

Small States and the Multilateral System: Transforming Global Governance for a Better Future

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Cover Photo: Dennis Francis, President of the 78th session of the General Assembly, speaks at the 100th Plenary Meeting on Small Island States and Sustainable Development. July 16, 2024. Eskinder Debebe/UN Photo.

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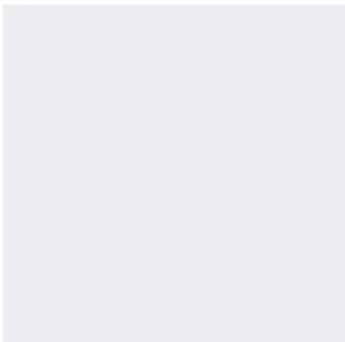
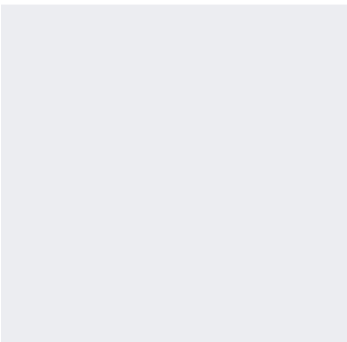
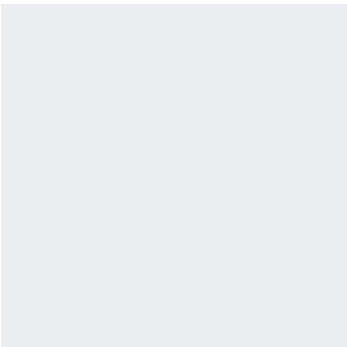
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ABBREVIATIONS

AOSIS	Alliance of Small Island States
CGPCS	Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia
COP28	28 th UN Climate Change Conference
FOSS	Forum of Small States
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICJ	International Court of Justice
SIDS	small island developing states
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UNCLOS	UN Convention on the Law of the Sea

Executive Summary

Small states play a critical role in upholding and advancing multilateralism and international law in the face of growing geopolitical tensions and global challenges. Representing the majority of UN member states, these countries broadly agree on the need to uphold international law, support multilateral cooperation and the institutions of global order, and adhere to the “purposes and principles” of the UN Charter.

Why do so many small states remain committed to the multilateral system? Small states’ lesser size inherently elevates the importance of multilateralism as a key pillar of their foreign policy. With limited military and economic power, small states depend on rules-based international cooperation to ensure their security and development. Their commitment to international law and multilateralism has allowed them to make significant contributions to global governance.

How have small states exerted influence on the multilateral system in the past, and how can they contribute to efforts to reform that system for the future? Small states have played an active role in championing international law, including through the International Criminal Court and International Court of Justice. They are agents of international peace and security, including on the Security Council. Small states also play an active role in protecting and managing shared resources that belong to all of humanity, including through their leadership on climate action and the formulation of laws related to the sea. Moreover, small states have been among the first to bring issues related to emerging technologies to the forefront of international diplomacy.

There are several techniques small states may use to shape the future of the multilateral system. First, they can become recognized experts on specific issue areas and use this expertise to gain leverage in negotiations. Second, they can take the initiative to chair multilateral negotiations, which they are often well-positioned for because they may be seen as less threatening and more inclined to canvass a wider group of states. Third, they can build

coalitions to advance their interests in multilateral negotiations, as the benefits of coalitions often exceed the sum of their parts. Finally, small states can serve as mediators by establishing themselves as impartial brokers that can help depoliticize controversial issues.

Following the adoption of the Pact for the Future in September 2024, small states can consider several priorities to help implement the pact and build a stronger multilateral system for the benefit of all:

- **Reinforce the fundamental principles of international cooperation:** Small states should lead and mobilize all member states in recommitting to their obligations under the UN Charter.
- **Expand and strengthen diverse cross-regional coalitions for global governance:** Small states should continue to leverage UN processes to widen the group of countries invested in overcoming polarization.
- **Promote information sharing and capacity building:** Small states that have the means and subject-matter expertise should redouble their efforts to pool resources and knowledge to build up other states’ capacities.
- **Revamp working methods:** Small states should work together to put forward their views on how to revamp and update the working methods of different UN organs.
- **Update the peace and security toolbox:** Small states need to be involved in updating the UN’s peace and security toolbox in areas such as mediation, preventive diplomacy, and peacebuilding.
- **Prioritize inclusiveness on new and emerging technologies:** If harnessed properly, digitalization and new and emerging technologies could help small states grow their influence.
- **Embed future thinking:** Small states should inject their views into the gamut of “forward-looking” and “long-term” conversations taking place at the UN.

Foreword

The United Nations is operating within a very polarized and fragmented geopolitical global environment. It has become harder to deal with complex global challenges, including climate change, pandemics, and the digital revolution, including artificial intelligence.

Small states have no choice but to be stalwart advocates of a rules-based multilateral system, based on international law and the UN Charter. Such a multilateral system is essential for global peace and inclusive development and gives small states an effective collective voice.

It is in this spirit that Singapore decided to partner with the International Peace Institute and S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies to organize a series of roundtable discussions on the theme of small states and multilateralism. This report, “Small States and the Future of Multilateralism,” is the result of concrete and constructive discussions among small states. I am grateful to the members of the Forum of Small States who made this project possible. The authors and researchers who prepared this succinct and substantive report should also be congratulated.

This report explains the critical role of small states in championing international law and the UN Charter, both of which are essential to safeguard the global commons. Small states must continue to shape the rules and norms necessary for global governance, not least in the field of new and emerging technologies.

We hope that this report will be a useful resource and reference for all small states. By working together, we ensure that our interests as small states are protected, not just for ourselves but for the world at large.

Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan
Minister for Foreign Affairs
Republic of Singapore

Introduction

The first quarter of the twenty-first century has been a time of dramatic transformation that has fundamentally challenged the multilateral system across geopolitical, technological, environmental, and economic dimensions. In 2023, UN Secretary-General António Guterres highlighted that “this new era is already marked by the highest level of geopolitical tensions and major power competition in decades.”¹

Yet despite growing geopolitical tensions among great powers, not all indicators are negative. Focusing on small states reveals that the world may not be as divided as it appears. Among the members of the Forum of Small States (FOSS)—an informal grouping of 108 countries with populations near or under 10 million—there is broad consensus on the need to uphold international law, support multilateral cooperation and the institutions of global order, and adhere to the “purposes and principles” of the UN Charter.² Such common ground was reiterated in a series of roundtables on small states and the future of multilateralism organized in 2023 and 2024 by the International Peace Institute (IPI) in partnership with Singapore, the convener of FOSS.

In what follows, we show that small states are well-positioned to serve as natural champions of multilateralism and international law and credible defenders of the global commons. We also examine some of the tools small states have used to craft multilateral responses to frontier issues. Finally, looking to the future, we argue that collectively, small states can and should be catalysts for change, offering a path forward amid geopolitical tensions between larger states.

The Multilateral System at a Crossroads

The multilateral system faces growing challenges across many dimensions, including geopolitics, technology, climate, and trade. The rising geopolitical tensions are demonstrated most starkly by the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, as well as the Russian and US vetoes blocking Security Council resolutions on these conflicts. If left unchecked, these tensions heighten the risk of further armed clashes and wars that put civilians’ lives in jeopardy. They also erode trust among states and dent the legitimacy of the council, making it difficult to engage in negotiations and agree on resolutions for maintaining international peace and security.

Among small states, there is broad consensus on the need to uphold international law, support multilateral cooperation and the institutions of global order, and adhere to the “purposes and principles” of the UN Charter.

Global challenges on the technological front span from outer space to the digital realm. Outer space is a shared domain bordering all states and lies beyond national jurisdictions. It is now increasingly congested (by satellites), contaminated (by debris), and

contested (by states). This contestation, combined with the lack of global rules or norms governing the peaceful, safe, and sustainable use of outer space, raises the risk of interstate clashes. In addition, “digital technologies are dramatically transforming our world,” as highlighted in the opening of the Global Digital Compact annexed to the Pact for the Future. These technologies offer tremendous benefits, such as by helping states achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), but they also pose challenges. For example, states are grappling with how to govern the capabilities and borderless reach of cyberspace and artificial intelligence. This has resulted in a patchwork of national standards, complicating the development of a global governance architecture to ensure an inclusive,

¹ António Guterres, “Secretary-General’s Remarks at the Launch of the Policy Brief on a New Agenda for Peace,” New York, July 20, 2023.

² This was also a key theme of the agreed statement by the Small States Group, a cross-regional grouping of fifty-five small states that provided collective input into the negotiations for the UN Pact for the Future. See: Small States Group, “Written Input from the Small States Group on the Zero-Draft of the Pact for the Future,” February 15, 2024.

responsible, and sustainable digital future.

Climate change is the most formidable environmental challenge of our time. There is scientific consensus that the climate crisis has entered a critical stage. The World Meteorological Organization predicts that the global temperature rise will temporarily exceed 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels sometime in the next five years, and is at risk of doing so permanently.³ It is widely believed that crossing that threshold could result in a cascade of irreversible effects on the global climate system. Natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes, and wildfires are already occurring at unprecedented rates, and most scientists attribute this increase to climate change. While climate impacts manifest themselves in different ways globally, they are especially severe for small island states that lack the geographical and economic buffers to adapt to these changes effectively. People in states such as Tuvalu could see their whole country erased from the map. The fact that the costs of climate change fall disproportionately on those who bear little responsibility for causing it makes it challenging to achieve the level of multilateral action required.

The multilateral trading system has been eroded by the rise of protectionism driven by national interests and geopolitical tensions. Some countries are blatantly violating the nondiscrimination principle enshrined in World Trade Organization agreements. Geopolitical rivalries, together with the COVID-19 pandemic, have sparked market volatility and supply chain disruptions affecting every sector from semiconductors to critical minerals. Certain states have also weaponized trade and investment relationships to coerce other states into aligning with their geopolitical agendas or joining their blocs. As other states respond in pursuit of supply chain “resilience,” the security offered by interdependence is weakened. The fragmentation of the global trading system has also undercut its ability to serve as an engine for sustainable development.

These are just a few examples of how rising global contestation has precipitated a sense of division and heightened concerns that the norms and institutions of global order are fraying. As evidenced by the 2024 Multilateralism Index developed by IPI and the Institute for Economics and Peace, the multilateral system is failing to deliver. The Index reveals a decline in the performance of the multilateral system across all five of the domains considered, with especially large drops in peace and security, human rights, and climate action.⁴ These failures underscore the mismatch between the current global order and the structures of global governance created in a bygone era. As a result, calls for reform continue to grow even as geopolitical divisions make systemic reform exceedingly difficult.

Small States’ Commitment and Contributions to the Multilateral System

Many of these calls for reform come from small states that continue to see the value of multilateralism. Why do so many small states remain committed to the multilateral system? Small states’ lesser size inherently elevates the importance of the health of their respective regions as a foreign policy priority, because an unstable neighborhood has outsized consequences for their development and survival.

This lesson is translated into their global agendas as small states are more vulnerable in a world where international law and institutions are undermined and only the most militarily or economically powerful are positioned to pursue their interests.⁵ Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, a country with nearly 40 million people, serves as a stark reminder that even larger states are vulnerable in a world where international law is not upheld. Reflecting on the Russian invasion, Permanent Representative of Guyana to the UN Carolyn Rodrigues-Birkett said that from a small-state perspective, “The question is not how will this end, but who’s next?”⁶ Such

3 World Meteorological Organization, “Global Temperature Is Likely to Exceed 1.5°C above Pre Industrial Level Temporarily in Next 5 Years,” June 5, 2024.

4 International Peace Institute and Institute for Economics and Peace, “Multilateralism Index 2024,” forthcoming.

5 Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, “Small States at the United Nations: Diverse Perspectives, Shared Opportunities,” International Peace Institute, May 2014; Adam Lupel and Lauri Mälksoo, “A Necessary Voice: Small States, International Law, and the UN Security Council,” International Peace Institute, April 2019.

