

Seychelles and Mauritius as Pioneers: The Case for a Refined Conceptualisation of Small State Foreign Policy

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Abstract

In traditional small state literature, small states are often relegated to the periphery. They are characterised as 'rule-takers' rather than 'rule-makers', lacking the resources to be proactive on the global stage and perpetually defined by a power deficit. Consequently, small state foreign policy behaviour is presumed to be driven by an enduring sense of dependence, with such states consistently aligning their policies with those of major players. This article challenges such assertions, arguing they reflect an outdated understanding of small state behaviour and power. By examining the cases of Seychelles and Mauritius, two Small Island Developing States in the South-West Indian Ocean, this article demonstrates that they defy these traditional notions. Through a thematic analysis of official government speeches from 2017 to 2024 and drawing on Holsti's conception of role theory, the article argues that these two islands are actively enacting the role of 'pioneers', directly contrasting with dependency-based foreign policy frameworks. Beyond expanding on the foreign policy of small states to include an 'interdependent foreign policy' (IFP) orientation, this article also shows that the role of 'pioneer' carries its own form of power, offering an alternative perspective on how small, oceanic states can assert influence in international relations.

Keywords: Small Island Developing States (SIDS); Western Indian Ocean; role conceptions; foreign policy

1. Introduction

In the last few decades, a growing body of literature on African agency (see Beswick and Hammerstad 2013; Brown 2012; Chipaika and Knowledge 2018; Ettang 2021; Taylor 2010) has emerged, repositioning Africa away from its longstanding portrayal as a 'hopeless continent' or a 'perpetual victim'. However, this scholarship has focused mainly on continental or mainland Africa, often highlighting the archetypal states of South Africa, Nigeria, Rwanda, Ethiopia, inter alia (Brown 2012). Noticeably omitted from this analytical gaze are the islands off the coast of Africa, which have demonstrated remarkable initiative in the international arena. The marginalisation of islands is also reflected in the dominant discourse surrounding the Indo-Pacific. Scholars such as Medcalf (2019) suggest that the narratives about the Indo-Pacific are based on the interests of the major actors which include the United States (US), India, Japan and China, as well as middle powers such as Australia and South Korea (Medcalf 2019). Similarly, analyses by Tuan (2020) and Berkosky and Miracola (2019) focus on the Indo-Pacific strategies of Australia, India the European Union, Japan, Russia and the US.

Common to all these analyses is the conspicuously overlooked role of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), as though they may, and do not, also have an interest in the future of the region. This marginalisation reflects a broader tendency to categorise small states as 'rule-takers' and not 'rule-makers', perpetuating the notion that they lack the necessary resources to be proactive in the international arena. Indeed, Wright (2023) asserts that in the field of international relations, islands are rarely considered and rather relegated to the margins. They are, de facto, seen as states with a necessary 'power deficit', which seemingly justifies their omission. Defined by this 'power-deficit', these states are said to have a foreign policy that is characterised by a sense of dependence; that is, they can pursue either a compliant or counter-dependent foreign policy. By analysing the cases of Seychelles and Mauritius, two SIDS in the South-West Indian Ocean, this article demonstrates why the traditional conceptualisation of small state foreign policy needs refinement. In doing so, it presents an alternative foreign policy orientation, namely an 'interdependent foreign policy' (IFP), that highlights their agency and power in the international arena.

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2. Tracing Small States in The Literature: From Traditional Narratives to Emerging Agency

Small states have not always been portrayed as weak. During ancient Greek times, small states were viewed favourably, with philosophers such as Plato and Jean-Jacques Rousseau praising small states as they were considered a necessary condition of the good life (Liska 1957). This theme was also prominent during the 18th and part of the 19th centuries, when small states were attractive since they contrasted the absolutism and centralisation inherent in big states (Amstrup 1965). In the latter years of the 19th and early 20th century, however, such a sentiment underwent revision, with scholars attributing war, misfortune and internal turmoil to the existence of small states (Von Rochau 1853). Indeed, this period was marked by changing global dynamics, including imperialism, the two world wars, and the Cold War. During the Nazi era, small states were explicitly devalued, with some suggesting that small states should be destroyed or pushed to the very periphery (Whittlesey 1942).

Consequently, descriptions started arising surrounding small states, with Schwarzenberger (1964: 109) suggesting they have “ridiculously little” of the currency that shapes the environment in which they exist. According to Väyrynen (1971) and Handel (1990), small states are solely preoccupied with survival. Rothstein (1968) asserts that these states must always rely on others to obtain security, while Väyrynen (1974) elaborated that small states are deeply dependent on other countries, have severely constrained independent decision-making abilities, and are fundamentally defined by a lack of autonomy. Keohane (1969: 296) goes so far as to suggest that these states could best be labelled as “system-ineffectual” states since they are unable to influence the system. This narrative persisted into the beginning of the 21st century, with Knudsen (2002) arguing that small states are ineffective in advancing their interests in the international arena, and Insanally (2013: 99) noting that small states lack the “strategic clout” necessary to obtain any significant concessions from larger states. Finally, Maass (2017) reinforced this view, arguing that the structure of the system continues to exist and develop regardless of the involvement and existence of small states.

