susceptibility to events in the global market, sensitivity to natural phenomena, a small domestic market, limited economic diversification, and higher levels of poverty.

Island states may share all the above characteristics, as well as others. Features specific to islands include remoteness and isolation from the mainland and primary markets, a higher degree of vulnerability (particularly to environmental disasters), and diseconomies of scale in the provision of certain public goods (World Bank/Commonwealth, 2000).

When analysing the literature on small states and security, it becomes apparent that, though much of the literature on small states is also pertinent to the study of small island states, there is very little material on the specific contribution small island states give within the international arena.

Much of the literature discussing small states takes a pessimistic view. Vital (1967) believes small states are vulnerable since they “lack the resources and ability to maintain an independent international role.” He notes that they are likely to give concessions under pressure and are limited in their political options; thus making them less viable members of the international community.

Handel (1990) echoes a similar view but notes that the term “weak state” can apply to all countries irrespective of size and population. Weak states are continually preoccupied with the question of survival. They have difficulty in defending themselves against great and middle powers, against a coalition of weak states, or even against a single weak state. He acknowledges that during the Cold War both the US and the USSR attempted to recruit as many allies as possible. These allies include small states that could prove to be useful pawns in the hands of the superpowers.

Espindola (1987) argues that economic dependence is the root cause of most security problems in small states. Small states require “external aid to develop their infrastructure; markets in which to

sell their commodity production; and foreign investment to introduce a measure of industrialisation to their economy.” He believes that small states can be particularly vulnerable to subversion especially when local groups can have access to external support, “Supplies of funds or weapons, even on a small scale, could enable groups... to overpower a tiny, ill-trained and ill-armed police force, which is all most small states can afford as security.”

This concern can be extended to other non-state actors. Multinational corporations and large economic conglomerates have budgets several times that of small states and “and political intelligence outside the reach of the meagre diplomatic service of a small state.” Also, “small states used as tax havens or as convenient sites for money laundering are particularly vulnerable” (Espindola 1987). It is for this reason that small states often enter into alliances with one another. Such alliances help them pool in resources and share best practice.

Warrington and Milne (2007) describe island states as the world’s most natural polities with “self-contained and distinctive” identities yet handicapped by “small population and remoteness.” Bartmann (2007) states that small island states lack the military capabilities to counter an external security threat. This makes small island states vulnerable to crime, immigration and terrorism.

Almezaini and Rickli (2017) argue that the recent increase in the number of small states forces larger states to incorporate them within the international system. Their studies focus on the role of small states in the Gulf. They adopt the theory promoted by the fourth generation of scholars which defines smallness in relation to power: “it encompasses the capacity to modify the conduct of other states, while preventing others from affecting its own behaviour.” Their study concludes that small Gulf States use “every opportunity to maintain their autonomy while trying to influence their immediate environment by restoring to hedging strategies and sometimes even extending their reach in declining regional powers.”

The end of the Cold War proved to be a critical juncture for the way small states operate in terms of security, within the international system. This enabled some small states to forge an independent foreign and security policy without having as a point of reference one superpower or another. A 1997 report by the Commonwealth Secretariat confirms that the new world order is multipolar and the attention of world politics is shifting from the old metropolitan centres of power to the peripheral areas. The greatest chance of small state survival is through participation in international institutions, appealing to international law and making effective use of diplomatic channels. The main focus shifted from the use of hard power (force or the threat of force) to the use of soft power

(diplomacy and sanctions).

The literature on small states presents a curious contradiction. On the one hand, several scholars believe that small states are vulnerable and in need of external assistance while on the other hand due to geopolitical factors, small states can (and do) perform an international role.

Before engaging with the main case study of Malta, this paper will attempt to create a theoretical framework through which one can analyse the role of small islands by drawing on texts of a descriptive and historical nature that deal with the role of islands in the international system.

### **Towards a Theoretical Framework**

In order to identify the role of small island states in the international system, this paper takes a preliminary review of descriptive accounts in several small island-states across a period of both time and space. Cyprus and Singapore have been chosen since they illustrate some of the roles a small island state plays under the traditional security regimes. Both islands are located at junctions of major trading and transit routes. The various island-states in the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean illustrate how such polities can enhance or jeopardise regional and global security.

Cyprus is situated in the Eastern Mediterranean, 97km away from the Turkish coast and 966km away from the Greek mainland. It represents a long-standing conflict between two great states and inheritors of vast, bygone empires; Greece and Turkey.

Woodhouse (1955) argues that Britain held Cyprus on the ground that it was “strategically indispensable” to British security in the Mediterranean and “consequently to the peace of Europe.” Even after Cypriot independence, Britain found it necessary to retain two military bases in Akrotiri and Dhekelia housing NATO intelligence-gathering functions (Souter, 1984).

Independence was granted on condition that British forces stationed on the island were “given powers, rights, and exemptions which are hardly compatible with the concept of Cypriot sovereignty” (Verrier, 1964). The 1960 Cypriot constitution created a delicate balance between the Turkish and the Greek communities and was guaranteed by three powers; the UK, Turkey and Greece (Diez et al., 2002). Tensions between the Greek Cypriot majority favouring *Enosis* (Unity with Greece) and the Turkish Cypriot minority favouring *Taksim* (Partition) escalated in 1963. Turkish Cypriots retreated into different enclaves and in 1964 UN peacekeepers were deployed to

pacify the situation. In 1974 a coup led by Nikos Sampson and supported by the Greek Military Junta attempted to overthrow the Cypriot President, Makarios III. Fearing retaliation on the Turkish-Cypriot minority, Turkey reacted by intervening militarily. The Sampson coup failed; however, Turkey retained control of just over one-third of the island (Hitchens, 1997).

