

# Sovereignty at the Extremes: Micro-States in World Politics

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JC Sharman<sup>1,2</sup>

## Abstract

Micro-states illustrate deep changes in the international system obscured by scholars' traditional focus on great powers. Logically, the nature and systemic effects of international anarchy should be most apparent in relation to the smallest and weakest states, and least apparent in relation to great powers. Focusing on micro-states suggests a permissive contemporary international system facilitating the proliferation and survival of states independent of their military and functional capacities. Micro-states' lack of great power allies illustrates the irrelevance of military threats under anarchy, while the presence of an international economic safety net attenuates problems of economic viability. The lack of association between smallness and delegating sovereignty questions functional explanations of hierarchy. Instead, varying micro-states strategies of *à la carte* hierarchy and selling sovereign prerogatives demonstrate that the current international system presents even its smallest and weakest members with choices rather than imperatives.

## Keywords

micro-states, sovereignty, international system, hierarchy, security

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As a general rule, those studying world politics have sought to explain the nature of the international system and the actors that constitute it through studying a small, biased sample of highly unrepresentative units: great powers and super-powers, cases that cluster together at one extreme of many of the most important variables of interest. This article adopts exactly the opposite approach in studying micro-states to throw new light on the nature and effects of international anarchy. This new perspective suggests a permissive international system that absolves states from the need to meet what were previously strict security and other functional imperatives, and instead presents even the smallest and weakest states with a menu of choices to exercise, delegate or sell sovereign prerogatives.

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<sup>1</sup>Griffith University, Nathan, QLD, Australia

<sup>2</sup>Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

## Corresponding author:

JC Sharman, Griffith University, 170 Kessels Rd, Nathan, Queensland 4111, Australia.  
Email: jcs207@cam.ac.uk; j.sharman@griffith.edu.au

This article is framed by two questions. First, what does the proliferation of micro-states tell us about the nature of the international system? Second, what strategies do micro-states adopt to take advantage of systemic conditions? The answer to the first is that micro-states evidence the permissive nature of the international system in both military and economic terms. Specifically, their survival and multiplication illustrates the obsolescence and irrelevance of fears of conquest traditionally said to be an inherent feature of international anarchy. Their ability to rely on a safety net of development aid and concessional lending shows the attenuation of the economic self-help principle. The lack of association between state size and international hierarchy undermines the position that micro-states face disproportionate systemic pressures to subordinate themselves to great power patrons. Instead of imperatives, the international system provides micro-states with a menu of options from which they craft different strategies. These states have taken a pick-and-choose approach to their sovereign prerogatives: energetically wielding some, delegating others in selectively forming hierarchical relationships, and commercialising still others. The variation whereby some micro-states delegate or sell sovereign prerogatives while others do not demonstrates that these strategies are indeed choices, rather than products of systemic necessity.

How can big questions about the nature of the international system be answered by the study of tiny places? International Relations is primarily distinguished from the other sub-fields of political science by the condition of anarchy, said to be so important because it creates uniquely pressing security concerns (survival in a self-help system) and makes co-operation especially difficult (market failures and collective action problems). But these special pressures created by anarchy should be *least* important for great powers. They are best able to defend themselves alone. Similarly, they are best able to secure their economic needs in isolation. For example, thanks to their large economies, great powers are the least dependent on trade, and thus the least dependent on an open international trading order (Krasner, 1978). Systemic effects should be *most* evident in the very weakest and smallest states. The imperatives of survival and self-help should press most heavily on micro-states. The problem of co-operation under anarchy, and thus the imperative to pool and delegate sovereignty to obtain ends that cannot be achieved in isolation, should also be most acute for micro-states.

The pervasive gigantism of IR has meant that the potential insights from studying small states are radically under-exploited. John Gerring (2007) notes that in qualitative case studies selection can be premised on representativeness or variation relative to the general population. Given that IR scholarship has concentrated so single-mindedly on great powers, it does not have representativeness. Given that it looks at only one end of the power spectrum, it does not have variation either. If power is the central concern of those who study international politics (or any kind of politics), then there is a great deal to be learned from those who experience its use on the receiving end, rather than just those who wield it. This observation holds even for those only interested in great powers.

To better understand the nature of the contemporary international system, this article examines four of the smallest sovereign states in existence: Liechtenstein in Europe, Nauru in the Pacific, St Kitts and Nevis in the Caribbean and the Seychelles in the Indian Ocean, which vary substantially in per capita wealth, geopolitical context and historical background. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, and especially since the 1960s, there has been a marked proliferation of small states, an important development which IR scholarship has so far done little to explain (Lake and O'Mahony, 2004). These four cases jointly illustrate key changes in the nature of the international system over time, specifically the

declining relevance of functional imperatives concerning security competition, economic self-help and hierarchy. All four were bitterly fought over as great power possessions yet have been left unmolested as sovereign states. The contemporary anarchic international system allows for such small, unarmed and unallied states to survive undisturbed, succoured by outside bail-outs in the event of economic crises. All four were tightly integrated within imperial hierarchies yet now energetically wield many sovereign prerogatives in a system that accords them formal equality. The multiplication and survival of these tiny units cannot be explained by a trend towards international hierarchy, given that states' propensity to delegate sovereign prerogatives seems unrelated to functional factors like (dis)economies of scale reflecting geographic, economic or demographic size. Micro-states play sovereignty games in selectively exercising, delegating and selling sovereign powers, from diplomatic recognition to the issuance of postage stamps (Adler-Nissen and Gad, 2013).