Considering this, small states are often perceived as having a limited range of foreign policy orientations. Liska (1957: 41), for example, suggests that small states involved in war can either side with the anti-hegemonic powers or with the “unbalancer”. Other scholars have noted that small states can either bandwagon or balance against a threat (Karsh 1988; Reiter 1994) or adopt a stance of neutrality and non-alignment (Rothstein 1968). In this instance, neutrality is not necessarily aimed at impartiality, but rather a reflection of the desperate efforts of small states to avoid entanglement in future wars. Espindola (1987), extends this argument to Third World states, suggesting they can either remain neutral or seek non-alignment, while Mouritzen (1991) reasons they can pursue a strategy of non-commitment. Richardson (1978) offers a bargaining model to explain the foreign policy of these states, which proffers that small states will comply with the foreign policies of larger states in exchange for military or economic aid, whereas Carney (1989) has put forward the patron-client relationship model, where the foreign policy of a small state is characterised by compliance.

Perhaps most recently, Breuning (2007), building on the work of Hey (1993), suggests that small states can pursue one of four foreign policy orientations, namely: (i) consensus-oriented; (ii) compliant; (iii) counter-dependent and (iv) compensation. A consensus-oriented foreign policy occurs when a small state voluntarily aligns its foreign policy with a more powerful state, whereas, in the case of compliant foreign policy, this comes only after external pressure has been applied by larger states. When a small state does not align its foreign policy (either through a consensus or compliant orientation), it can be described as pursuing a counter-dependent foreign policy. Adopting this orientation, small states, frustrated with their dependent stance, will try to lessen their dependence and adopt an anti-core foreign policy (Hey 1993). The compensation orientation is similar to the counter-dependent stance in the sense that both reject major powers and attempt to lessen dependence. In the case of the latter, however, the distinguishing factor is that the motivation behind this orientation lies in the need to appease domestic audiences (Hey 1993). At the core of these four orientations is a common theme: small states’ foreign policy is always defined by a sense of dependence, whether it is an acceptance or rejection of this.

The emergence of a new strain of thought, however, questions the relevance of such a framework, as well as the traditional assumptions of small state foreign policy, discussed earlier. Malik (2020) argues that small states actually play a pivotal role, since their support (or lack thereof) determines the success or failure of great powers. In other words, for major players such as the US to be successful in articulating their visions of the Indo-Pacific, they are reliant on enlisting the support of small islands. Bueger and Wivel (2018) also touch on the importance of small states, suggesting that small states have issue-specific capabilities that they can utilise to exert niche influence. Otto (2022) demonstrates how Seychelles was able to carve out a crucial role for itself as a pivotal player during the heydays of piracy off the coast of Somalia in 2008.

There are other instances where islands have expressed creativity and agency, with Tuvalu renting out its '.tv' internet domain to a US media company, generating 8.5 per cent of its domestic revenue annually (Hawksley and Georgeou 2023). Tuvalu has creatively monetised aspects of its sovereignty. Vanuatu has innovatively used its sovereignty to generate income by selling its citizenship to wealthy people. Beyond these economic strategies, scholars such as Hume et al. (2021) and Morgan (2022) have made the case that SIDS are exerting agency by pushing for a new classification system, reconceptualising themselves from small island states to large ocean states. Such arguments question the conventional knowledge, calling into question whether they truly have “ridiculously little” of the currency. Schwarzenberger (1964) speaks of whether they are as ineffective in advancing their interests in the international arena as Knudson (2002) suggests. Furthermore, this emerging strain in the literature calls into question whether small states, and specifically SIDS, should still be confined to the paradigm where they are described as system-ineffectual and only have foreign policy options that are dependent.

3. Analytical Framework

Breuning's (2007) theory on small states provides a valuable framework for understanding how small states behave, which is subsequently adopted by this article as a foundation. However, in operationalising Breuning's framework, this article consolidates the four proposed orientations into two primary categories: compliant and counter-dependent foreign policy orientations. This adjustment is justified on the basis that it is practically nearly impossible to distinguish compliant from consensus-oriented and counter-dependent from compensation without intimate knowledge of the decision-making process, which is not typically disclosed in speeches. It thus falls outside the purview of this article.

Importantly, this condensation does not diminish Breuning's framework since it still captures the two fundamental positions of small states. The two foreign policy orientations are defined as compliant foreign policy orientation and counter-dependent foreign policy orientation. If it can be illustrated that a state demonstrated policy alignment with a major player, then that state can be said to be pursuing a compliant foreign policy. Alignment refers to any actions taken by a state that demonstrates explicit support for another state. If it can be demonstrated that a state is adopting an anti-core or anti-major power sentiment towards another state, then it can be suggested that this state is pursuing a counter-dependent foreign policy. Importantly, there must be a clear anti-core or hostile position towards a major player. This analytical framework, which enables a more practical application of Breuning's framework while retaining its conceptual integrity, is illustrated in Table 1.