Turkey argued that, as a guarantor, it was well within its rights to invade. In 1983, the Turkish enclave in the north proclaimed itself as the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) (Diez et al., 2002). Hitchens (1997) states that “outside powers have never scrupled to employ local and regional rivalries in order to get their own way.” Verrier (1964) corroborates this:

“It is essential to correct a general impression that the British forces are in Cyprus solely to keep the peace. They are not. They are there first and foremost to preserve Britain's strategic interests in the island ... these interests cannot be preserved while the island is in ferment.”

Apart from the Sovereign Base Areas Britain had several installations, training areas, communication stations and service families stationed on Cyprus. Verrier (1964) describes Akrotiri as “the largest RAF station in the world.” Cyprus is within reasonable flying distance to the Middle East, with its vast oil interests, and its climate is similar to that of the Gulf. Troops stationed in Cyprus needed little acclimatisation should they be required to move east.

Similarly, the USSR displayed an interest in Cyprus. This concerned policymakers in Washington since it could have enhanced the USSR’s expansionist naval activities while weakening NATO’s southern and eastern flanks (Adams, 1972). Makarios III did little to soothe such concerns since he adopted strong rhetoric and fostered cordial relations with the anti-NATO Marxist-Leninist AKEL Party and sought closer links with the Non-Aligned Movement. Despite this facade, Makarios III still permitted clandestine U.S. activities on Cyprus (Camp, 1980).

The end of the Cold War did not diminish Cyprus’ relevance. Cyprus became a member of the European Union (EU) in 2004. Initially, a solution to the conflict was considered to be a prerequisite for membership. This requirement was dropped in 1994. The TRNC was invited to take part in negotiations but declined to do so. The Turkish Cypriots (reflecting the view held in Ankara) viewed EU membership as a security threat, “a back-door to 'enosis' without opening the membership door to the TRNC's protector, Turkey” (Friis in Diez et al., 2002).

Cyprus is situated near “Turkey's 'soft belly'.” This creates a degree of insecurity to Turkey particularly if the Hellenic Navy or Greek weapons are deployed on the island. Greece thus has a “bargaining card” which can force Turkey to rethink action in the Aegean. Turkey is fearful of a

unified Cyprus with close ties to Greece since its influence over Cyprus would then be minimal (Stivachtis in Diez et al., 2002).

Greece places Cyprus within its Euro-Atlantic strategy. Athens views the solution of the Cyprus problem as a “national priority” and believes that an attack on Cyprus is an attack to Hellenism. Greece viewed Cyprus' EU accession as vital to its strategic calculations and believed that this would help strengthen Cypriot independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity (Stivachtis in Diez et al., 2002).

Theophanous (2000) takes the view that the solution to the Cyprus Problem is secondary to the security interests of the region. This view is consistent with how area players may view small island states; the broader regional security interests are of primary importance, and adverse domestic situations can be tolerated so long as they do not hinder regional stability.

The case of Cyprus illustrates how conflict on a small island can have wider security implications involving different area players. A small island state can enhance the strategic positioning of a regional power if this player retains some form of control over the domestic policies of the island; this is evident in Greece and Turkey's quest to influence Cypriot internal affairs.

Singapore is another island which played a significant role in terms of security. Founded purely to satisfy British strategic interests in the region, Singapore linked “the Dominions in the Pacific to India and the rest of the Empire.” Its geographical features allowed for “the creation of a naval base with ample storage facilities.” The island had “anchorage space” which was “protected by the surrounding low hills.” The base on Singapore would provide ships with docking and storage facilities as well as, “fuel and supplies of all sorts” (Roosevelt, 1929).

Buesst (1932) states that most Australians approved of the Singapore naval base since it “would provide as effectual a safeguard of Australian security.” New Zealand was equally enthusiastic about the project. It was the only Dominion which contributed to the construction of the base since its government felt that the country was too small to defend itself (McIntyre, 1971). Japan viewed a British base in Singapore as “a menace and a challenge” since it is “ideally situated as a strategic centre from which to dominate Japan's sea communications and subject her to distant blockade” (Buesst, 1932). Indeed, one of the most hard-fought battles in World War II was between the Empire of Japan and the Allied Powers over Singapore.

After the Second World War, Singapore housed the British Commissioner-General for South East Asia and several Western governments opened consulates in Singapore, staffing them with senior diplomatic personnel (Boyce, 1965). After being granted independence from Great Britain in 1963, Singapore joined the Malay Federation. It requested independence from this Federation in 1965.

The USSR established a naval presence in the Indian Ocean in 1968. Vertzberger (1982) explains that freedom of passage through the Straits became vital since detours through Indonesian or Australian waters “might prove a critical delay in crisis situations when immediate reaction and presence are major political and military advantages.” For this reason, the USSR gave “maximum consideration to the interests of the states bordering on straits.”

On the other hand, the US had troops stationed in South Korea and Japan and its Seventh Fleet was based to the east of Singapore. Rapid deployment of units to the Indian Ocean and the Gulf had to transit through the Straits. Moreover, US patrol aircraft, in-flight refuelling tanker jets and navy vessels often used Singaporean facilities for servicing (Vertzberger, 1982; Indorf, 1988).

Singapore was always considered to be a “foreign affairs power.” Despite the changing security scenario, the hard power role of Singapore remains intact: it is still an important air and sea route, it is one of the busiest sea-lanes in the world, and it is the gateway between the Indian and the Pacific Ocean (Ganesan, 1992).