6 United Nations, “Future of Multilateralism and the Role of Small States,” New York, April 4, 2024, available at <https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k1w/k1wcu44n5a>.

existential threats will incentivize small states to defend the multilateral system through a unified voice and collective action. By staying silent or disengaged, small states cede the power to define international norms, laws, and practices to larger powers that can threaten their survival. Many small states also acknowledge that the United Nations and the multilateral system more broadly provide services that would be difficult to provide at the national level alone. One small-state diplomat said, in reference to a school meals program that began with a partnership with UNICEF and the Food and Agriculture Organization, “We trust the UN and the international system more than bigger players. And we trust it not because we are idealists but because in many places these institutions perform functions that we can’t perform on our own.”⁷ International organizations offer economies of scale in expertise and service delivery that are vital for small states’ development agendas.

According to the 2024 Index of Countries’ Support to UN-Based Multilateralism (UN-Mi), out of the top twenty countries that are most supportive of multilateralism, at least fifteen could be categorized as small states.⁸ Small states are at the forefront of efforts to renew commitment to multilateralism and update international rules and norms to respond effectively to global transformation. Their active participation in the Summit of the Future and the negotiation of the Pact for the Future is a case in point. Many small states regard the pact as an essential, forward-looking opportunity to promote a more inclusive, peaceful, just, and equitable world and manage emerging and future transnational challenges. In this regard, a coalition of more than sixty small states, led by Singapore, played an active and vocal role in supporting the development of the pact and ensuring that it would contribute to the reinvigoration and updating of the rules-based multilateral system. It is also notable that all three central outcome documents

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of the summit are being co-facilitated by small states. Namibia, with a population of just 2.5 million, is one of the two co-facilitators of the summit and the pact, while Jamaica is co-facilitating negotiations on the Declaration for Future Generations, and Sweden and Zambia are co-facilitating the Global Digital Compact.

Despite the strong commitment of many small states to multilateralism, geopolitical analyses and discussions of global order tend to center on the great powers—big states with big armies and big economies—overlooking the significant contributions of small states.⁹ While small states need the international system, the international system also needs the active participation and contributions of small states. As eloquently articulated by Permanent Representative of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines to the UN Rhonda King, small states are “the ants and bees” of the multilateral ecosystem: They aerate the ground to keep it productive and compatible with life and growth, and they pollinate its flowers to enable fertilization and the production of seeds for reproduction:

In [the multilateral] ecosystem, small states play a role akin to ants and bees, which science tells us are essential for

the health and well-being of the whole.... In the natural ecosystem, ants and bees display remarkable levels of cooperation and resilience, overcoming obstacles through collective effort and forming symbiotic relationships with other species. Similarly, small states navigate the multilateral system, facing trials that test their resolve and resourcefulness. They forge alliances with like-minded countries, civil societies, [and] the international organizations, pooling their strengths to amplify their voices and influence.¹⁰

Small states were present at the advent of modern multilateralism. When the UN was founded in 1945, many of the world’s smaller nations were still

7 Interview, small state diplomat, New York, March 27, 2024.

8 Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), “Part 3: Government Support to UN-Based Multilateralism,” Sustainable Development Report Dashboards, available at <https://dashboards.sdindex.org/chapters/part-3-government-support-to-un-based-multilateralism>.

9 Most notoriously, this “realist” focus on great powers lies at the center of Henry Kissinger’s highly influential views on “world order” summed up in: Henry Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History* (New York: Penguin, 2014).

10 Ó Súilleabháin, “Small States,” p. 1.

under the rule of colonial powers. Yet two-thirds of the forty-nine countries that signed the San Francisco Charter were small states. Today, most UN members are independent small states, and these states have become critical to its functioning. In an international legal system based upon the sovereign equality of states, small states have a particular role to play in building a stronger and more effective multilateral system. Despite their size and relative geopolitical power, small states have had a concrete impact on the multilateral system in the past, and their influence has grown alongside their number, while an increasingly multipolar world order has freed them from the constraints of Cold War geopolitics.

How Small States Make a Difference in the Multilateral System

How have small states exerted influence on the multilateral system in the past, and how can they contribute to efforts to reform that system for the future? They do this by promoting international peace and security, championing multilateralism and safeguarding international law, defending the global commons, and advancing multilateral action on frontier issues.

Small States as Agents of International Peace and Security

While small states do not occupy any of the five permanent seats in the UN Security Council, they have had an impact on the decisions and outcomes of the council in their active role as elected members. For example, Malta led the ten elected members of the council in putting forward Resolution 2712, adopted in November 2023 following the outbreak of the Israel–Hamas war. This resolution sought to establish urgent and extended humanitarian pauses and corridors to bring humanitarian aid to civilians in Gaza. With the council hamstrung by political divisions between the permanent members, Malta’s efforts demonstrated the crucial role that small states can play in facilitating international responses to some

of the most urgent security challenges. Similarly, during their 2018–2019 terms on the Security Council, Kuwait and Sweden led efforts to adopt Resolution 2401 demanding a cessation of hostilities in Syria to allow for humanitarian aid delivery, which was eventually adopted unanimously. Small states such as New Zealand, Switzerland, Slovenia, Guyana, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines have also played a crucial role in speaking truth to power during council discussions and in asserting principled positions based on the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law.

Small states also play an outsize role on international peace and security issues outside of the Security Council. In the face of obstruction from the veto-wielding permanent members of the council, small states have gone to the General Assembly to demand greater accountability and transparency in the use of the veto. For example, Liechtenstein’s veto initiative led to the adoption of a resolution in 2022 that requires the General Assembly to meet within ten days of any veto cast in the Security Council, effectively holding the permanent members accountable for blocking council action. The resolution was adopted without a vote, demonstrating the breadth of the coalition Liechtenstein had built around the initiative. Liechtenstein hailed the resolution as “proof that even a small state such as Liechtenstein can play an active, defining role at international level.”¹¹ Liechtenstein also led efforts to table the first General Assembly resolution on Myanmar after the 2021 coup d’état. The resolution, which was adopted in June 2021, called for the immediate suspension of the transfer of all weapons to Myanmar and was seen as the international community’s most widespread condemnation of the coup to date. The first Security Council resolution on Myanmar only came eighteen months later, in December 2022.