Finally, Holsti's 1970 article on 'National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy' is used alongside Breuning's framework to interpret the roles that states adopt in the international arena. Through an analysis of state speeches, Holsti (1970) identifies 17 distinct role conceptions that states can enact. This article embodies Holsti's (1970) approach by systematically examining speeches, identifying key phrases that signal a state's position or orientation within Breuning's framework, and translating these into specific role conceptions.

Table 1: Analytical framework for small state foreign policy orientations

Foreign Policy Orientation	Definition	Key Indicators	Policy Outcome
Compliant	A state aligns its foreign policy with major players.	Any actions that illustrate clear support for the policies or positions of major players.	Pro-core: Foreign policy reflects the interests of major powers and not the national government.
Counterdependent	A state adopts an anti-core stance, showing hostility towards a major player.	Any actions that demonstrate clear resistance or critique of the policies of major players, which include hostile rhetoric or actions.	Anti-core: Foreign policy reflects attempts to lessen dependence on major players or even reject them.

4. Methodology

Situated within a qualitative research approach, this article adopts thematic analysis as a research design. The thematic analysis is guided by the analytical framework that was operationalised in the previous section and based on the work of Breuning (2007). Breuning's (2007) framework provided the guiding questions for the thematic analysis, while Holsti's (1970) national role conception approach was applied alongside it to assess whether a state was positioning itself in alignment with or in opposition to major powers. Government speeches from Seychelles and Mauritius delivered between 2017 and 2024 were manually coded by the researcher. Only speeches that related to a state's foreign policy and addressed to the external environment (as opposed to its domestic environment) were considered. Speeches were selected

on the basis that they represent an articulation of a country's position on a matter (Modelske 1962) and can, therefore, be used to gain insight into the views of a state's foreign affairs (Shlapentokh 2009). As Shlapentokh (2009) further reasons, as a rule, speeches should be taken as relatively authentic reflections of a government's position.

Themes that could answer the question of whether the selected states align its foreign policy with a major player or rejects major players were identified. The reliability of the speeches was ensured through two measures: first, providing as many direct quotations as possible, thereby increasing transparency and second, clearly listing all speeches used in the bibliography with a direct link to the speech so that the reader can independently verify the speeches.

The selection of states and the timeframe was deliberate. While there are six SIDS in Africa, Seychelles was chosen specifically, because it has played a prominent role in the fight against piracy and established itself as a leader in the blue economy, while Mauritius was chosen because it has garnered significant attention from two competing major players, namely China and India, and is thus, an interesting case to observe, especially in terms of its alignment of foreign policy (or lack thereof). The year 2017 was chosen as the starting date since it represents a significant juncture: the release of the US' first Indo-Pacific strategy and the revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the US, India, Japan and Australia). This year signifies a pivotal year in which the term 'Indo-Pacific' gained significant currency

5. Pioneer Foreign Policy Orientation

5.1. *The case of Seychelles*

Seychelles, a high-income archipelago with a population of less than 100 000 people, is located in the Western Indian Ocean (Cabestan 2021). It is the smallest African country if land area and population are considered (CIA Factbook 2025). Seychelles acute vulnerability to climate change and natural disasters, coupled with its unique vulnerabilities of an undiversified, marine-dependent economy, position it as the quintessential SIDS.

The thematic analysis of 40 relevant public speeches by Seychellois government officials demonstrated two important findings (for all speeches directly quoted, see the References). Firstly, Seychelles does not align its foreign policy with major players, and therefore, cannot be said to be pursuing a compliant foreign policy. At a press meeting in 2022, the Seychellois President, Ramkalawan, fervently announced that Seychelles would continue to position itself as a non-aligned sovereign nation, vis-à-vis the Russia-Ukraine conflict (Seychelles News Agency 25 March 2022). This non-alignment with a major power was further emphasised when Ramkalawan noted that Seychelles strongly supports the position of the African Union on matters such as this aforementioned conflict and reform of the United Nations Security Council, demonstrating a prioritisation of African solidarity over alignment with major players (Faure 2018b; Ramkalawan 2022b). Shortly after that statement, Ramkalawan articulated that: "We speak to everyone, we talk to everyone, but we say to them we are non-aligned we are not aligned, keep your geopolitics to yourself [sic]" (Ramkalawan 2022a). Evidently, Seychelles' foreign policy does not reflect the preferences of the major players, who are concerned with geopolitics. In fact, Seychelles has underscored its resistance to major power geopolitics by stating that it is "trying not to get caught in the crossfire", while reminding powers "that geopolitics will not supersede human rights and international law" (Ramkalawan 2024b). In this sense, human rights and international law are prioritised, superseding the geopolitical agendas of major players. Ramkalawan (2020) has reiterated that Seychelles' sovereignty is sacred and that under his watch there would never be a foreign military base on the island. Seychelles' foreign policy, therefore, demonstrates a resistance to reflecting the geopolitics-driven agenda of major powers, suggesting that it eschews a compliant foreign policy.