The Caribbean Sea is home to eight small island states with a population of less than 500,000<sup>1</sup>. All are former British colonies. Following independence, these new states were aware of the need to have security forces. The US was equally eager to see them establish \*/such forces. Mahan (quoted in Simmons, 1985) states that “weak Caribbean countries holding many positions of great strategic importance constitute a danger to the security of the US.” This view is consistent with the fears that small and weak states may destabilise the region or be a threat to neighbouring countries.

The trafficking of drugs was corroding the social fabric of the Caribbean islands and the basin countries (Simmons, 1985; Maingot, 1988). US Customs and the Federal Drug Enforcement Agency were successfully combating the transit of drugs via land and air. The smugglers often made use of pleasure crafts and private yachts for “smuggling drugs from Caribbean countries where cheap cocaine and marijuana were readily available in commercial quantities” (Siddle, 1982).

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<sup>1</sup> Bahamas, Barbados, St Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Grenada, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, and St Kitts and Nevis



Security concerns were no longer purely military. Sorensen (quoted in Griffith, 1995) urged the US to recognise that non-military developments pose threats to long-term security and quality of life and no country could combat these threats alone. The US took the lead in the Caribbean and Latin America (Queiser Morales, 1989) since the drug trade was damaging the social fabric in several downtown areas in the US (Maingot, 1988).

The Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended that the US military should take a more pro-active role in the fight against drug production and trafficking. In addition to having a direct military presence, the US also “increased military sales, aid, and training” and “expanded intelligence operations” (Mabry, 1988; Griffith, 1995).

Drug traffickers often possess resources which are more sophisticated than those employed by the police or the military in small island states (Griffith, 1993). This can inadvertently lead to arms trafficking, money laundering and corruption of law enforcement and military officials. In turn, this undermines the credibility of governments.

These new and complex realities have prompted a new approach to security issues where all states – irrespective of size and population – have to be engaged in order to avoid the creation of weak links. The small islands of the Caribbean are expected to cooperate in initiatives to combat illicit activity. In view of this, the US engages in bilateral agreements with various small-island states in the Caribbean which permit land and sea patrols by US vessels within national boundaries. While necessary to the security of the US, several states resented this agreement and viewed it as unnecessary foreign pressure (Bryan, 1997).

Equally crucial to the provision of collective security are the small island states in the Pacific Ocean. The Pacific is the largest ocean covering approximately 28% of the world’s surface. It is divided into four ethnocultural sub-regions: Polynesia (including Tuvalu, Samoa and Tonga), Melanesia (including the Solomon Islands, Fiji and Vanuatu), Australasia (Australia and New Zealand) and Micronesia (including Kiribati, Palau and the Marshall Islands). The Pacific is home to major sea lanes for low-cost transportation, as well as offshore oil and gas fields.

In terms of geopolitics, the Pacific has high-security value. Throughout the Cold War, the primary concern of the US and its allies was “the prevention of the direct or indirect extension of Soviet power” (Harper, 1953). After the Cold War, the main aim was to prevent criminal organisations

from making use of small island states for their purposes, to the detriment of regional security.

The US took control of Micronesia following the Second World War. President Truman opted to place the area under UN trusteeship. As a concession to the military, Micronesia was designated a “strategic trust,” a unique status that gave the US a virtual free hand in the region. It committed itself to offer the Micronesians “the exercise of self-determination in the (indefinite) future.” In the mid-70s islanders developed nationalistic aspirations. Some new nations seeking to assert their sovereignty looked towards the USSR (Mihaly, 1974; Harper, 1953).

There was a fear that the USSR could exploit underdevelopment in small island states. Its Pacific Fleet was expanding, and one of these states could readily accept an alternative arrangement to that offered by the US. This would have allowed the Soviets to operate near Hawaii and major sea lanes connecting the US to Asia and Australia. It would have posed a problem to the US since their Pacific policy was based on two assumptions, namely:

“That the defence of the United States necessitates maintenance of a number of forward positions well to the west of Hawaii; and that the United States should maintain, in those positions forces, capable of supporting its commitments in limited and counterinsurgency wars in Asia.” (Mihaly, 1974)

The responsibility for negotiations with the Micronesians was shifted from the Department of the Interior to the National Security Council. The Micronesians proposed an agreement of “Free Association” which recognises “qualified sovereignty, but leaves foreign affairs and defence, plus an obligation to subsidise, with the former metropolitan power.” This agreement served US security interests since it secured base rights and denied the territory to other powers. It also created a relationship of mutual dependence: “Micronesia needs American financial support; the United States needs assurance that Micronesia will not fall into potentially hostile hands” (Mihaly, 1974).

Other powers had an interest in the area. France, a former colonial power viewed the region as having an “immense strategic value” providing defence and economic benefits derived from nuclear testing, mining operations and nickel production.

Australia and New Zealand are heavily involved in the region and both countries partnered with the US to develop the ANZUS security pact which creates “a joint outlook on their strategic interests in this area” (Fry, 1981). Nonetheless, in 1984, the Government of New Zealand imposed a total ban of nuclear weapons on its territory and lent its support to the South Pacific Forum and its goal to establish a South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone.

Small island states can be more vulnerable to political instability. All powers involved in the region fear the presence or the possibility of a failed state. The rebellion on the island of Santo in Vanuatu prompted action by the administrations in Port Moresby and Canberra as well as those in Paris and London. France and Britain agreed to send a joint negotiating mission as a final attempt to avoid military intervention. These meetings proved to be inconclusive, and a half-hearted Anglo-French military operation was launched on Santo. Papua New Guinea authorised the deployment of a Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF) contingent to suppress the rebellion. The PNGDF was successful with the indirect help of Australia and New Zealand (Gubb, 1994).