Small States, Big Champions: Multilateralism and International Law

Small states are natural champions of multilateralism and supporters of the purposes and principles of the UN Charter. They cannot adhere to the

¹¹ Liechtenstein Marketing, “United Nations Adopt Liechtenstein’s Veto Initiative,” April 26, 2022.

idea of “might makes right” as they do not possess big militaries or economies. As a result, they tend to seek cooperation and collective action to foster a stable and rules-based international system where all states, regardless of size, can thrive.¹² Commitment to international law and support for the multilateral system are thus common features of the foreign policies of many small states.¹³

Historically, many small states have been active in the development and elaboration of the rules and principles of international law and the institutions responsible for their implementation and enforcement. For example, the Trinidadian Arthur N. R. Robinson set up the Foundation for the Establishment of an International Criminal Court (ICC) in 1972 and, during his tenure as prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago, tabled a motion to set up the ICC at the UN General Assembly in 1989, nearly a decade before the adoption of the Rome Statute. Continuing the legacy of small states’ contributions to the ICC, Liechtenstein played a central role in adding the “crime of aggression” to the Rome Statute as a core crime covered by the court alongside genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.¹⁴

Small states have also been vital to the functioning of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), regularly bringing forward both bilateral and multilateral cases. Indeed, Douglas Guilfoyle has argued that as champions of international law, small states often use “litigation as statecraft” to achieve their strategic objectives and counter stronger powers.¹⁵ The infamous 1986 case that Nicaragua brought and won against the United States regarding its support for the Contras and the mining of its harbors demonstrated that a small state can use the mechanisms of international justice to hold larger powers accountable. While the US never paid the reparations awarded to Nicaragua, the case is

widely seen as having set an important precedent. As another example, in 2014 the Marshall Islands filed lawsuits against each of the nine nuclear-armed states at the ICJ, arguing that they had not complied with their legal obligations to pursue disarmament under Article VI of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. While the cases were dismissed, they too set an important precedent by forcing major powers to defend their actions.¹⁶

Beyond these bilateral cases, small states have also led efforts to pursue multilateral cases at the ICJ. In one recent example, Vanuatu spearheaded efforts in the UN General Assembly to request the ICJ to issue an advisory opinion on climate change in 2023.¹⁷ Indeed, small states have been especially instrumental in the development of international law related to climate change and the environment. Because small states constitute the majority of legal jurisdictions globally, they also have the capacity to collectively generate customary international law through national rulings, giving them a stronger legal basis for negotiations in multilateral settings.

Small States as Stewards of the Global Commons

Small states play an active role in protecting and managing shared resources that belong to all of humanity. Small island developing states (SIDS) have played a particularly important role in global debates about climate change for moral, existential, and practical reasons. Despite contributing less than 1 percent of annual greenhouse gas emissions, SIDS are disproportionately affected by rising seas and warming waters. With marine areas on average twenty-eight times larger than their land mass, they are also critical custodians of the oceans. SIDS are thus well-placed to provide credible leadership on environmental and legal issues related to the sea.¹⁸

12 There is a growing literature that identifies this comparative tendency among small states: see Alyson Bailes, Bradley Thayer, and Baldur Thorhallsson, “Alliance Theory and Alliance ‘Shelter’: The Complexities of Small State Alliance Behavior,” *Third World Thematics* 1, no. 1 (2016); Hillary Briffa, “Small States and Covid-19: Challenges and Opportunities for Multilateralism,” *Global Perspectives* 4, no. 1 (2023), p. 3.

13 Lupel and Mälksoo, “A Necessary Voice.”

14 Interview, small state diplomat, New York, March 27, 2024.

15 Douglas Guilfoyle, “Litigation as Statecraft: Small States and the Law of the Sea,” *British Yearbook of International Law*, 2023, available at <https://doi.org/10.1093/bybil/brad009>.

16 Many of these points were raised under Chatham House rule of non-attribution at the International Peace Institute roundtable discussion, “Small States as Catalyst for Change and Champions of International Law,” New York, October 24, 2023.

17 For more information, see: Vanuatu ICJ Initiative, available at <https://www.vanuatuicj.com/>.

18 See: UN, “About Small Island Developing States (SIDS),” available at <https://sdgs.un.org/smallislands/about-smallisland-developing-states>.

For example, Singapore was instrumental in formulating laws related to the sea as president of the negotiations on both the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the recent Agreement under UNCLOS on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (the “High Seas Treaty”). A small-state diplomat, Arvid Pardo of Malta, also developed the principle of the “common heritage of mankind” that first appeared in Article 136 of UNCLOS and has since been referenced in “every major treaty relating to the global commons including treaties or resolutions on biological diversity, climate change, and outer space.”¹⁹ Tommy Koh, the Singaporean ambassador who presided over the Third UN Conference on the Law of the Sea, described UNCLOS as the “constitution for the oceans” and one of the “most robust environmental treaties.”²⁰ UNCLOS continues to be regarded as setting out the legal framework within which all activities in the oceans and seas must be carried out.

Historically, many small states have been active in the development and elaboration of the rules and principles of international law and the institutions responsible for their implementation and enforcement.

Other small states have played a particularly prominent role on climate issues. The Marshall Islands formed the High Ambition Coalition on climate change in 2015 in the run-up to what became the Paris Agreement. The group was instrumental in securing some of the central parts of the deal, including the goal of maintaining the global temperature rise below 1.5 degrees Celsius.²¹ More recently, at the 28th UN Climate Change Conference (COP28), the Maldives spearheaded efforts to set up a Loss and Damage Fund to assist countries that

have been harmed by climate change to recuperate some of the costs. While the total contributions may not cover the real costs of climate change for the developing world, this was one of the most significant—and hard-fought—diplomatic victories for less developed countries in history.