Secondly, despite not aligning its foreign policy, Seychelles does not reject the major players and therefore, it would be inaccurate to suggest it is pursuing a counterdependent foreign policy. Seychelles has not disengaged from major nations. In the past, Seychelles was one of the early participants in the UK-led Global Ocean Alliance, while concurrently engaging in South-South, North-South and Triangular cooperation (Faure 2020a). The nation has also reaffirmed its approach of multiple engagement by receiving military training for their forces from both the US and India, while patrol boats have been received from China and India (Ramkalawan 2022a). In an interview with a Seychellois government official, the official summarised this approach, suggesting that: "Seychelles has always been pushing this line of friends to everyone and enemies to none [...] We are friendly with China, we are friendly with India, we are friendly with the United States and Europe and Russia" (personal communication, 23 February 2024c). Rather than resisting major players, Seychelles engages with them on multiple fronts to pursue its national interests.

The thematic analysis further revealed that Seychelles adopted a role that stood in opposition to the foreign policy orientations proposed by Breuning (2007). Seychelles positioned itself as, what this study coins, a ‘pioneer’. This was encapsulated in numerous speeches, with the country asserting that “we want to be a leader in the Indian Ocean [...] We want to be a spokesperson” (Radegonde 2023). In another instance, the government stated that “Seychelles will remain at the forefront of the discourse on climate change [...] Seychelles has challenged the established model of donor-recipient relationship through innovative financing” (Faure 2020c). Ramkalawan boldly asserted that “no island is too small to be a part of this endeavour, no country too large to claim a monopoly of ideas” (2021a). Noteworthy, Seychelles was the first state to introduce a Debt Swap for Ocean Conservation and Climate Adaption² as well as issue Blue Bonds³ (Faure 2017). Other pioneering initiatives and activities include: Seychelles as the first country to designate a marine protected area in the Western Indian Ocean (Faure 2020b), Seychelles was the first African state to ratify the Biological Diversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Agreement (Ramkalawan 2024b), and achieving its 30 by 30 Marine Spatial Plan milestone 10 years before the global deadline (Ramkalawan 2024a) (an initiative that it pioneered alongside other states).

In another domain, Seychelles expressed their desire to be a leader in the shipbuilding industry, with Faure announcing that “we will make land available for all ship owners in Africa, and act as a hub for all activities related to the shipping and maritime sectors” (2018a). This pioneering role is not limited to occasional rhetoric; Seychelles has overtly committed to its role, stating, “Seychelles remains committed to its pioneering role in marine conservation” (Ramkalawan 2023).

Essentially, Seychelles is pursuing a foreign policy orientation that does not neatly fit into the categories prescribed by Breuning (2007) of either adopting alignment or stark resistance. Rather, the orientation enacted by Seychelles transcends these binary categorisations, demonstrating agency by pioneering, a role not typically expected by traditional small state literature.

5.2. *The case of Mauritius*

Mauritius is an archipelago situated in the Southwest Indian Ocean (Republic of Mauritius 2020). Significantly larger than Seychelles, it has a territory of 1 864 square kilometres and a population of over 1.27 million. However, in comparison to most states, it still has a small population and land area, and considering its vulnerability to economic shocks, it is considered a SIDS (United Nations n.d.).

The thematic analysis of 24 speeches by the Mauritian government, reveals that like Seychelles, Mauritius does not clearly align its foreign policy with the interests of major players. One example of this is the stance taken on the Russia-Ukraine war, where, apart from advocating for a peaceful resolution to the conflict, the main point emphasised was that “we should be seriously thinking of saving our planet” and not only about war (Jugnauth 2022c). Notably, the emphasis was on saving the planet, which signals a departure from the stance taken by the major powers where geopolitical conflict is the central preoccupation. For Mauritius, climate change supersedes geopolitical conflicts. In other instances, it goes so far as to challenge major powers, where for example, in 2022c Prime Minister Jugnauth stated, “it ill behoves to the UK to call on Mauritius and other African countries to respond to other allegations of illegal occupation when it illegally occupies a part of Africa”. Furthermore, as with Seychelles, Mauritius closely aligns itself with the African continent as opposed to major players and reinforces its commitment to African solidarity over the preferences of major players (Jugnauth 2017; Jugnauth 2022c; Jugnauth 2024). These instances demonstrate that Mauritius does not pursue a compliant foreign policy, since it prioritises non-alignment with major players, reflects its own interests of climate change over geopolitics and challenges major players while remaining closely aligned with the African continent.

Despite this non-alignment, Mauritius does not reject major powers nor adopt an anti-core sentiment. For example, although differing on its position on Russia-Ukraine with the US, Mauritius does not reject the US. Mauritius still supports the US military presence on Diego Garcia and has expressed their desire to “build on the legacy of the excellent bilateral ties that unite Mauritius and the USA” (Jugnauth 2021d). Furthermore, Mauritius maintains relations with numerous partners. The former Mauritian Prime Minister pointed out the multiple trade agreements Mauritius had, which ranged from partnerships with China to the UK to India (Jugnauth 2021a). This demonstrates that Mauritius has a multiple-actor engagement approach as opposed to distancing itself from major players. In this sense, Mauritius does not neatly fit the prescription of pursuing a counter-dependent foreign policy.