The reaction to this minor rebellion may be considered to be highly disproportionate. However, a failed state in the region could have wide repercussions. In this case, “a divided Vanuatu promised to be a lasting source of friction within the region and...boded a radicalisation of Melanesia” (Gubb, 1994).

Australia is particularly preoccupied with the possibility of failed states in the region since this may become a springboard for smuggling terrorist funds, illegal substances and human trafficking. Nauru, the smallest independent republic in the world, began experiencing trouble once its phosphate deposits began depleting due to reckless domestic politics. In 1989, Nauru was listed as one of the 15 countries that failed “to prevent money laundering and the financing of terrorist organisations,” and by 2004 the state apparatus of Nauru had collapsed leaving the Islanders in a situation of total dependence on external aid (Bartmann, 2007).

Australia approached Nauru to contract out some security functions. In 2001, the Australian government suggested a “Pacific Solution”. The Pacific Solution was a deterrence policy which diverted approximately 1,600 asylum seekers to detention centres set up in Nauru and Papua New Guinea (UNHCR, 2008). The policy aimed to reduce detention centres on the Australian mainland. Australia would, in turn, pay the country for services rendered (BBC News, 2007). The remuneration Nauru received could avert the situation of a failed state. This solution, however, generated considerable criticism by human rights organisations due to the conditions of the camps.

Following the coups in the Solomon Islands and Fiji in the year 2000, the Asian Wall Street Journal believed the island nations of the South Pacific were a looming threat to Asia-Pacific security since criminal gangs operated in some of these islands. Firth (2001) concludes that such reports are widely exaggerated but concedes that there are genuine fears that terrorist organisations may make

use of vulnerable small island states. Herr (2006) believes that Australia will keep on developing these bonds with small island states of the Pacific: “such connections may well have new relevance in the post-9/11 agenda of shoring up fragile or failing states.”

## **A Theoretical Framework**

The following points of observation based on the discussion above identify the roles that small island states may play in the international system while providing a theoretical framework for the main case study of this paper:

- **The geographical position of small islands** makes them an ideal base for international actors wishing to influence, monitor and control the region.
- **Small islands have specific geographic characteristics**; they often suffer from geographic isolation and have no hinterland thus making them difficult to fortify.
- **Islands are ideal for permanent or semi-permanent military facilities and installations** which enhance intelligence-gathering and provide communication services. Small island states may also be suited for military training, the testing of equipment and weapons.
- **Small islands are located in different expanses of water in the path of major sea and air routes.** Islands have often exploited this by offering excellent port facilities for refuelling and repairing vessels and aircraft.
- **Large states frequently made use of their influence over small island states** to exert political and military pressure on other nearby states or rival powers.
- **Islands can be vehicles of strategic denial.** The concept of “strategic denial” was particularly relevant during the Cold War when the friendship or alliance of one small island state to one of the superpowers could be detrimental to the security of the opposing superpower and its allies in the region.
- **Small islands are more vulnerable to external influences.** This can strain their military and security forces. It is in the interest of larger states to prevent a small island state from

turning into a failed state since a stable polity contributes to peace and stability in the region.

- Islands are often located at different junctions in the sea which are difficult to control. This **border role** could include the controlling of straits and sea passageways and the patrolling of surrounding waters to ensure no transit of illicit materials.
- **Small island states often pool their sovereignty** and join different international organisations to offset their weakness and vulnerability.
- **Small islands** can engage in **collective security initiatives**. These may range from enforcing a nuclear-free zone, neutralising a region and combating criminal activities.
- **Internal conflict can have repercussions on other regional actors**. Nonetheless, external powers will only act if internal friction will harm their interests.
- **The role of small islands is underappreciated and understated**. While unable to provide large-scale assistance, small islands are often well positioned to provide timely assistance.
- **Their geographical position has often placed them at the heart of contentious hot spots**, and their size has accentuated their vulnerability. Medium and great powers are aware of this and often strive to include small island states in their security plans. Domestic politics, therefore, can be said to affect regional stability.

### **Case Study: Malta**

Malta is taken as the primary case study of this study. It is an island state located in the central Mediterranean; 300km north of the Libyan coast and 93km south of the Italian coast. It was granted its independence from Britain in 1964, and it became a member-state of the EU in 2004. With an estimated population of 412,000 and a land area of 316km<sup>2</sup>, it is also the EU's smallest member state.

It fulfils several of the functions outlined in the theoretical framework above. During the 2011 uprising in Libya, it played an important role in the evacuation of various individuals from the Libyan mainland. As an EU member state with a positive economic record, it has been hailed as an

example of stability and a reliable partner in a troubled region. In addition, it managed to host the Presidency of the Council of the European Union at a time when Europe was experiencing a large wave of migration from Syria and Libya and attempting to deal with the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. On the reverse side, questions over measures adopted by the Government of Malta, such as the Individual Investment Programme (IIP) scheme, and anti-money laundering legislation have intensified during the 2014 – 2019 period.

Smallness and insularity are two aspects which permeate Maltese political discourse. Such discourse is used to elicit responses to particular problems and raise awareness on a possible political platform. Politicians often refer to the vulnerability inherent in Malta's smallness and insularity when trying to argue for greater assistance on various matters, chief among which migration. On the other hand, politicians will also refer to Malta's ability to punch above its weight when it seeks to promote its viability as a trusted partner on the international stage.