The argument here complements earlier work on the survival of weak or failed states (Atzili, 2012; Hironaka, 2005; Jackson, 1990), but differs from them in the empirical referents, and in the focus on the international system, rather than intra-state conflict. It bolsters scholarship on the broad themes of obsolescence of inter-state war (e.g. Mueller, 1989), and theoretical literature suggesting that the international system is evolving from a Hobbesian towards a more Kantian environment (Wendt, 1999).

The first section of this article lays out the rationale for studying micro-states, particularly in terms of the value of case studies with extreme values of independent or dependent variables, and the need to remedy selection bias and address problems of over-determination. In substantiating the thesis about how the international system has become much more permissive, the second step is to derive and test propositions on survival pressures, and the delegation of sovereign prerogatives in line with recent work on hierarchy in international politics. Despite being most likely victims of security pressures, these states either maintain token armed forces or none at all. Liechtenstein, Nauru and the Seychelles have no alliances, while St Kitts and Nevis' most powerful military ally is Barbados. All bar Liechtenstein have experienced recent wrenching economic crises surmounted only with foreign help in the form of outside bail-outs. Because micro-states should be least able to provide military and economic security themselves, they should be especially likely to enter into hierarchical arrangements to satisfy these requirements. But although some of these states have delegated some important aspects of sovereignty, they have delegated fewer prerogatives than some much larger states. Thus, at least in these instances, hierarchy does not seem to reflect any functional imperative of security, governance or economic concerns.

Establishing that micro-states have a historically unprecedented degree of freedom of action begs the question of what they do with this latitude. As such, the third step is to briefly review the strategies adopted by micro-states, given the context of the contemporary international system. These four countries have deployed varying strategies of hierarchy *à la carte* and commercialised aspects of their sovereignty, from citizenship to banking and company registries and to diplomatic recognition. These tiny cases indicate that the international system allows states a world of possibilities: to have armies or allies, or not, and to retain, delegate or profit from a wide range of sovereign prerogatives.

## Why Study Micro-States?

The actions of the United States and China have a major impact on other actors in the international system; those of Tuvalu and Cape Verde do not. But even if IR were only the

study of the exercise of power in the international system, those states on the receiving end of coercion and domination should be of interest. To employ an extreme analogy put forward by Jack Donnelly (2006), it would be a strange history of slavery that looked only at slave-owners but not the slaves themselves or the relations between the two. An empirical understanding of power in international politics demands a study of relatively powerless states and their relations with the powerful.

Gerring (2007: 86) observes that 'Case study analysis is focused on a small number of cases that are expected to provide insight into a causal relationship across a larger population of cases'. According to which rules should this choice be made? It can be done by selecting cases that comprise a representative sample of a general population, or capturing as much variation as possible on independent and dependent variables (Goertz and Mahoney, 2012: 186; King et al., 1994: 140–141). Conventional IR flouts these basic rules in its focus on great powers; there is no effort to draw a representative sample of countries and variation is highly truncated on key variables (Collier and Mahoney, 1996: 71–72; George and Bennett, 2004: 25). Gary King, Robert Keohane and Sidney Verba argue that where IR theories pick cases that share similarly high levels of power (military, economic or however defined), these theories can make no causal inferences as to the effects of power (King et al., 1994: 140).

When deliberately selecting unrepresentative cases, the most common justification is the logic of critical or crucial cases, which are argued to provide 'most-likely' or 'least-likely' tests (Eckstein, 1975; Rogowski, 2004), with the former being used to refute theories and the latter to confirm them. The least-likely design has been referred to as a Sinatra inference ('if it can make it here, it can make it anywhere', Levy, 2002) in supporting theories through subjecting them to especially tough tests. In a most-likely test, by contrast, an extremely high value of the hypothesised independent variable should be matched with an extreme value of the dependent variable (George and Bennett, 2004: 121–122; King et al., 1994: 141). Given the extreme characteristics of micro-states, they suit either approach. For example, if states are hypothesised to be vulnerable to conquest in inverse proportion to their military strength, then micro-states are important disconfirming instances for the hypothesis generally, being most-likely cases for this argument though nevertheless not conquered. If economic globalisation affects states in inverse proportion to the size of their economies, small states are a most-likely test of its effects (Katzenstein, 1985: 9).