2 A debt for ocean conservation deal refers to the process whereby money that would have gone to debt repayment is redirected to support ocean planning projects that foster marine conservation (Michel 2023).

3 Blue bonds are financial instruments that, combining public and private investment, aim to fund ocean conservation initiatives, such as expanding marine protected areas, improving governance of fisheries and developing a state’s blue economy (World Bank Group 2018).

Much like Seychelles, Mauritius emerges as a pioneer in foreign policy orientations. In fact, Mauritius frequently utilises the word ‘spearheading’, stating that “Mauritius has taken the lead in the western Indian Ocean region in combating piracy” (Jugnauth 2018), “continues to spearhead the fight against drug trafficking and other maritime crimes”, and “The Bank of Mauritius has set up the Climate Change Centre in 2021, to spearhead efforts in measuring, analysing, managing, and mitigating climate risk” (Jugnauth 2022a). Mauritius has also frequently emphasised the need for a new financing structure through the (now adopted) Multidimensional Vulnerability Index (MVI), which is a novel framework to conceptualise vulnerability. In the past, it also advocated for the G20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative to be extended to include middle-income countries and SIDS (Jugnauth 2021c).

Once again, the pioneering role of Mauritius suggests that its foreign policy is neither purely compliant nor counterdependent. Rather, Mauritius seems to challenge the prevailing notion that small states are merely rule-takers of rules in the international arena and cannot impact their external environment or advance their interests. The role of pioneer contrasts Breuning’s (2007) assertion that small states such as SIDS, can only either pursue a compliant or counter-dependent foreign policy.

6. Rethinking SIDS

To fully account for the foreign policy orientation of small states, it is necessary to expand Breuning’s (2007) framework and incorporate an additional foreign policy orientation, namely that of pursuing an ‘IFP’. When there is an assumption (as in the traditional literature) that small states exist purely in a dependent relationship with major players, then it follows that they have a marginal position with severely constrained foreign policy orientations. However, when small states—and in this case SIDS—are understood as existing not in a dependent relationship, but rather an interdependent relationship, then it is possible to explore how they may have other foreign policy orientations—options that may reflect a sense of power.

But what reasons are there for suggesting that SIDS do indeed exist in an interdependent relationship? The primary rationale for suggesting this is based on the thematic analysis, where the theme arose of Seychelles and Mauritius enacting a pioneer role. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a pioneer is someone who opens a new line of thought or method that opens up the path for others to follow. Dependence, on the other hand, is defined as the state of being influenced or controlled by another. Following this, pioneer seemingly stands in contrast to dependence. In fact, by very definition, a pioneer tends to lead, not follow. Therefore, pioneering can be said to negate the passive nature of dependence. In this sense, the foreign policy of SIDS is defined, not by a sense of dependence, but rather interdependence. Importantly, ‘interdependence’ is deliberately chosen instead of ‘independence’, since SIDS still rely on major players in some ways and engage with them. Therefore, they do not pursue pure ‘independence’, but rather ‘interdependence’, which is defined by Nye (2007: 210) as “situations in which actors or events in different parts of a system affect each other”. Interdependence implies mutual dependence (Nye 2007).

The pivotal aspect of suggesting that SIDS exist in an interdependent relationship with major players, is that it permits the understanding that SIDS are dynamic participants who may have the ability to assert power. This stems from the work of Baldwin (1983: 19) who specifically writes that interdependence always “implies potential power of some kind”. On the one hand, therefore, it could be accepted that by virtue of this interdependent relationship, SIDS have potential power. However, on the other hand, this article goes one step further to suggest that inherent in the pioneer role conception is already a form of power; that is, the pioneer role is a manifestation of power. By enacting the role of pioneer, Seychelles and Mauritius demonstrate their ability to change their environment, which is taken as a form of power in this article, since power is defined as the ability to change the behaviour of others and change the distribution of results (or essentially, changing one’s environment) (Rothgeb 1993).

For example, Seychelles has strategically leveraged its position as a pioneer in the environmental domain, specifically in climate financing. As mentioned earlier, Seychelles became the first country to introduce a debt-for-ocean-conservation-swap and pioneered the issuance of blue bonds. Through these initiatives, Seychelles was not only able to accumulate specialised knowledge in the ocean conservation field, it was also able to influence international financial mechanisms. The nation was able to reform the viewing of debt repayment through a solely terra-centric lens and rather advocated for the inclusion of an ocean-centric perspective, which suits its reality as an island state. Essentially, Seychelles was able to change its environment to ensure that maritime dimensions are incorporated into debt negotiations. The state redefined the parameters of environmental financing, creating frameworks for other states to follow. In 2021, Belize adopted a similar debt-for-nature swap deal (Michel 2023), while in May 2023, Indonesia issued its Blue Bond in the Japanese debt capital market (UNDP 2023). These actions exemplify how Seychelles has reshaped its environment and influenced others, a tangible manifestation of power.