### **Malta and the Libyan Crisis**

Malta's most active and prominent role in recent years was linked to the outbreak of civil unrest in Libya. In February 2011 protests demanding an end to the Gaddafi regime broke out in several Libyan cities. The Libyan regime responded to these protests with violence. Two Libyan fighter jet pilots defected to Malta with their Mirage planes after being ordered to bomb protestors. As the crisis ensued, a former Libyan Energy Minister defected to Malta.

Malta assumed the role of an evacuation hub for all those leaving Libya by air and sea. This came at a time when Malta was considered to be on amicable terms with the Libyan regime. The Maltese government responded to the crisis by setting up medical facilities to treat evacuees. Newspaper reports drew parallels to Malta's role in previous wars; both as a "nurse of the Mediterranean" and an "unsinkable aircraft carrier" (Times of Malta, 25.II.2011). These initiatives turned into fully-fledged humanitarian operations. Several Heads of Government got in touch with Prime Minister Dr Lawrence Gonzi to discuss the deteriorating situation in Libya and coordinate the evacuation of their citizens from Libya. Malta's Embassy in Tripoli remained open throughout the crisis. In a matter of weeks, 8000 people from 89 different countries travelled from Libya to Malta (Times of Malta, 28.II.2011).

Malta hosted three British RAF C-130 Hercules aircraft with 150 rescued civilians on board. A Catamaran service operated between Malta and Libya, and thousands others were rescued. The

British frigate HMS Cumberland evacuated British personnel based in Libya and two Italian cruise ships were leased by the Chinese government to rescue 4,000 workers. Once in Malta, the evacuees were flown back home (Tripoli Post, 28.II.2011).

As the crisis worsened, it became apparent that foreign intervention was needed to enforce a United Nations Security Council No-Fly Zone and protect civilians caught in the crossfire. NATO assumed command of the operation. The Prime Minister made it clear that Malta would not allow a military base on its territory. It did not have the necessary equipment, and the only airport in Malta was needed for civilian and commercial purposes (quoted in DeBattista, 2012).

The paradoxical nature of small states is very much evident in this episode. A small island state may be both strategically positioned and politically willing to assist, but its lack of resources and facilities may hinder it in fulfilling such a function.

Malta's ports hosted some vessels which needed to be replenished and refuelled. Vessels were given the opportunity to evacuate personnel in urgent need of medical attention. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs helped in the organisation of the humanitarian "Life Link to Misurata" which was coordinated by NGOs to collect supplies and provide humanitarian aid to the besieged residents of Misurata (Frazier in DeBattista, 2012).

The Flight Information Region (FIR) was put to use for military purposes. Since Malta's FIR covers a large area, all military operations had to pass through it. Malta's flight control cooperated and facilitated such flights over Maltese airspace. The Maltese Government refused permission for flights to pass directly over the islands and aircraft were directed to two air corridors over the Maltese air space (Gonzi in DeBattista, 2012)

During the initial days of the conflict, the Gaddafi regime tried to bank on Malta's role as a trusted interlocutor. Dr Gonzi insisted that Malta would only be able to act as an interlocutor if attacks on civilians stopped and the military tanks return to their compounds. The attacks on insurgents continued, and the Libyan regime was losing its credibility. The Maltese Government informed the Regime that no one in the international community believed that the request for a ceasefire was genuine and that Malta would not act as an interlocutor.

Malta recognised the National Transitional Council (NTC) as the sole interlocutor of the Libyan people and, following the 'Liberation of Tripoli' in late August 2011, the Maltese Government

recognised the NTC as the sole government of Libya. Colonel Gaddafi was captured and killed in October 2011.

At the end of a short stop-over visit, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton hailed Malta as a “regional authority.” She announced the appointment of career-diplomat Gina Abercombie-Winstanley as the new US Ambassador to Malta (MaltaToday, 18.X.2011). The appointment of a career diplomat to this post was very significant and was seen to be an acknowledgement of Malta’s geostrategic importance in the Mediterranean.

In 2016, a plane crash at the Malta International Airport left five French nationals dead. Questions were soon raised when the narrative put forward by the Maltese government did not match the information emerging from France. The Maltese Government argued that the passengers and crew were part of a surveillance operation to combat drug trafficking and human trafficking while the DGDDI<sup>2</sup> said that none of its employees was on board the aircraft. Indeed, the Directorate-General for External Security<sup>3</sup> confirmed that three of its employees were on board the aircraft. When speaking to the French newspaper *Liberation*, a source claimed that “Malta is the rear base of all Libyan operations... the French, British, Italians, Americans ... everyone is there.” The same source claimed that Malta “has become the hub of all traffic related to Libya” (The Malta Independent, 26.X.2016).

Malta can also be a source of insecurity to the neighbouring Libyan state. In January 2017, reports emerged that Libya’s Audit Bureau banned some Maltese firms from conducting business since it was believed that they were smuggling “millions of Euros of Libyan money out of the country” (Times of Malta, 24.I.2017). Of more significant concern to regional security is the oil smuggling racket in the central Mediterranean.

In October 2017, the investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia was murdered in a car bomb less than two hundred meters from her residence. In the aftermath of this yet-unsolved murder, 18 media organisations based in 15 different countries teamed up to form “The Daphne Project” to continue covering the stories that the late journalist was investigating.