Examining great power/micro-state dyads may also help to address problems of overdetermination (King et al., 1994: 122–123). For example, studies of compliance in international law and international relations often disagree about the influence of economic size or military strength relative to legal and normative factors. Is adherence to international rules a product of a logic of appropriateness or a logic of consequences (Steinberg, 2002)? Here, it may be more instructive to look at relations between great powers and micro-states, rather than similarly matched dyads. For example, if the United States and China abide by World Trade Organization (WTO) judgements deciding disputes between them, does this reflect the socialising effects of norms of free trade and a respect for international law, or a *Realpolitik* appreciation that because each side is significantly dependent on the other, openly defecting from the free trade regime could leave each appreciably worse off? The result could reflect either rationale or a combination of both. Free trade is overdetermined. If the US complies with an adverse WTO ruling won by Antigua, however, it will not reflect worries about the likely effect of Antiguan retaliation or a bilateral trade war on the US economy (Lee and Smith, 2010). We may know

more about the extent to which great powers are different or the same as other states through comparisons of unequals.

The field is not entirely blind to these problems. Stephen D Krasner (1999: 54) has argued that neo-realism and neo-liberalism are hamstrung by a near-exclusive focus on symmetrical relations between large states. David Lake points out that any study of hierarchy must also devote substantial attention to the weak. He faults Kenneth Waltz, and by implication IR scholars more generally, for the fixation on studying great powers (Lake, 2002: 10). Both Krasner (1999: 175–183, 229–230) and Lake (2007: 60, 2009a: 54, 78, 2009b: 264, 275) make innovative and convincing use of micro-state examples in advancing big theoretical arguments about the nature of the international system. Robert Jackson (1990), Ann Hironaka (2005) and Boaz Atzili (2012) have persuasively asserted the increasing irrelevance of international survival pressures with reference to weak or failed states as part of arguments about intra-state and transnational conflicts (although the cases they consider, such as the Congo or Somalia, are quite different from those examined here). But these often brilliant exceptions do not change the general neglect of micro-states.

## Case Selection

The important points of variation between the four micro-states referenced below increase the confidence in the general applicability of the conclusions. Conversely, common variation over time in the four cases provides the fulcrum for the main thesis about fundamental change in the nature of the international system replacing imperatives with options. Specifically, where these territories were historically fought over and repeatedly conquered as great power possessions until 1945, they have remained undisturbed as sovereign states, while benefiting from outside rescues when faced with economic crises. Where micro-states were previously locked into imperial hierarchies, they now wield a much greater range of autonomous sovereign prerogatives than functional efficiency would suggest, while selectively delegating and selling others.

The four micro-states are in different regions, have different colonial heritages and contrasting levels of development. Nauru is a Pacific island state that gained independence from Australia in 1968 after earlier being a German colony. The Principality of Liechtenstein, sovereign since the end of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806, is sandwiched between Switzerland and Austria. The Seychelles is an archipelago a thousand miles East of Africa in the Indian Ocean, governed first by the French, then the British, until independence in 1976. St Kitts and Nevis was a British colony and then associated state until 1983. All four countries are democracies, although the Seychelles was ruled as a one-party state 1977–1992.

For a period in the late 1970s, Nauru was the richest country in the world per capita, thanks to its phosphate. Now that the phosphate has run out, unemployment is 90%, and when last measured the national debt was in excess of 1600% of gross domestic product (GDP; Asian Development Bank, 2007). Liechtenstein is one of the world's richest countries per capita, with no national debt. The Seychelles is a middle-income country reliant on tuna and tourism. After running a relatively closed economy during the period of one-party rule, over-spending on the state sector led to a debt crisis and an International Monetary Fund (IMF) rescue package in 2008 (IMF, 2010). St Kitts and Nevis is a middle-income country that has gone from being a mono-crop sugar economy to having no sugar production at all from 2005, precipitating a debt crisis and international rescue package (IMF, 2013). Thus, while all four micro-states unsurprisingly share negligible

land area, population, economic size and military strength, there are other important differences between cases (e.g. Liechtenstein's landlocked situation and wealth vs Nauru's remote Pacific location and poverty; St Kitts and Nevis' proximity to the US vs the Seychelles' isolation from major powers).

Defining small states has bedevilled and hamstrung work in this area (Lee and Smith, 2010: 1092–1093; Mosser, 2001; Neumann and Gstohl, 2006: 9). This difficulty explains Alastair Johnston's (2012: 62) recent verdict that 'Although there is a literature on small states in IR, it is rather out of date and relatively underdeveloped' (Neumann and Gstohl, 2006: 11, also agree; of course there are exceptions, among others, see Archer et al., 2014; Veenendaal and Corbett, 2015). This article understands state size as a continuous variable, in keeping with the most/least-likely research design. On almost any objective measure (population, land area, economic size, military power), Nauru (population 11,000), St Kitts and Nevis (population 43,000), Liechtenstein (population 35,000) and the Seychelles (86,000 people) represent the extremities of state smallness. Rather than seeking to draw a conceptually implausible arbitrary dividing line between micro-states and the rest (e.g. a million people, see Wivel et al., 2014: 7–8), this category is conceived as a radial concept: 'micro-state' is defined by a central sub-category that shares all features of the type to a strong degree (extremely small geographic size, population, economy, etc.), linked with radiating sub-categories that have progressively fewer of these features or have them to a lesser extent (Collier and Mahon, 1993: 848). On objective grounds, these four cases are less ambiguously small states than the European middle powers considered by Peter Katzenstein (1985), such as Switzerland and Austria.