Similarly, both Seychelles and Mauritius have been able to shape their environment by being part of the pioneering force advocating for the MVI. Traditionally, vulnerability has been determined solely by Gross National Income, which is problematic for states such as Mauritius and Seychelles which are no longer low-income countries and are, therefore, excluded from development assistance (Ramkalawan 2021b). SIDS have advocated for the introduction of the MVI which includes considering the structural vulnerabilities of SIDS beyond the Gross National Income (Wilkinson and Pandwar 2023). With the adoption of the MVI in 2024, Seychelles and Mauritius have demonstrated their ability to shape their environment so that it is more responsive to their realities. That is, vulnerability has been reconceptualised to include the agendas of SIDS. As aptly stated by the President of Seychelles, “the MVI resolution adopted here last month also represents a triumph of the multilateral system to consider new approaches to complex and evolving issues” (Ramkalawan 2024b).

Having established that the role of pioneer carries with it a form of power, there are two final elements that require further elaboration. First, there is a need to interrogate what the sources of power are for SIDS. Second, it is important to consider how this understanding of power inaugurates a broadened framework of foreign policy orientations for small states. This dual inquiry is important for understanding the mechanisms that SIDS utilise to exercise power and how this redefines foreign policy orientations beyond traditional dependency frameworks.

6.1. *Sources of power*

The primary source of power for SIDS lies in their geographic location, which ought to be understood in two ways: in the ideological sense and in a material sense. In the case of the former, major players are vying for the attention of the island states, since securing their support ensures that the values and visions of the major players are upheld and promoted. In this context, the contestation over these islands extends beyond physical territory to include ideological influence. Western players promote values like democracy and human rights, while China advances visions of development. SIDS are aware that offering their support by showcasing the objectives and values of major players, can endow them with a valuable bargaining chip (Wright 2023). Additionally, for major players, gaining the ideological support of SIDS can be important, considering that, when collaborating with other islands, these islands make up a considerable voice in international organisations, therefore holding significant diplomatic weight. For example, the Alliance of Small Island States comprises 20 per cent of the votes at the United Nations, which makes them an important ‘voting bloc’ that can influence the agenda (Morgan 2022). The increasing understanding of the importance of these islands is evident by the intensifying of diplomatic activity in the region. For example, in June 2023, the US reopened its embassy in Seychelles, after a 27-year hiatus (Blinken 2023).

In the case of the latter, the islands have a high strategic importance due to their material position. These SIDS are located along important sea lines of communication and offer major players the ability to project military power. As noted by a Seychellois government official, “if you have Seychelles, then you can control all of the space” and “till nowadays, all the powers want to be friendly with Seychelles, because when you are in Seychelles, basically you are in the middle of the Indian Ocean” (personal communication 2024a). Another official noted that Seychelles “welcome[s] the interest because it means you can use it to your advantage” (personal communication 2024b). A strategic location constitutes power, since it enables these islands to leverage the geopolitical rivalry to their advantage. For example, Seychelles has used its position to engage with a plethora of actors, ranging from Western to non-Western players. Essentially, their location allows them to not only take rules, but to make rules on their own terms—if major players want to engage with these islands, they must respond to the needs of SIDS, which allows these SIDS to shape their external environment in a way that aligns with their needs.

Closely linked to strategic positioning is power derived from possessing the object of value, or highly sought-after resources. One Seychellois government official explained that “if I have something you do not have, then I am powerful” (personal communication 2024b). Decades ago, Thibaut and Kelley (1959: 124) asserted that “an individual’s power over another derives from the latter’s being dependent upon him”. In this specific context, SIDS derive power from the fact that, whereas SIDS can look elsewhere for support (as evident in their multiple engagement approach), major players cannot do this. Major players are dependent on the strategic position of SIDS, however, SIDS are not dependent on major players in the same way. As Blau (1964: 124) explains, “power depends on people’s needs for the benefits those in power have to offer”. In this instance, ocean states negate the power of the major player because they are not dependent on the benefits of the major players, while major players affirm the power of the ocean states because they require the benefits which the SIDS have to offer, namely their strategic location.

A final source of power is moral power, which is fundamentally ideational since it is linked to norms and legitimacy. This can be identified as a source of power, specifically because the issues that SIDS advocate for, are not confined to technical or economic concerns, but are inherently deeply moral. Issues such as environmental matters, are difficult for major players to simply ignore. Building on

DeSombre's (2009) concept of environmental power, which refers to the power a state has from threatening to undermine environmental protection, it can be suggested that SIDS exert influence by not undermining environmental protection, but rather actively promoting it. Major players must align with SIDS to maintain their 'green credibility' and avoid reputational damage, since domination requires a continual reinforcement. As noted by the Principle Secretary for the Blue Economy in Seychelles, Seychelles is fortunate in a sense that it has "sort of like a positive public image when we are working for the blue economy. Green is the most attractive deal out there. So our partners from abroad, are quite keen to support the transition towards renewable sustainable development [...] For them it is getting to tick the box, but for us it is a bit more" (personal communication 2024c). Former Seychellois President, James Alix Michel (2016: 55), similarly asserts that "little wonder, too that I spend much of my time talking to international leaders about its [the Blue Economy] potential, not just for island states but for the world. Because of this we have a place on the world stage. We punch well above our weight. That is because we have a message that people want to hear". This demonstrates how SIDS leverage the moral dimension of the issues they advocate for, utilising them as a source of power and influence.