One of the stories concerned a multimillion fuel smuggling operation, “with stolen Libyan fuel traded easily in territorial waters and through established storage facilities inside the Grand Harbour

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<sup>2</sup> Direction générale des douanes et droits indirects - Directorate-General of Customs and Indirect Taxes

<sup>3</sup> Direction générale de la sécurité extérieure



and Birżebbuġa.” This operation was coordinated by Maltese, Libyan and Sicilian businessmen with close ties to the Mafia. According to a leading newspaper, such operations are “carried out under Maltese authorities' noses” (Times of Malta, 3.V.2018).

According to Italian investigations, one Maltese smuggler earned “at least €26 million selling to just one Italian buyer.” Maltese authorities claimed that “they could do nothing to prevent the smuggling because it happened outside territorial waters.” Italian sources disputed this claim since the tankers “always made ship-to-ship transfers at the very edge of the Hurd’s Bank, a shallow area on the edge of the Maltese territorial waters and within the control of Malta.” Furthermore, sources within local fishing cooperatives complained that two renowned smugglers “were allowed to dock at the two bunkering facilities without being checked by the local authorities, including the customs department” (Times of Malta, 3.V.2018).

Such activity was aided by the issuing of fake certificates stating that the smuggled oil from Libya originated in Saudi Arabia. These forgeries would later be certified through a Maltese notary and the apostille of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Malta. A spokesperson claimed that the Ministry was only required to certify the notarised document rather than “check the contents of the record” (Times of Malta, 3.V.2018).

Malta’s role during the Libyan crisis highlights this dual role of small island states – as both a possible source of security and insecurity. While logistical limitations may limit the role a small island state can play, the lack of oversight on security matters might create a real weak link in the region through which undesirable elements may flourish.

### **Malta and Irregular Migration**

Irregular migration is a challenge for various European states. Between 2007 and 2017, more than 700,000 irregular migrants have been tracked in the Mediterranean (Frontex 2017). While this figure can be considered as insignificant compared with the 1.8 million displaced people following the Syrian Civil War (Frontex, 2018), it still caused considerable tensions among the Mediterranean states.

In Malta, the challenge of irregular migration started to be acutely felt in 2003 with the arrival of 520 migrants (UNHCR, 2019). At the time, Malta was going through an intense political campaign on whether the country should join the EU or not. It was clear from the start that the domestic

politics surrounding irregular migrations would produce a series of confrontations with the EU and other states. The domestic politics of the Maltese islands concerning irregular migration would shift according to the number of migrants reaching the Maltese shores (Cachia & Vassallo, 2017).

By 2004, the Maltese Government was already facing criticism for its stance against irregular migrants. However, as the discussion below will highlight, its approach towards rescued ships would produce further confrontations with other Mediterranean countries. Much of this confrontation concerns Malta's search and rescue area (SAR). Malta's jurisdiction covers approximately 250,000km<sup>2</sup>; which roughly equates to the size of Great Britain. While this area is essential for trade and fisheries, it can become a burden for search and rescue missions. With the country's EU membership, Malta had to abide by the Dublin Convention which obliges states to take responsibility for asylum seekers within this area. However, in more than one instance Malta would declare that these rescued migrants should be taken to the nearest port, which was often either Lampedusa or Sicily. This would lead to some diplomatic confrontations between Malta and Italy over the interpretation of the Dublin Convention (DeBattista, 2016).

The first confrontation took place in the summer of 2006 when Malta and Spain refused to take responsibility for the 50 migrants onboard the vessel *Francisco y Catalina*. Malta refused to allow the vessel to enter the Maltese waters stating that Malta was not obliged to give shelter to these migrants as they were closer to the Libyan shore (The Guardian, 29.V.2007). The issue was only solved when the European Commission pressured Spain, Andorra and Italy to take responsibility for these migrants.

Other confrontations soon followed. These would cause considerable embarrassment both for Mediterranean states and the EU. In 2007, a dispute took place between Malta and Italy emerged over the fate of 27 migrants who were clinging to fishing nets in Libya's search and rescue area. Photos of these migrants hanging on to this net reached major European news agencies. Malta used a similar approach to the first incident declaring that according to international law regulations, Italy had to take responsibility for these migrants. It would take three days for the issue to be solved. The Italian Navy saved these migrants only after being admonished by the EU (Times of Malta, 28.V.2007).

Political turmoil on the fate of some migrants followed in 2009. This involved a four-day diplomatic standoff between Italy and Malta over 140 migrants who were rescued in Malta's SAR by the Turkish vessel *Pinar*. The approach taken by the Maltese political class was that these

migrants should be taken to the closest safe port while Italy argued that, since the rescue took place within Malta's SAR, Malta should be responsible for the migrants. This confrontation between the two Mediterranean countries forced the European Commission to intervene with both countries being urged to respect the European regulations on migration. Italy, eventually, took in the migrants involved declaring that it was only taking them for humanitarian reasons. It accused Malta of repeatedly failing to save refugees within its SAR (Times of Malta, 20.IV.2009).

In 2011, issues concerning the responsibility of migrants rescued at sea created another dispute. One hundred six migrants were left stranded on board a Spanish warship for four days amid diplomatic confrontation between Malta, Spain and Italy on who was responsible for them. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) was critical of the actions taken by these Mediterranean countries since, it argued, they were putting the lives of migrants further at risk. Malta refused to take the migrants, even on humanitarian grounds, arguing that the nearest safe post was Lampedusa. In the event, Tunisia assumed the responsibility for these migrants, and they were transferred on a Tunisian naval ship (Times of Malta, 17.VII.2011).