## **Theoretical Implications: Security, Hierarchy and Micro-States**

For realists, insecurity is the fundamental driving force of states' behaviour. Anarchy puts states in a self-help system, where their security and ultimately survival are at risk. Although there are differences of emphasis between different realist scholars (e.g. Brooks, 1997; Holmes, 2011), to abandon this key insight is to gut realism of its main theoretical insight and render it unfalsifiable (Legro and Moravcsik, 1999). States are said to have two options for maintaining their security and survival: strengthening their internal military power and/or concluding alliances with more powerful states as part of a balancing or bandwagoning strategy (Mearsheimer, 2001; Walt, 1990; Waltz, 1979). The logic of this position necessitates that the weaker the state, absent allies, the more its survival is at risk (Lake and O'Mahony, 2004: 704). Micro-states constitute least-likely cases for survival within the international system. Wivel and Oest note that a

permanent power asymmetry renders [micro-states] dependent on the actions of other states and unable to defend themselves. Thus, we would expect them to face severe threats to their security more often than other states and at the same time be less able to deal with these threats on their own (Wivel and Oest, 2010: 435).

Conversely, according to the 'Sinatra' logic, if this kind of tiny, undefended, isolated and often massively indebted states can make it in the international system, any state should be able to. Although scholars can reasonably differ as to how to measure power resources, no one can reasonably contest the fact that micro-states are at or very near the powerless end of the spectrum.

Looking at micro-state survival also helps with the problem of overdetermination in examining the fundamental question of the declining propensity for inter-state war in the contemporary international system. The absence of war between great powers since 1945 may be a product of direct or extended nuclear or conventional deterrence, or ideational factors like the delegitimation of war as an instrument of state policy thanks to cultural and normative shifts, or some combination of both. It is difficult to discern the explanatory potential of competing explanations because they both predict that great powers will survive unmolested. The situation with micro-states is very different. Not only are their military forces trivial or non-existent, but since few maintain alliances, micro-states' survival in the international system is not overdetermined. A supplementary factor is the ability of micro-states (and others) to call upon international assistance in times of acute economic hardship.

The second strand of relevant theory concerns hierarchy in the international system. Are small states disproportionately likely to delegate out important elements of their sovereignty? Small states are less likely to be able to protect themselves unaided, either from military threats or economic disruptions, and thus should be more inclined to engage in sovereignty exchanges with great powers or perhaps supranational institutions. Certainly to the extent that there is a policy literature on micro-states, it is overwhelmingly cast in terms of their vulnerability (to economic shocks, natural disasters, climate change, etc.; e.g. Hendrikson, 1999; Lee and Smith, 2010; Wivel et al., 2014). It would seem that, all other things being equal, the smaller the state, the greater the need and willingness to contract out sovereign prerogatives (Lake and O'Mahony, 2004). States, like firms, should exchange with others for things they cannot produce themselves efficiently or at all (Butt, 2013: 579). Given the inherent limits and diseconomies of scale for micro-states, this should be most things. For Lake, subordinate states do not have to be small. Yet among those states exhibiting the highest levels of both economic and security subordination, micro-states are disproportionately represented. Aside from the Marshall Islands and Federated States of Micronesia, Lake's top 10 most dependent states in 1995 are Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Canada, Dominica, El Salvador, Grenada, Jamaica, Panama, St Kitts and Nevis and St Vincent and the Grenadines (Lake, 2009a: 79).

Constructivist scholars of hierarchy again see transfers of sovereignty as almost always from a weaker state to a stronger one, with the transfer based on, but not reducible to, power differentials (Donnelly, 2006: 149). Wendt and Friedheim (1995: 690) speak of the value of studying hierarchy dyads characterised by 'extreme power disparities'. Whether hierarchy is based on rational contracting or social relations, the two kinds of states that should be most likely to be in hierarchical relationships are great powers as superiors and micro-states as subordinates.

Before going any further, it is important to rebut an objection: perhaps the micro-states are simply too small to be worth conquering and have nothing of sufficient value to offer patrons. The idea that these territories are too small to be worth invading is clearly contradicted by the fact that each was repeatedly invaded at various stages of history. As for not having anything of value to offer in a hierarchical relationship, each territory was incorporated in hierarchical imperial relations for decades or centuries, and fought over on this basis (and a few similarly sized entities are still part of classic imperial hierarchies, see Aldrich and Connell, 1998). There is a rather circular quality to this kind of criticism. Why aren't micro-states conquered or more enmeshed in international hierarchies? Because they aren't worth it. How do we know this? Because they haven't been

conquered or more enmeshed in international hierarchies. The outcome is explained by the presumed preferences of strong states, and the evidence for these presumed preferences is the outcome.

### **Micro-State Security**

The territories now comprising Liechtenstein, St Kitts and Nevis, the Seychelles and Nauru were all repeatedly conquered before they became sovereign states, yet not one has been attacked since independence, despite their extreme vulnerability. This is a remarkable shift indicative of systemic changes. Specifically, these are primarily the obsolescence of wars of conquest, and to a lesser extent a generalised international duty to economically assist poor and crisis-wracked nations.