In summary, SIDS leverage a diverse array of power sources—ideological, strategic, resource-based and moral—that allow them to shape the international environment on their own terms. Rather than being mere passive recipients of power, SIDS actively engage major players, turning the contemporary geopolitical competition into opportunities for strategic manoeuvring. SIDS ability to balance relations with a variety of actors, extract concessions and shape global agendas—such as on climate changes issues—demonstrates that power rests not only with major players. By drawing on these alternative bases of power, SIDS challenge traditional foreign policy orientations prescribed to them.

6.2. *An interdependent foreign policy*

The aim of this article is to propose an expanded framework for understanding small state foreign policy. While Breuning (2007) proposes four types of foreign policy orientations for small states that are grouped under the label 'dependent' foreign policy, this article proposes an additional label, namely 'IFP' to more accurately reflect the evolving dynamics of small state engagement with major players. The framework's central proposition rests on two key premises. First, small state foreign policy is not defined by 'dependence' or 'independence', but rather 'interdependence', where SIDS exist in a complex interdependent world—small states are not only dependent on larger states, but larger states are also dependent on smaller states. Second, power should be understood through an alternative metric, where power is not purely traditional military or economic resources, but extends to incorporate intangible and tangible elements. Both these premises rely on the fact that SIDS and small states, for that matter, do not exist in pure isolation, however, they operate in a complex network of reciprocal dependencies.

Building on these premises, there are three key strategies that are used by these states in their engagement. Firstly, SIDS manipulate the interdependent relationship with larger states. However, more than just manipulating the fact that larger states are also reliant on them, there is also an understanding that their interdependence extends to factors such as norms and laws. That is, independence is reinforced by adherence to norms and laws. SIDS can leverage their moral power to influence states' actions, especially where reputation and credibility are at risk. For example, the moral imperative that undergirds environmental protection can compel major players to respond to the needs of SIDS. Secondly, SIDS utilise fluid partnerships, where they switch between those partners that can provide them with the best support. The thematic analysis illustrated that SIDS neither align with major players nor reject them, but rather pursue multiple engagements. In the military domain, for example, Seychelles has engaged with the US, China and India, while stating that it is friendly with diverse actors, ranging from the US, Europe and Russia.

Thirdly, SIDS rely on issue-specific engagement implying that instead of relying on one player for support in all areas, they can engage with actors in specific domains, which allows them to interact with various partners simultaneously. Mauritius, for example, has engaged with Japan in terms of space technologies and disaster management (Jugnauth 2019; Jugnauth 2021b); engaged with India in terms of social and economic development initiatives, including, for example, traditional medicines (Jugnauth 2022b) and engaged with the US for a security arrangement on the Chagos Archipelago (Jugnauth 2021c). Additionally, Mauritius is also an important member of the Indian Ocean Commission, which respectively engages with other partners such as the European Union on maritime security in the South-West Indian Ocean through the Programme for the Promotion of Maritime Safety (MASE Programme) (NewsGov 2024).

The third component of the IFP relates to the tools of influence available to SIDS. This is directly linked to the sources of power discussed earlier. According to the IFP, SIDS derive power from three key sources. First, their strategic position—both ideologically and materially—their critical location along important sea lines of communication and important regions makes them sought after by major

players which allows them leverage. Second, they possess that which is valued by others—their location is currently highly prized and their attention and support much desired by major players. Third, SIDS advocate for inherently moral issues that major players cannot ignore without risking reputational damage.

Finally, the last component of the framework refers to the modes of engagement adopted by SIDS. Seychelles and Mauritius in this case, position themselves as pioneers and engage as pioneers, which transcend the traditional portrayal of small states in the traditional literature. They can often be found to be acting as norm entrepreneurs, especially in the environmental domain, pushing for reform of existing mechanisms such as how debt is repaid. As the thematic analysis illustrated, Mauritius and Seychelles are innovators and thought leaders in the environmental domain often challenging the status quo. Their innovation becomes an expression of power. Essentially, the mode of engagement pursued by Seychelles and Mauritius reflects an intentional decision to assert their agency in the global system as pioneers. This framework is illustrated in Table 2 below:

Table 2: IFP Analytical Framework

Component	Description	Example
Core Premise	- Small State foreign policy is characterised by interdependence, where both ‘smaller’ and ‘larger’ states are dependent on one another. - Power is reconceptualised as constituting both tangible and intangible elements.	- The US relies on the strategic positioning of Mauritius (and the Chagos specifically) to provide security and maintain an open and free Indo-Pacific, while Mauritius relies on the US for trade. - Power can be derived from a strategic location that holds both material and immaterial value. Materially, such a location serves as a critical military base; while immaterially, it fosters ideological alignment with major global players.
Key Strategies	- Manipulating interdependence – SIDS navigate the international arena by manipulating the dependence that exists between major players and ‘smaller states’ as well as the dependence of major players on norms and laws. - Fluid partnerships – SIDS switch and choose between partners that can provide them with the best support, and they often engage with multiple partners at the same time. - Issue-specific engagement – SIDS refrain from relying on a single major player and rather engage with a plethora of actors in specific fields.	- Seychelles is aware that major players must maintain a certain reputation and can, therefore, play on this to achieve their interests. - Seychelles has partnerships with various actors, such as in the military domain where it has received support from the US, China and India. - Mauritius has multiple partners, such as Japan, India and the US that assist in differing fields.
Tools of Influence	- Strategic Positioning – SIDS utilise their geopolitical and ideological significance. - Valued Resources – SIDS draw on the fact that they hold that which is valued. - Moral Advocacy – SIDS engage with issues that have ethical imperatives, since these are issues that major players cannot afford to dismiss.	- Mauritius’ Agalega Island is strategically located and is currently being developed by India as an air and naval staging point for surveillance. - SIDS occupy the space that is sought after by major players to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific. - Climate Change and Climate Financing Justice.
Modes of Engagement	Pioneers – SIDS enact the role of pioneers, where they act as norm entrepreneurs in the environmental domain and position themselves as innovators and thought-leaders.	Mauritius has often referred to itself as a leader or wanting to ‘spearhead’ various initiatives. Both Seychelles and Mauritius have pioneered various environmental initiatives, including the MVI.

7. Concluding Remarks: Three Key Considerations

This article began with problematising the premise that small states, and SIDS, are often relegated to the global periphery, where they are positioned as ‘rule-takers’ and not ‘rule-makers’. These states are seen as perpetually defined by a power deficit and consequently their foreign policy is characterised by an enduring sense of dependence on major players. This article has made the argument that such thought needs urgent rethinking, and based on the analysis presented, offers three key concluding points.

First, there are clear indications that Breuning’s (2007) framework must be expanded to incorporate a foreign policy orientation that is not purely based on unilateral dependence, but rather interdependence. It is not only the small states that are dependent on the major players, but also the major players that are dependent on the small states. This is since the behaviour displayed by both Seychelles and Mauritius (through a thematic analysis of their official government speeches) does not suggest that they are completely aligning their

foreign policy on the one hand, or on the other hand, completely rejecting major powers. This is most apparent in their enactment of the role of pioneer, which is where a state seeks an innovative way to pursue its interests as opposed to pursuing interests through alignment with major powers. This article proposed an IFP, known as the IFP orientation, to account for the behaviour of SIDS in the Indian Ocean.

Second, SIDS, as a type of small state, should not be pigeonholed as merely being rule-takers. The IFP orientation demonstrates how SIDS may in fact be rule-makers. By (1) drawing on diverse, non-traditional forms of power, (2) utilising three key strategies of manipulating interdependence, utilising fluid partnerships, and engaging in issue-specific engagement and (3) pursuing the role of ‘pioneer’ as a mode of engagement, SIDS are strategically able to shape their environment and rethink, reform and reconceptualise existing rules. The example of Seychelles and the debt-for-ocean-conservation deal, as well as the issuing of blue bonds and Mauritius’ involvement in the adoptions of the MVI demonstrate the ability of SIDS to reform rules and make them more responsive to their needs and realities.

Thirdly, within the context of SIDS, power must be understood differently from the traditional understanding of resource- and material-based conceptions of power. SIDS do not derive their power from their size, but rather from their unique, and highly strategic geographic location that serves a material and ideological purpose for major players and endows SIDS with a unique value. Their strategic location often serves as hubs for trade, shipping routes and naval operations providing major players with outposts of influence. The geographical advantage, or strategic location of SIDS situates them as indispensable partners, with a bargaining leverage that transcends their material size. Furthermore, SIDS do not derive their power from military might, but rather from the moral weight of the issues they champion. SIDS engage with issues that are inherently moral and must be addressed by major players if they want to maintain a certain reputation. Ignoring the plight of SIDS may tarnish the image of major players.

In closing, it is worth pointing out that this article makes a hybrid contribution to the field of International Relations. On the one hand, it makes an academic contribution, in the sense that it contributes to the academic debate regarding small state foreign policy and provides an additional analytical framework that can be used by scholars to conceptualise and understand the foreign policy of SIDS. On the other hand, there are also practical contributions of this article. For example, this article outlines alternative sources of power for SIDS. While this is derived from studying the behaviour of SIDS, it is not necessarily the case that these SIDS are always conscious that they are using power in this way. As such, practitioners can consider how their states may more effectively utilise moral power to advance their interests and navigate geopolitical contestation. In this sense, the contribution of this article serves as a point of reflection for practitioners. Lastly, having hypothesised an alternative framework, this article invites further empirical testing encompassing as many islands as possible in both the Indian Ocean and beyond, to continue refining and adapting the framework.

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