Between 2013 and 2018, following a decline in the number of incoming migrants, the political approach towards this issue was to promote burden sharing and solidarity rather than to force vessels to go to the nearest ports. In November 2015, Malta hosted the Valletta Summit on Migration. This Summit brought together Heads of State and Government from both Europe and Africa "to strengthen cooperation and address the current challenges but also the opportunities of migration." The summit proposed an action plan with the intention of addressing "the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement," enhancing "cooperation on legal migration and mobility," reinforcing "the protection of migrants and asylum seekers," preventing and fighting "irregular migration, migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings" while working "more closely to improve cooperation on return, readmission and reintegration" (Council of the European Union, accessed 6.IV.2019). After this summit, the EU's return policy was reviewed to "analyse the application of the legal, operational, financial and practical tools available at EU and national levels, in order to identify how to increase return rates" (Fernandez and Lilleorg, 2018).

In 2018, Malta and Italy were, once again, involved in more confrontation over the responsibility of migrants rescued in the Central Mediterranean. In June 2018, 629 migrants were saved onboard the MV Aquarius. Italy barred them from disembarking on its shores. The issues revolved around the obligations of international law versus the obligations of Malta's SAR. Both Italy and Malta accused each other of failing in their humanitarian commitments. The UNHCR and the European

Commission called for both countries to fulfil their obligations; however, ultimately Spain intervened and allowed these migrants to enter its ports. The tension between the two countries would escalate again at the end of June 2018 when another Spanish ship, Open Arms, carrying 59 migrants was refused entry in both Malta and Italy. Once again, Spain intervened to allow these migrants to reach Valencia since Malta and Italy failed to agree on a solution (Reuters, 1.VII.2018). MV Aquarius and Open Arms, which are run by iNGOs, would be involved in more disputes during that year.

In August 2018 both Malta and Italy refused to allow the MV Aquarius to disembark 141 migrants in their ports. After five days, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Spain or Portugal decided to open their borders for these migrants. When this was agreed upon, Malta agreed to let the migrants disembark in order for them to be relocated to these countries (Times of Malta. 15.VIII.2018).

In December 2018, Malta refused to take in 311 migrants saved off the coast of Libya by the Open Arms vessel. Once again, Malta and Italy accused each other of failing their international obligations. The EU's attempt to exert its influence did not alter their positions. Ultimately, Spain took responsibility for these migrants and allowed them to disembark (The Malta Independent, 29.XII.2018).

In the episodes above, Malta's approach highlights how the EU still struggles to enforce the Dublin Convention and how the region is still unable to find long-term solutions to this issue. In the short-run, solutions are fraught with disagreements and diplomatic standoffs. This is causing a situation of human insecurity in the Central Mediterranean as thousands of migrants die every year in their attempt to reach Europe.

### **The Individual Investment Programme**

In 2014, the Government of Malta launched its Individual Investment Programme (IIP), dubbed by its critics as the "Cash for Passports" programme. According to Henley & Partners, the operators of the programme, the Maltese Passport "ranks as the 9th most powerful passport in the world, and the 2nd most powerful passport amongst the key citizenship by investment programmes" (Henley & Partners quoted in Individual Investment Programme, accessed 6.IV.2019).

According to the Government, the IIP is intended to generate interest and attract talented individuals and investors to the Maltese islands. The official literature claims that it is attracting "rare talent that

will further benefit the country's economy." The programme claims to have attracted families who "become proud Maltese citizens not looking to make money but wanting to become part of another country to contribute to the already rich diverse nature through personal and cultural relationships" (Individual Investment Programme, accessed 6.IV.2019).

The IIP requires applicants to pay a €650,000 contribution to a national development fund and invest €150,000 in government stocks or bonds. Applicants must also own property worth at least €350,000 for at least a year in order to satisfy the residency criterion. A spouse or a child costs an extra €25,000. That price increases to €50,000 if the dependent is over the age of 18 (Politico, 28.VIII.2016).

Between 2014 and 2018, the scheme generated €404 million for the posterity scheme and €174 million for Malta's consolidated fund. Property sales soared to a total value of €110 million. Moreover, 718 leased properties added up to €70 million over five years. €126 million were invested in Malta Government Stocks (MaltaToday, 7.I.2018).

The IIP, however, has a more controversial and sinister aspect to it. Critics have often pointed that it amounts to nothing more than the selling of European citizenship, thus providing a backdoor into Europe for citizens from countries under EU sanctions. MEP Frank Engel said that "these are the practices of a banana republic which must be rigorously counteracted within the EU" while MEP Anna Gomes said that such schemes "put at risk the integrity of the Schengen system." MEP Robert Zile was concerned that the scheme would help "defy the sanctions imposed on Russia by Europe" since the majority of applicants are of Russian origin (Politico, 28.VIII.2016).

Andrew Rosindell, Member of Parliament for Romford, argued that there are considerable concerns with the programme. He argued that the UK needs to end automatic free movement for EU citizens since "Malta is effectively deciding UK immigration policy." He added that "there are going to be security concerns in terms of criminality, in terms of people coming in who perhaps are not desirable in our own country" (Politico, 28.VIII.2016).

The Maltese government dismissed such concerns arguing that other European countries offered visa or residency programmes in return for investment. The government spokesperson added that such countries were often "less rigorous" in their vetting (Politico, 28.VIII.2016).

EU member states which have similar citizenship by investment schemes include Austria, Cyprus,

Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Portugal. Member states can set up their criteria for awarding citizenship. Despite occasional harsh statements by the European Commission on such schemes, it chose to limit itself to issuing a series of guidelines rather than a definitive hard stance. While a number of member states refused to engage with the Commission in the preliminary discussions, Malta was “one of the member states that had been open and forthcoming in discussions with the EC” (MaltaToday, 7.I.2018).