At the core of this movement around loss and damage was not just the Maldives but a whole group of small states, the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), which was founded in 1990 at the Second World Climate Conference in Geneva and is currently led by Samoa.²² By coordinating over the course of three decades, these small states elevated the issue of climate change and kept it at the forefront of international agendas.²³ While AOSIS members have a diversity of interests, they converged on core negotiating positions and

each used different channels and strategies to press for their shared goals.²⁴ In this way, AOSIS has been able to improve the coordination and capacity of SIDS in climate negotiations, leading to outcomes that would have been impossible if the individual members attempted to negotiate on their own.²⁵

Other small states, such as Senegal and the United Arab Emirates, have also been at the forefront of pushing solutions to better manage the global commons, including by hosting the 2026 UN Water Conference. In addition, during its 2022–2023 presidency of ECOSOC, Bulgaria led efforts to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Sustainable Development Goals.

19 Tommy Koh, *Building a New Legal Order for the Oceans* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2019); Sharon Seah, “The ‘High Seas Treaty’: Six Things Worth Knowing,” Fulcrum: Analysis on Southeast Asia, ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, March 17, 2023, available at <https://fulcrum.sg/the-high-seas-treaty-six-things-worthknowing/>.

20 Tommy Koh, “Keynote Address at the High-Level Commemorative Meeting of the General Assembly to Mark the 40th Anniversary of the Adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea,” New York, April 29, 2022, available at <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2022/04/20220430-min-ny>.

21 High Ambition Coalition, “High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People,” available at www.highambitioncoalition.org; Farhana Yamin, “The High Ambition Coalition,” in *Negotiating the Paris Agreement*, edited by Henrik Jepsen, Magnus Lundgren, Kai Monheim, and Hayley Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

22 Jack Corbett and John Connell, “Small states in the Pacific,” in *Handbook on the Politics of Small States*, edited by Godfrey Baldacchino and Anders Wivel (Edward Elgar, 2020).

23 John W. Ashe, Robert Van Lierop, and Anilla Chieran, “The Role of the Alliance of Small and Island States in the Negotiation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change,” *Natural Resources Forum* 23, no. 2 (1999).

24 Carola Klöck et al., “Beyond AOSIS: Small Island States’ Presence and Participation at COP27,” *Climate and Development* (2024).

25 Interview, small island developing states diplomat, New York, May 9, 2024.

Small States Pushing the Frontiers of Multilateral Action

These accomplishments are more than mere contributions to ongoing processes. Initiatives like the High Ambition Coalition on climate change and the early proposals that led to the establishment of the ICC were historic innovations that inspired fundamental change. As stated by fifty-five small states in a joint declaration during official consultations for the Summit of the Future, “For small states, innovation is not an option, but a necessary positive multiplier for progress and development.”²⁶

Indeed, small states have been among the first to bring issues related to emerging technologies to the forefront of international diplomacy. For example, in 2017, Denmark was the first country in the world to make technology and digitalization a cross-cutting foreign policy and security priority, establishing a diplomatic presence in Silicon Valley.²⁷ Singapore established the Digital Forum of Small States in 2022 to foster collaboration on digital issues and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence. This format has allowed small states to share cross-regional expertise and experiences with digital transformation and sought to counter the growth of “digital divides” between members. Together with Rwanda, Singapore is also leading the development of the AI Governance Playbook for the Digital Forum of Small States.²⁸

Nonetheless, it is easy for small states, especially lower-income small states, to be sidelined from multilateral discussions on these issues. Discussions on the governance of technologies such as artificial intelligence tend to center on the relatively large, higher-income countries where the tech industry is concentrated even though such borderless technologies affect all countries and need to be governed on a global scale.

Similarly, issues related to outer space are often considered the sole provenance of the few large, space-faring nations even though outer space is a shared domain, and all states, including small ones, have a stake in what happens in low-earth orbit.²⁹ As an economically diverse, cross-regional group of UN member states, small states are well-placed to communicate perspectives and coordinate positions on emerging technologies and outer space that reflect the interests of all member states.

How Small States Effect Change: Tools of the Trade

Small island developing states (SIDS) have played a particularly important role in global debates about climate change for moral, existential, and practical reasons.

Building on their long track record as innovators and catalysts for change, small states face an opportune moment to leverage their “tools of the trade” to transform global governance

and shape the future of multilateralism. In September 2024, UN member states will agree on a Pact for the Future that declares that a “transformation in global governance is essential.”³⁰ What tools and techniques can small states employ now and in the future to drive this transformation? We identify several techniques that small states may use to shape the future of the multilateral system: leveraging expertise to engage in niche diplomacy, holding the chair, building coalitions, and mediating between conflict parties.

Leveraging Expertise for Niche Diplomacy

By virtue of their size, small states tend to have fewer career diplomats and specialists in their foreign service. This tends to limit their capacity to cover all topics and regions on the international agenda. As a result, many small states have chosen to be selective and focus on a particular set of policy areas. In this way, they can become recognized

26 Statement by Small States Group at the Summit of the Future consultations, New York, December 11, 2023, chapter 3.

27 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, “The TechPlomacy Approach,” available at <https://techamb.um.dk/thetechplomacy-approach>.

28 Singapore Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA), “Digital Forum of Small States,” available at <https://www.imda.gov.sg/about-imda/international-relations/digital-forum-of-small-states>; IMDA, “Model AI Governance Framework (Generative AI),” May 30, 2024, available at <https://www.imda.gov.sg/resources/pressreleases-factsheets-and-speeches/factsheets/2024/gen-ai-and-digital-foss-ai-governance-playbook>.

29 See: United Nations, “For All Humanity—The Future of Outer Space Governance,” Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 7, May 2023.

30 Pact for the Future, Rev. 4, September 13, 2024, para. 66.

issue-area experts, providing a basis for credible leadership on a particular topic and giving them more leverage in negotiations.

Some international negotiations pivot on complex technicalities. For instance, negotiations aimed at creating rules for multilateral banking and financial institutions encompass choosing among different technical modalities, and the mastery of the subject matter translates directly into bargaining leverage. The cross-border flow of capital has inherently been more disruptive to smaller economies and requires strong multilateral coordination to manage, even as small states lack the economic leverage to assert their interests. However, states with greater expertise and strong track records of successful management of their national financial ecosystems are perceived by other states as more credible, making their arguments more likely to be accepted and potentially helping to overcome stalemates and reach agreement. This can allow small states with technical prowess to punch above their weight and obtain more favorable outcomes.