The Principality of Liechtenstein came into being from 1719 as the 343rd component polity of the Holy Roman Empire (Kohn, 1967: 550). Earlier in the 1620s, the countryside was ravaged by roving Swiss and Austrian troops (Beattie, 2004: 5). In the Napoleonic Wars, Liechtenstein was occupied by French and later Russian forces. From 1815, the Principality became part of the North German Confederation, as part of which it fought unsuccessfully against the Prussians in 1866. Shortly afterwards, the legislature refused the military budget, and the army was abolished.

The early modern period was also a troubled one for St Kitts and Nevis. After the first European settlement in 1623, the French and English joined to exterminate the native Carib population, before fighting each other and the Spanish. The islands were reconquered by the French and British several times over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As an indication of the strategic stakes, the British built their strongest fortress in the Western hemisphere in St Kitts, which repulsed a French attack in 1806, the last military action on the islands (Dyde, 2005; Hubbard, 2002). The same Anglo-French rivalry also affected the Seychelles, uninhabited until settled by slave-owning French in 1756. From 1794, the islands were used as a base by French privateers attacking British shipping. The British took the islands several times during the course of the war, permanently occupying the Seychelles from 1810 until independence in 1976 (Scarr, 1999: 18–37).

While the two world wars spared the Seychelles and St Kitts and Nevis, this was not true of Liechtenstein and especially Nauru. Although Liechtenstein declared its neutrality in World War I, the Entente powers treated the principality as a part of Austria-Hungary, and thus subjected it to an economic blockade, which devastated the economy (Beattie, 2004: 38–41). In 1914, Nauru was a German colony. From the turn of the twentieth century, Nauru had been economically and physically transformed by the mining that followed the discovery that the island was almost solid phosphate, the key ingredient for fertiliser. Shortly after the declaration of war in 1914, Australian troops claimed Nauru for the British Empire, just beating a Japanese naval force that had its eye on the same prize (Viviani, 1970: 41). A note to the Australian Versailles delegation explained the island's value:

Australia's hope of getting anything substantial in relief of its crushing war debt is slender. Nauru is the one island whose receipts exceed its expenditure. Its phosphate deposit marks it of considerable value, not only as a purely commercial proposition but because the future productivity of our continent absolutely depends on such a fertilizer (Viviani, 1970: 42).



Nauru was awarded to the British Empire, divided on the ratio 42:42:16 between Australia, Britain and New Zealand, with Australia having administrative responsibilities.

The varying fortunes of Liechtenstein and Nauru during World War II provide an instructive contrast. In 1934, Liechtenstein requested to be included in the Swiss defensive perimeter. The Swiss military supported this proposal because such a move would have allowed defence along the Rhine border with Austria (Beattie, 2004: 85). The Swiss government refused, however, worrying that such a move might compromise Swiss neutrality, unless Liechtenstein agreed to give up its sovereignty and become part of Switzerland. With the annexation of Austria in 1938, the Principality now had a direct border with Nazi Germany. Hitler's government considered invading Liechtenstein but decided that attacking an unarmed neutral would cause serious diplomatic damage at a time when Britain and France were still set on appeasement. However, it was decided that if Liechtenstein militarised the border by joining Swiss fortifications, this 'would be viewed as an anti-German move' (Beattie, 2004: 91). As such, it was Liechtenstein's very defencelessness that turned out to be its main advantage in avoiding invasion. In 1945, with the Red Army on its border, Liechtenstein defied the Soviet Union's demands to forcibly repatriate anti-Communist Russians who had fought with the *Wehrmacht* before taking refuge in the Principality.

In contrast, in August 1942, the Japanese conquered Nauru, after which it was extensively bombed by the Allies. By 1945, many women had been forced into sexual slavery as 'comfort women', most of the sick had been executed and the general population starved (Hughes, 2004: 2). A third of Nauru's population perished during 1942–1945 (Viviani, 1970: 77–84). Nonetheless, upon independence in 1968, the government of Nauru rejected Australian offers of defence guarantees, a decision that runs directly counter to the conventional wisdom (Viviani, 1970: 170–171). Currently, like Liechtenstein, Nauru has no armed forces, allies or bases.

Immediately before independence in 1976, the Seychelles government unsuccessfully petitioned both Britain and the United States to set up a naval base. The government worried that the Seychelles might go the way of its Indian Ocean neighbour Zanzibar, briefly independent in 1963 before being absorbed into Tanganyika the following year (Scarr, 1999: 176). Now the Seychelles armed forces total 450 people, mostly in the coast guard (Author's interviews, Victoria, Seychelles, 2013). Recent piracy has increased the cost of shipping and insurance, and driven cruise ships and freighters away from the Seychelles. In response, the country hosts anti-piracy forces from a huge variety of states, including Spain, France, Russia, the United States (which has operated drones from the main island of Mahé), China, India and even Luxembourg. These foreign forces are there to defend their own ships rather than the Seychelles as such, however. The government emphasises that while it is open to help from all countries, it will not enter into alliances (Author's interviews, Victoria, Seychelles, 2013).