In contrast, the OECD put Malta on its blacklist, together with 21 states offering similar schemes, in October 2018 arguing that such schemes “undermine international efforts against tax evasion.” Nonetheless, such a scheme has not been discontinued by the Government of Malta. Indeed, the Prime Minister himself was engaged in many conferences and events organised by Henley & Partners to promote the scheme (Times of Malta, 27.X.2018).

### **The Presidency of the Council of the European Union (January – June 2017)**

Malta assumed the Presidency of the Council of the European Union in January 2017. Harwood, Moncada and Pace (2018) argue that:

“Since the presidency’s main role is that of an ‘honest broker’, requiring untiring efforts to achieve concord between the member states on often difficult and divisive dossiers, it calls for attentive and patient diplomacy, an approach that fits well with a small state’s preferred methods in world politics.”

Looking back on the Presidency, they argue that it was a success due to the “diplomatic prowess in managing to broker agreement on a range of issues.” They attribute this success to a range of factors; the holistic view of public administration rather than narrowly specialised administration, clear political leadership on EU matters and a tenacious diplomatic corps. Also, “one cannot ignore the services of the EU institutions and the support provided by the three presidency (trios) structure.” The Presidency had several priorities which included migration, the single market, security, social inclusion, Europe’s Neighbourhood Policy and its Maritime policies (Harwood, Moncada and Pace, 2018).

According to Fernandez and Lilleorg (2018), “the issue of solidarity and responsibility-sharing among Member States with regard to processing and hosting asylum-seekers remained at the core of the discussion.” The Valletta Summit held in 2015 between the EU and Africa was “an important first step towards meeting migration challenges in a spirit of mutual responsibility.”

In terms of the Internal Market, two main objectives were achieved during the Maltese Presidency; namely the end of roaming charges within the EU and the declaration of Geo-blocking as a discriminatory practice. Progress was registered in other areas including legislation concerning SMEs, renewing the Energy Efficiency package to increase energy efficiency, and strengthening the security of energy supply (Sammut, 2018).

Harwood (2018) argues that, in terms of social inclusion, Malta outlined three objectives: “female participation in the labour market, efforts to combat gender-based violence and, finally LGBTIQ issues, primarily the holding of a Ministerial-level Conference” on such issues to “explore the Commission’s roadmap on this area.” This conference was held in February 2017. While the Commission had other priorities, and the Union’s competence in this field is rather limited, the Presidency “can be assessed to have met its limited agenda in this area.”

In terms of Maritime policy, Malta sought to secure political endorsement in order to improve the international ocean governance framework. According to Pace (2018), “Malta was able to transmit clearly, diligently and successfully its sensitivities towards this sector and using its first-hand knowledge of the issue, it was able to overcome the drawbacks of smallness and lead.” In terms of achievements, Malta was able to secure “an agreement on technical measures and legislation that controls who can fish where and how” as well as agreements on:

“a general approach for the North Sea Multiannual Plan; the Sustainable Management of External Fishing Fleets; the MedFish4Ever declaration to save Mediterranean fish stocks; and rules on the characteristics of fishing vessels. They also transposed the recommendations of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas into EU law.” (Politico, 28.I.2018)

While holding the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Prime Minister Joseph Muscat called a snap election amid accusations of corruption and lack of transparency. The decision to call an early election was not well-received in Brussels, however, Muscat was returned to office with a very comfortable majority (Politico, 28.I.2018).

In assessing the performance of Malta’s Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Politico argued that this was the “island’s coming-out ceremony.” It argued that Malta “turned out to be rather good” at “negotiating deals to push through legislation in dozens of policy areas.”

Wivel (2018) argues that, although small states are not in control of power resources “sufficient to pursue dominant power politics,” they can nonetheless rely on “diplomatic means of influence and persuasion.” He argues that, when holding the rotating presidency of the Council, small states can

maximise their role by prioritising their goals and ranking their policy concerns. He concludes by stating that the “Council presidency is an opportunity for small states to take advantage of the agenda-setting powers not otherwise available at their disposal.” Indeed, such opportunities allow small states to showcase their soft-power, “stemming from being the weaker party in an asymmetric relationship.”

## **Conclusion**

The case study highlights the different roles that small island states can play in shaping and securing regional and international stability.

Malta’s relationship with Libya highlights the role of small island states as an ideal base for international actors seeking to secure their position in the region or, in this particular case, the safety of their citizens. The weakened logistical capacity of small island states can, however, hamper the assistance that a small state could give in times of military conflict. On the other hand, the lack of proper enforcement can lead to security vacuums which would have wider regional repercussions, as the case of oil smuggling highlights.

Malta’s participation within the structures of the EU is consistent with the behaviour of small island states since most seek to participate in international organisations. This increases the role that domestic politics can play in influencing stability and security in the region. As the above case highlights, issues surrounding migration and the IIP led to strong reactions from concerned partners.

Malta’s turn to host the rotating Presidency of the European Union coincided with various key international developments; the swearing-in of President Donald Trump in the United States, the proliferation of fake news, fears over Russia’s global influence, Britain’s triggering of Article 50 to begin the process of Brexit and various electoral tests which put in the balance the nature and the future of the EU. Throughout these events, Malta was a passive observer. However, as the host of the rotating Presidency, it undoubtedly increased the weighting of its views which would have otherwise been marginal and inconsequential.

The participation of Small Island states in regional fora, as well in debates of the future of the region mean that domestic politics have a greater chance of influencing regional stability. As such states become more integrated into the global system, so does their ability to have an impact on their immediate neighbourhood and beyond.



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