Many small states have become recognized issue-area experts, providing a basis for credible leadership on a particular topic and giving them more leverage in negotiations.

For example, Costa Rica has cultivated expertise in regulating small arms and light weapons, allowing it to spearhead negotiations on the Arms Trade Treaty, which was adopted in 2013.³¹ Costa Rica remains a leader on small arms issues to this day. In 2024, Permanent Representative of Costa Rica to the UN Maritza Chan served as president of the Fourth Review Conference (RevCon4) of the UN Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons.³²

Similarly, Switzerland has leveraged its expertise in biodiversity to shape multilateral rules in this area. Between 2003 and 2010, Switzerland made twenty submissions to entities supporting negotiations of the Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of

Benefits Arising from their Utilization to the Convention on Biological Diversity. As a proactive player supplying ideas, Switzerland steered negotiations and prevented deadlock, ultimately contributing to the successful adoption of the protocol.³³

Such “niche diplomacy” can also serve small states well on the UN Security Council. For example, Estonia was elected to the council in 2020 as a recognized expert in cybersecurity. This allowed Estonia to advance the issue further than many thought feasible, including by holding the first formal Security Council meeting on cyber issues under its council presidency in 2021.³⁴

Holding the Chair

Another effective way for small states to have influence in the multilateral system is by taking the initiative to chair multilateral negotiations. Small-state diplomats are often well-received in such positions. International nego-

tiations are often fraught, so it is important that the state presiding over the negotiations presses delegates toward convergence. Small-state delegates are often well-positioned to do so because they may be seen as less threatening and more inclined to canvass a wider group of states.

For example, the Seychelles was able to shape global maritime security governance during its chairmanship of the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS) from 2015 to 2017. Its self-nomination was approved by consensus, in recognition of its efforts to counter piracy and secure the Indian Ocean. As chair, it organized two plenary meetings and used its agenda-setting authority to lead the reform of the CGPCS and improve responses to the surge in piracy in early 2017. In 2008, the Seychelles began serving as a port of call for anti-piracy naval patrols and allowed its airstrips to be used by foreign air forces

31 Ó Súilleabháin, “Small States,” p. 7.

32 United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, “Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons,” 2024.

33 Tobias Schulz, Marc Hufty, and Maurice Tschopp, “Small and Smart: The Role of Switzerland in the Cartagena and Nagoya Protocols Negotiations,” *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics* 17 (2017).

34 Kristin Haugevik et al., “Small States, Different Approaches: Estonia and Norway on the UN Security Council,” International Centre for Defence and Security, November 2021; Richard Gowan, “Estonia in the UN Security Council: A History in Three Crises,” International Centre for Defence and Security, March 2022.

to conduct counter-piracy operations. The country's courts also prosecuted several arrested pirates. In short, the Seychelles used its leadership and strategic location at the center of the western Indian Ocean to build a reputation as a trusted partner in the realm of maritime security.³⁵

Serving as chair can also allow small states to shape the dynamics and results of multilateral negotiations, such as by tabling the initial “zero” draft, gaining access to the negotiating parties to better understand their preferences, and steering the direction of talks. Small states often play this role in partnership with larger states.³⁶ For example, in the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) negotiations, Ireland was a co-facilitator of the process along with Kenya. They laid out their vision in a paper for achieving the 2030 Agenda to facilitate the discussions, which helped the parties to reach the final agreement. At the start, they imposed procedural rules to ensure a successful outcome: the co-facilitators argued that there should not be any major changes to the draft, and the negotiating parties should focus on a limited number of changes. They imposed tight deadlines to extract concessions from disagreeing countries and wielded significant influence over the outcome.³⁷

As a group of UN member states that tend to wield little power on their own but collectively make up the majority of countries in the world, small states are natural coalition builders.

Forming Coalitions

As a group of UN member states that tend to wield little power on their own but collectively make up the majority of countries in the world, small states are natural coalition builders. Coalition formation is often the most effective way for states to advance their interests in multilateral negotiations, and the

benefits of coalitions often exceed the sum of their parts. They elevate the group's visibility and thus that of its agenda, which can enhance negotiating power. If the coalition is stable and long-term, it may also benefit from the pooling of resources and other economies of scale. Often, coalitions of small states also include partnerships with international NGOs. In many of the cases cited in this report, including the High Seas Treaty, the agreement on loss and damage financing, and the 2030 Agenda, NGO partners played a critical role in augmenting small states' capacity and amplifying their voice.³⁸

Small states build coalitions not just among themselves but also with larger countries. Middle powers regularly see small states as good partners to build consensus among a cross-section of member states to advance multilateral processes of all kinds.³⁹ As Permanent Representative of Kenya to the UN Martin Kimani said, “Without small states acting in concert and partnership with those like Kenya, the UN would become unworkable.”⁴⁰

Small states have also worked together to increase their influence on the UN Security Council.⁴¹ This has often entailed building connections to the wider UN membership beyond the council. For example, following the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011, small states such as Jordan, Luxembourg, New Zealand, and Uruguay took the lead in building coalitions on related issues, including cross-border humanitarian access and the protection of medical facilities and personnel in conflict situations. In the latter case, Security Council Resolution 2286 on the protection of medical facilities and personnel was initiated by

35 Christian Bueger and Anders Wivel, “How Do Small States Maximize Influence? Creole Diplomacy and the Smart State Foreign Policy of the Seychelles,” *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 14, no. 2 (2018).

36 For insights on the chair's role in partnership beyond the small states context, see: Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit and Nantasit Klaisringoen, “Co-chairing Asia-Pacific Defence Diplomacy: The Case ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 73, no. 1 (2019).

37 Felix Dodds, David Donoghue, and Jimena Leiva Roesch, *Negotiating the Sustainable Development Goals: A Transformational Agenda for an Insecure World* (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 80, 100, 116–117.