St Kitts and Nevis neither asked for nor received security guarantees from the British at independence. The country maintains armed forces 200 strong, trained and equipped for coast guard and disaster relief duties, as well as dealing with civil unrest (Author's interview, Basseterre, St Kitts, 2013). St Kitts and Nevis is part of a formal alliance through the Eastern Caribbean Regional Security System. This agreement, first concluded in 1982 and formalised in a 1996 treaty, is largely aimed at co-operation in fighting natural disasters and crime (Bartman, 2002; Knight and Persaud, 2001; Sutton, 1993). Although it does include a defence guarantee, its membership (Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, St Lucia, and St Vincent and the Grenadines) makes clear the limits of potential military assistance.

How can the shift from vulnerable imperial possessions to secure sovereign micro-states be reconciled with the purported security pressures of anarchy? Arguments linking geography, technology or the offence/defence balance to conquest have little purchase here (Brooks, 1997). Nauru in the Central Pacific and the Seychelles in the middle of the Indian Ocean are among the remotest countries on Earth, but this has not saved them from attack in the past. The rise of modern ships and air travel has brought these countries within reach of more and more potential aggressors, yet they have become safer rather than more exposed. None of the micro-states has any defences of note, and hence the offence/defence balance is irrelevant.

Directly confounding expectations, all four micro-states have survived despite the complete absence of alliances with any substantial military power. This is thanks to the decline of inter-state wars of conquest (Fazal, 2007; Mueller, 1989). Asking about precautions against external attack in interviews in these four states provokes incredulity that someone would raise such a ludicrously far-fetched proposition (Author's interviews, Nauru, 2008; Vaduz, Liechtenstein 2013; Victoria, the Seychelles 2013; Basseterre, St Kitts 2013). Large-N statistical work suggests that these four micro-states are by no means outliers. Tanisha Fazal (2007: 230) finds there is no relationship between either military weakness or the absence of alliances and violent elimination from the international system since 1815. Thus, micro-states contradict the position that states are driven to a strategy of self-help through internal military strengthening or external alliance formation. This disconfirmation is important for the larger theoretical concern with what are argued to be the effects of anarchy, exactly because these are extreme cases, those that are most likely to face existential security threats.

While the military aspect is primary in looking at the real or supposed effects of anarchy, it is also worth briefly considering economic factors. For as well as the absence of inter-state war, it is the presence of a *de facto* international economic welfare system that bolsters small states (and larger quasi-states too, see Jackson, 1990). The Seychelles suffered an economic crisis, debt default and currency collapse during 2008–2009, only tamed by receiving an IMF/World Bank rescue package (IMF, 2010). Earlier it had received an amount equivalent to almost 10% of GDP from foreign aid, as well as preferential trade access to EU markets (Kothari and Wilkinson, 2013: 99). A few years later St Kitts and Nevis, struggling with the end of its previously dominant sugar industry and being 'graduated out' of aid programmes as it reached middle-income status, suffered a similar crisis. Once again, it was bailed out by the IMF (2013). The most extreme example is Nauru, where aid provides over two-thirds of the budget. In particular, foreign aid pays for the island's only generator that powers the desalination plant, without which Nauru would have negligible fresh water and hence be uninhabitable (Author's interview, Nauru, 2008). No doubt international aid and concessional loans come with strings attached (which lenders may or may not be able to enforce). Yet the fact remains that these bail-outs are seen by recipient governments as far better than the alternative of being left to cope alone. The imperatives of an international self-help economic system are substantially attenuated by this safety net.

### **Micro-States and Hierarchy**

If the logic of hierarchy is that weak countries, and micro-states in particular, trade sovereignty to reach ends they cannot achieve in isolation, security is one of these. But it is not the only one. Economic hierarchy deals may include surrendering control of customs

and trade policy, adopting a foreign currency and empowering foreign appellate courts to reassure foreign investors (Lake, 2009a: 71–76). With their minuscule, undiversified and vulnerable economies highly exposed to international forces outside their control, it might be expected that micro-states are most likely to cede such economic prerogatives (Katzenstein, 1985; Lake, 2009a: 73). The section below shows that some micro-states have indeed entered international hierarchy deals to improve economic outcomes, but there is no particular relationship between small size and alienating sovereignty, tending to disconfirm functional explanations of hierarchy. In some regards, micro-states have retained more economic sovereignty than great powers (e.g. the Seychelles' and Nauru's absence from the WTO). More broadly, the trend is for micro-states to claim more sovereign rights over time, even if it is to later profit from selling them, as discussed below.

Before World War 1, the Austro-Hungarian Empire exercised most diplomatic functions for Liechtenstein. The Empire could sign treaties on behalf of Liechtenstein (with the latter's consent), and there was a common customs zone. Liechtenstein's supreme court of appeal was the Austrian Supreme Court (Duursma, 1996: 154). After 1918, Liechtenstein adopted the Swiss franc. The appellate court was now in Liechtenstein, though it continued to use some Austrian judges. In 1920, Liechtenstein became part of the Swiss postal and telegraphic area, and in 1923, a customs union. Switzerland agreed to represent Liechtenstein's diplomatic interests, with the important result that in 1960 Liechtenstein became a member of the European Free Trade Area (EFTA) when Switzerland joined. In an important indicator of the expectations of sovereignty at the time, in 1920, Liechtenstein's application for membership in the League of Nations was refused because the Principality had no army and had deputed some of its sovereign prerogatives to other states (Duursma, 1996: 171–173).