38 Thanks to Minh-Thu Pham for raising this point in civil society discussions around the Pact for the Future consultations. According to an ongoing study by her recently founded Project Starling, alliances between small states and NGOs have been instrumental in shaping many recent intergovernmental processes, including the High Seas Treaty, the Paris Climate Agreement, and the Sustainable Development Goals. For more information, see: “Project Starling,” available at www.projectstarling.org.

39 For an example of a coalition formation among small states and middle powers, see Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit, “What Causes Changes in International Governance Details?: An Economic Security Perspective,” *Review of International Political Economy* 29, no. 2 (2020).

40 Remarks at “Strengthening Multilateralism by Upholding the United Nations Charter: The Role of Small States,” United Nations Headquarters, New York, April 4, 2024, available on UN WebTV: <https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k1w/k1wcu44n5a>.

41 Baldur Thorhallsson, “Small States in the UN Security Council: Means of Influence?” *Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 7, no. 2 (2012).

New Zealand and ultimately gained passage in 2016 with five penholders from five continents and eighty-five member states as co-sponsors.⁴²

Serving as Mediators

Because of their strategic vulnerability, small states have often had to choose between forming alliances with greater powers and navigating between greater powers without being seen as overly partial. Over time, many small states that have taken this second path have gained credence as impartial brokers. Small states can often depoliticize issues that might be more controversial if raised by rival powers, making them particularly apt choices for mediators.

Small states have offered their countries as venues for major security discussions, such as the Manama Dialogue in Bahrain and the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, both managed by the International Institute for Strategic Studies. By hosting major powers' diplomatic delegations, small states can maintain close contact and pathways for communication. In the best case scenarios, smaller states may be able to depoliticize issues that might otherwise have been regarded as confrontational if raised by rival powers. As complex issues are difficult for small states to drive unilaterally, they tend to frame them in ways that are pertinent to the interests of a broader range of states, which can help build buy-in. Furthermore, small states often prioritize making such processes more inclusive.

Small states can also serve as mediators between adversaries or conflict parties. There are several ways states, including small states, can carry out mediation. They can act as "facilitators" by relaying messages between the parties if direct contact is impossible and securing space for the parties to identify their interests and goals without making substantive interventions. Notably, Switzerland plays this role between the US and Iran. The Swiss embassy in Tehran handles all consular affairs for the US

government in Iran and has been the principal facilitator of diplomatic relations between the rivals since they broke off relations after the extended hostage crisis beginning in November 1979.⁴³

Small states can also assume the role of "formulators." In this role, they can influence the dynamics of talks such as by setting the agenda and determining the frequency of meetings and tempo of discussions. One oft-cited case is the mediation by Norway and Sweden in the Israel-Palestine conflict. Both states acted not only as facilitators in setting up secretive communication channels but also as formulators in designing the agenda and proactively shaping the dialogue. Norway's actions resulted in the 1993 Oslo Accords. While the ongoing war in Gaza has cast a shadow over this success, the accords led to the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority and were for years recognized as the only concrete agreement in the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. The success of Norway and Sweden as mediators was undergirded by their reputation for impartiality and trustworthiness, their diplomatic adeptness, and others' perception of them being small and non-threatening states.⁴⁴

A more recent example was the critical role Cuba and Norway played in mediating the peace agreement between the government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP), which formally ended the longest armed conflict in the Western Hemisphere in 2016. Cuba hosted the talks in Havana to provide a buffer between the negotiating parties and the ongoing violence and divisive politics of the conflict. Norway served as a "guarantor," helping to facilitate the process away from the negotiating table.⁴⁵ Another recent example is Qatar, which has acted as a mediator in several conflicts, including most recently the Israel-Hamas conflict. Qatar's involvement demonstrates the enduring involvement of small states in peace processes and conflict resolution by facilitating dialogue and negotiation among disputing parties.

Small states that have the means and subject-matter expertise should redouble their efforts to pool resources and knowledge to build up other states' capacities.

42 Lupel and Mälksoo, "A Necessary Voice," pp. 7–9.

43 "Switzerland's Vital Role as US-Iran Go Between Amid Soaring Tensions," *Al-Arabiya News*, April 15, 2024.

44 Jacob Eriksson, "Mediation by Small States: Norway and Sweden in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict," in *Handbook on the Politics of Small States*.

45 Renata Segura and Delphine Mechoulan, "Made in Havana: How Colombia and the FARC Decided to End the War," International Peace Institute, February 2017.

The Future of Multilateralism: Recommendations for Small States

This paper has made the case that small states are well positioned to be natural champions of multilateralism and international law and credible defenders of the UN Charter. At a time of great change, geopolitical divisions, and rising existential threats, small states have a distinctive role to play as a diverse, cross-regional grouping that represents the majority of UN member states. Many of these transformations—from climate change to emerging technologies—carry potentially catastrophic risks. However, they also offer opportunities for progress. Human history is at a crossroads. On one path, there is potential for catastrophe; along another path, there are opportunities for renewal and progress. The choices we make today will have profound effects on our collective future.

Following its anticipated adoption, the Pact for the Future and its listed actions will serve as a roadmap for member states in their efforts to build a renewed multilateral system. The pact also sets out a timeline to review progress on its implementation within five years, at the beginning of the 83rd session of the UN General Assembly. How can small states contribute to implementing the pact and building a stronger multilateral system for the benefit of all? Among the priorities, we recommend the following:

1. **Reinforce the fundamental principles of international cooperation:** At this time of rising conflict and great power competition, there is a need to get back to basics—the fundamental purposes and principles of the UN Charter. A world where the UN Charter is brazenly violated is a dangerous one where “might makes right” usually prevails.

Being most at risk in such a world, small states have the moral authority to lead by being insistent and consistent in calling out violations of the UN Charter, following the principle that a violation anywhere is a violation everywhere. Selective enforcement of

international law undermines the very foundation of the international system.