From the 1970s, however, the Principality increasingly managed its own foreign policy. In the late 1980s, Liechtenstein gained independent representation in the negotiations between EFTA and the European Economic Community, leading to Liechtenstein's accession to the new European Economic Area in 1992, even though the Swiss had rejected this option. In 1990, Liechtenstein successfully applied to become part of the UN. Liechtenstein has shown no interest in joining the EU; however, it can access this market through the European Economic Area already, and it would be a net budget contributor (Author's interviews, Vaduz, Liechtenstein, 2013). As such, Liechtenstein has alienated less economic sovereignty than the 28 members of the EU.

At independence in 1968, Nauru's national wealth amounted to US \$4million per family, and thus there was no need for foreign aid nor did the population even have to work (guest workers did the mining; Hughes, 2004: 3). Nauru opted for a domestic appellate court and (unlike Canada and Australia) a domestic head of state, though in an important hierarchy deal, it did adopt the Australian dollar. For the first few decades after independence, the government eschewed diplomatic relations and membership of nearly all international organisations, including the UN (Hughes, 2004; Author's interview Hughes, Sydney, Australia, 2012). Although there has been much rhetoric concerning a South Pacific customs union, this is still far from a reality. After phosphate reserves were exhausted, Nauru joined the UN in 1999.

Currently, the Seychelles is remarkably close to the sovereign ideal. It has not delegated any foreign affairs powers. The head of state has been a native Seychellois citizen since independence, and there has never been any right of appeal to any foreign court (Shillington, 2009: 136). The Seychelles acceded to the UN shortly after independence and is a member of various regional organisations, but these rather superficial arrangements entail nothing

like the degree of integration as the EU or the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS; discussed below). The government considered adopting the US dollar as currency during the economic crisis in 2008 but decided to stick with the Seychelles rupee to benefit from devaluation (Author's interview, Victoria, Seychelles, 2013).

St Kitts and Nevis has kept more ties with the former colonial master, remaining a constitutional monarchy and sharing Queen Elizabeth II as head of state with the UK and 14 other countries. There are two levels of supranational court, the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court, and the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London, the final court of appeal. There had been a common currency for British Caribbean colonies since World War II, but with the collapse of the British West Indies federation, the progressive withdrawal of the larger members saw this shrink back to six OECS (Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia, and St Vincent and the Grenadines) and two UK Overseas Territories (Anguilla and Montserrat). The Eastern Caribbean dollar and Eastern Caribbean Central Bank long pre-date their European equivalents. The OECS has, however, trailed the EU in introducing freedom of movement and capital, an arrangement in place only since 2011. The OECS lacks the extensive corpus of EU law, and any equivalent to the European Court of Justice that can strike down national laws. With only a weak secretariat, the OECS is a much more intergovernmental body than the more supranational EU.

In deciding whether micro-states have delegated more or less sovereignty than we might expect, a reasonable question is 'compared to what?' Compared to EU members, micro-states have retained more sovereignty. EU states have relinquished sovereign control over their customs and trade policy and, with respect to EU nationals, immigration too. They have a common citizenship, are governed by supranational law and have surrendered supreme jurisdiction in many areas to the European Court of Justice. The majority of EU members have also given up their currency and control over monetary policy. However, critics might object that the deep sovereignty pooling within the EU is unique; what other relevant examples are there?

Even considering less formal dyadic hierarchy relations, the sovereign independence of contemporary micro-states stands out (Butt, 2013; Hobson and Sharman, 2005; Lake, 2009a; Wendt and Friedheim, 1995). The United States exercised a great deal of control of West German and Japanese security policies during the Cold War, bolstered by a very substantial military presence. There is no equivalent in the micro-states here, which do not host permanent bases and have been free to pursue a policy of neutrality. Still less is there the tight control the Soviet Union exercised over the domestic politics of its Eastern European satellites under the Brezhnev doctrine, or the frequent interventions that underpinned US policy in Central America in the early twentieth century. Although, as noted, Nauru, St Kitts and Nevis, and the Seychelles have participated in multilateral conditional lending programmes at various points, this is nothing like as intrusive as the measures imposed by creditor great powers on delinquent borrowers in the Balkans and Latin America before World War I (Krasner, 1999).

### **Micro-State Strategies: Hierarchy à la Carte and Selling Sovereignty**

If the sections above have established that deep changes in the international system, like the decline of inter-state wars of conquest, remove or attenuate functional imperatives for micro-states, what strategies do these states adopt to take advantage of this freedom? In

reviewing the evidence from the preceding section, a pick-and-choose approach to hierarchy is evident, while a second prominent trend is the commercialisation of sovereign prerogatives. The variation in the way different micro-states adopt and adapt different strategies further reinforces the conclusion that these are strategic choices made in a permissive environment, rather than the emanations of underlying and determinative systemic forces.

Thus, in taking stock of the discussion of hierarchy above, rationalist literature on hierarchy tends to maintain that states will exchange sovereign prerogatives on a means–ends basis to obtain things they cannot otherwise get, mainly military and economic security (e.g. Cooley and Spruyt, 2009; Krasner, 1999; Lake, 2009a). The four micro-states have a very limited domestic capacity to ensure either, and on this basis should be more prone to surrender sovereignty to others to make good this deficit. Micro-states have indeed made some important constitutional, legal and economic grants of sovereign powers to foreign states and regional associations. Yet these are generally less extensive than the powers ceded by many much larger states like EU member states, or Cold War clients like Poland, East Germany, West Germany or Japan. Furthermore, the trend seems to be for micro-states to reclaim and exercise sovereignty rather than delegate it, for example, Nauru and Liechtenstein's greater presence in international organisations since the 1990s. Variation in delegating sovereignty has been the product of deliberate decisions, whether it is to enter regional associations or stay aloof, cede or retain a local currency, or use a domestic or foreign appellate court. The fact that all four micro-states were closely integrated within imperial hierarchies but now exhibit widely varying levels of delegated sovereignty is a strong indicator of both systemic change in the nature of international anarchy and micro-states' agency in practising hierarchy *à la carte*.

The second notable strategy employed by micro-states is to profit by selling or renting out their sovereign prerogatives. Once again, the variation in whether and to what extent these states engage in such practices indicates the importance of choice, even if in some instances this has been in response to testing economic exigencies. A few examples illustrate the range of possibilities. Soon after joining the UN in the 1990s, Nauru began selling diplomatic recognition between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China (Van Fossen, 2012). In 2009, Nauru was apparently rewarded with US \$50 million in soft loans and development aid from Russia in return for recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia (*New York Times*, 2009). Several decades earlier, the Seychelles had sold its representation on the International Whaling Commission to Greenpeace (Epstein, 2008: 160–161).

Closely related is the sale of passports or more formally citizenship by investment programmes. Here, St Kitts and Nevis has from 1984 pioneered a route more recently copied by many others, including EU members like Cyprus and Malta (*Bloomberg*, 2015). A Kittitian passport is available to those paying US \$250,000 to the government sugar diversification fund or investing at least US \$400,000 in local real estate (Author's interviews, Bassetterre, St Kitts, 2004 and 2013). Sales are currently running at around 2000 passports annually (Government of St Kitts & Nevis, 2016). Nauru sold over a thousand passports during 1998–2002, some with diplomatic accreditation, earning US \$11 million in the process (Van Fossen, 2007: 141).

Perhaps the most common commercial sovereignty move has been to establish a tax haven: Liechtenstein in the 1920s, Nauru in the 1970s, St Kitts and Nevis in the 1980s, and the Seychelles in the 1990s. More than just a place for foreigners to hide money, tax

haven facilities have allowed non-residents to become corporate citizens by establishing shell companies or shell banks, meaning that they operate under the laws of their micro-state host rather than these individuals' actual home countries (Findley et al., 2014; Palan et al., 2010). Finally, all four countries have marketed various exotica, from their postage stamps to coins. In commodifying sovereignty in this manner, it is important to stress that there has not been any permanent or irrevocable alienation of their authority. Diplomatic recognition has been withdrawn as well as extended, passports cancelled and offshore financial centres shut down.

## Conclusion

The shift whereby territories that once were fiercely contested by great powers are now left militarily untroubled as sovereign states, and actively supported in times of economic crisis, suggests a fundamental transformation in the nature of the international system. Similarly, the fact that all four cases examined here were tightly integrated within imperial hierarchies but now practise hierarchy *à la carte* again suggests a much more permissive international system than most IR theory has assumed. While there are of course limits – micro-states cannot directly challenge great powers or violate international prohibitions on hosting transnational terrorist movements – the latitude they nevertheless currently enjoy is unprecedented. The recent experiences of micro-states indicate that much IR scholarship has been developed to explain a Darwinian international system that no longer exists. Contemporary states are presented with several options but few, if any, functional imperatives. Using the leeway the environment affords, micro-states exercise, delegate and sell sovereign powers to different degrees at different times in order to advance their interests. Although this article does not seek to explain these tectonic changes within the international system, it does offer the firm conclusion that answers to fundamental questions about world politics should be sought at the extremes of powerlessness, and not just among the powerful. Sometimes even the biggest questions are best answered by looking at the smallest cases.

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### **Author Biography**

JC Sharman is Sir Patrick Sheehy Professor of International Relations in the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Cambridge. Sharman's research is focused on tax havens, corruption and money laundering, as well as the international relations of the early modern world. His most recent books are *The Despot's Guide to Wealth Management* (Cornell University Press, 2017) and *International Order in Diversity: War, Trade and Rule in the Indian Ocean* (with Andrew Phillips, Cambridge University Press, 2015).