Small states should lead and mobilize all member states in recommitting to their obligations under the UN Charter through consistent words and actions. Small states can also be instrumental in initiating and supporting resolutions that reinforce adherence to international law and call on all states to avoid double standards in its application. As a rule of thumb, small states should be vocally supportive when it comes to respect for international law and a rules-based order across all of the issues they deal with at the UN. This cannot be taken as a given. It is equally important for small states to work together to bring attention to serious violations of international law at appropriate fora or platforms. They can emphasize how these coordinated efforts align with the core purposes of the UN, including “to develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples... to strengthen universal peace.”⁴⁶

2. **Expand and strengthen diverse cross-regional coalitions for global governance:** Geopolitical divisions threaten to sunder the world to such an extent that international cooperation becomes impossible. Small states in particular have little to gain from divisive binaries such as “East” versus “West” or “North” versus “South” and polarizing geopolitical dynamics. Yet these divisions are increasingly manifesting themselves in multilateral processes and negotiations. Small states need to be keenly alert to the risks of divisions that could breed zero-sum positions that will not serve their interests.

The United Nations derives its legitimacy from its universal membership, serving as “a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations” for the attainment of common ends.⁴⁷ Small states may serve a useful role in establishing and expanding cross-regional coalitions looking at the full range of issues on the UN agenda. This

⁴⁶ UN Charter, Article 1.2.

⁴⁷ UN Charter, Article 1.4.

can help bolster small states' efforts to bridge divides and mediate differences to support the UN's goals. Working together in the General Assembly and other international fora, small states should continue to leverage UN processes to facilitate inclusive dialogue and build consensus and widen the group of countries invested in overcoming polarization as a global priority. This would reinforce their commitment to multilateralism, serving the common interests of all member states. In this way, frameworks should be built to demonstrate the "win-win" nature of multilateral cooperation, an area in urgent need of revival. In addition, cross-regional coalitions developed by many small states may serve as building blocks for greater cooperation if joined by larger states.

3. **Promote information sharing and capacity building:** Small states are a politically, geographically, and economically diverse group and vary significantly in their areas of expertise and technical capacities. To fully harness the opportunities of emerging technologies such as AI and lessen the risks from planetary crises like climate change or pandemics, investment in information sharing and capacity building will be essential.

Small states that have the means and subject-matter expertise should redouble their efforts to pool resources and knowledge to build up other states' capacities. Doing so will help shore up our collective capacity to pursue sustainable development, climate action, pandemic prevention, and the safe, secure, and resilient functioning of digital systems. Small states without sufficient resources to address such challenges on their own should work to leverage UN and multi-stakeholder mechanisms to support information sharing and capacity building to bridge divides. Where the benefits of pooled expertise are significant, small states should also consider further institutionalizing information sharing and capacity building in permanent mechanisms beyond the UN system, whether through purpose-built organizations mandated to support small states or through support to existing organizations such as think tanks that

can incubate small-state expertise.

The transnational issues at the heart of our shared future can only be addressed through international cooperation. It is an "all hands on deck" moment, and it is in the interest of all states that "all hands" have the tools required for success.

4. **Revamp working methods:** The UN system can only function as well as each of its parts. Small states should work together to put forward their views on how to revamp and update the working methods of different UN organs to ensure that they remain fit for purpose. This includes reinforcing efforts to enhance the working methods, transparency, and accountability of the UN Security Council, as well as strengthening its relationship with the General Assembly and other subsidiary bodies. Small states should work together to ensure that the General Assembly can use its role and authority to the fullest extent to deal with global challenges, including in peace and security. At a time of polarization in the work of the Security Council, small states can work collectively to strengthen the role of the General Assembly in peace and security. Another priority will be for small states to be actively involved in the process of selecting the next secretary-general.
5. **Update the peace and security toolbox:** Just as small states suffer outside impacts from strife and conflict, so too are they the largest beneficiaries of a safer and more peaceful world. In this regard, small states need to be involved in updating the UN's peace and security toolbox, including strengthening the Peacebuilding Commission; implementing the recommendations in the New Agenda for Peace; supporting the revitalization and implementation of tools for the peaceful settlement of disputes, including mediation, preventive diplomacy, and peacebuilding; and sharing knowledge and best practices on conflict prevention.
6. **Prioritize inclusiveness on new and emerging technologies:** If harnessed properly, digitalization and new and emerging technologies could help small states bridge the gap in influence they have long had to accept due to their lesser

size and resources. This moment of technological transformation presents opportunities for small states—whether in building the first global digital cooperation architecture and laying the groundwork for an inclusive conversation on harnessing AI or in building and reinforcing the governance of cyberspace and outer space.

7. **Embed future thinking:** Small states need to make sure that they inject their views into the gamut of “forward-looking” and “long-term” conversations taking place through various processes at the UN. For example, discussions on how to advance sustainable development ahead of 2030 and beyond will be the critical next phase in taking forward the Sustainable Development Goals. Protocols to strengthen the international response to complex global shocks should also be developed, taking into account small states’ views. Small states should also leverage the Declaration on Future Generations to look at ways they can further introduce and embed strategic foresight into their national policymaking and UN processes to ensure they are well-prepared for future challenges and to safeguard the interests of future generations.

Conclusion

In an era of dramatic transformation, as the world faces a future of simultaneous peril and promise, the transformation of our systems of global

governance is imperative. The Pact for the Future underscores this urgency in its call to “renew trust in global institutions” by making them more representative, responsive and effective.⁴⁸ Small states, through their collective resources and active participation, can help reinvigorate multilateralism and international cooperation. As documented in this report, small states have historically made integral contributions to strengthening the multilateral system and defending international law using a wide range of tools. Going forward, they can promote a multilateral system that safeguards the interests of all states, ensuring a sustainable and equitable future for generations to come.

The path toward achieving the world envisioned in the Pact for the Future will be filled with triumphs and challenges. In order for the agreed actions inscribed in the pact to yield their transformative potential, small states in various configurations need to muster their collective leadership and political acumen to keep on track their implementation, focusing initially on low-hanging fruits. While there will be moments when small states make meaningful progress, there will also be times when they experience setbacks and disappointments. But there is no room for giving up. We must not regress to the world where “might makes right”; we must endure and push forward. With unwavering dedication, small states can ensure that this transformation is representative, responsive, and effective in achieving the common interest of a brighter future for all humanity.

⁴⁸ Pact for the Future, Rev. 4, September 13, 2024, para. 67.



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