Small Power Influence: An Oxymoron? The Case of Trinidad and Tobago

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Abstract: The Caribbean region, once a beneficiary of Cold War rivalries, has found itself marginalized diplomatically since the 1990s. Yet Trinidad and Tobago, the only energy producer in the region, has been able to some degree to stake out a leadership role regionally and even beyond. The paper analyzes the limits which small states confront in projecting soft power. Trinidad and Tobago has had mixed success in achieving regional influence within the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). The paper also concludes that the important factor in sustaining leadership is government commitment and will.¹

To classical realists as well as neorealists, the world’s divisions are uncomplicated: great powers (and of course superpowers) are militarily strong (large armies, advanced technology including nuclear, with associated industrial might); small powers are more or less militarily irrelevant, seemingly regardless of any fixed size. Whether most of these countries can even be considered “powers” is open to debate. Weak military capability has usually signified powerlessness and dependence on others for security (thus, the small depend on alliances) As noted in Braveboy-Wagner 2010:

…the literature on power tends to refer rather generously to the concept of “small powers,” the term being used to mean states with weak military capability or in
Rothstein’s case, states which recognize that they must rely on others for their security (Rothstein 1968, 29). A militarily weak state is not, intuitively-speaking, a “power” at all unless it can be said to exert influence over larger nations through strategic location or military alliances. Moreover, since all militarily weak states are not small in the population sense, if one adds the population dimension—which is the dominant conception of “small” in most of the literature—it is clear that most small-sized states are both militarily and economically weak. This is why small-state researchers have opted to study these states from the perspective of dependence and vulnerability, not power. In other words, the universe of small states with the potential to exercise military or economic power is itself very small (p. 408).

Fortunately, the research on power has evolved or gravitated from a focus on only “hard” power (capabilities or the use of them for “influence”) to one on “soft” power. The term, associated mostly with Joseph Nye, refers to the power of attraction, that is influencing others through the attractiveness of your culture and values.(Nye 1990). Although Nye was and remains particularly concerned about the U.S. use of soft power, soft power can and has been expanded to apply to any state able to influence others in multiple ways, well beyond militarily. The universe of users of soft power should include small-sized states, assuming that these have the wherewithal (that is, the resources or some other value) to have an impact. Moreover, while power exercised at the systemic level is a characteristic of the great powers, one can easily apply the concept of soft power at any level – most meaningfully for small states, at the regional level. Thus even states which do not try to influence the global community as a whole can seek to influence their neighbors using soft instruments. This has left space for considering the exercise of power by appropriate small-sized states.

For example, the (admittedly rather extreme) example of Qatar comes to mind. This country of only 2.1 million (2014), only a quarter of whom are citizens, had a GDP of $146 billion in 2011 (UN Human Development Report 2014), a per capita income of
$78,000, the highest in the world, and a very high human development rank (36). Most of its GDP and 85 percent of exports derive from oil production and related industries, and in addition it is the world’s third largest natural gas producer. While Qatar may not be particularly influential on the world stage-- although it is a close ally of the United States (it hosts the US Central Command)-- it has used its resource power to project itself as a leader of the Arab world. In this respect, Qatar has adopted the role of mediator in a number of conflicts between fellow Arab and Muslim nations. As one news source noted, in 2007-8 alone, “the Qatari foreign minister, Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber Al Thani (widely known as H.B.J.), has flown his jet — repeatedly — everywhere from Morocco to Libya to Yemen, using charm, guile and large amounts of money to mediate disputes, with varying success.” One particular success came in May 2008 when the Emir played a primary role in mediating factional conflict in Lebanon that threatened to bring down the government and prevent a power sharing agreement from being worked out (Worth, New York Times, 2008). Then Qatar established (or tried to) a Taliban office as a prelude to talks on the future of Afghanistan. Qatari money and influence boosted Islamists in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Syria; and although the tide of Arab Spring successes eventually turned, Qatar was one of the facilitators of the June 2014 exchange of an American POW Bowe Bergdahl, for five Taliban militants released from Guantanamo Bay (Nordland and Mazetti, New York Times, June 6,2014). At the time of writing, Qatar is considered to be crucial to any resolution of conflict between Israel and Hamas. Qatar has even expanded its influence to the sports arena, pushing successfully, if controversially because of accusations of corruption in the football governing body FIFA,
to host the World Football (Soccer) Cup in 2022. In other words, Qatar is determined not to be ignored – a small nation using its very deep pockets to great advantage.

Looking at the Caribbean area, where very small states abound, we can see very few states with the potential for even one half of Qatar’s influence – primarily because of the lack of resources. Of all the independent states of the Caribbean, Cuba has the largest population with 11 million and St. Kitts-Nevis the smallest with some 50,000 people. By neither absolute nor perceptual measures would the Caribbean islands and the associated littoral states of Belize, Guyana, and Suriname (which are also members of the Caribbean Community or CARICOM) be categorized as anything but small. The smallest states are in fact usually deemed “microstates.” Leaving aside those microstates with populations in the range of 100,000, the other Caribbean states could conceivably exercise some kind of influence in their region, even if they are not very wealthy, but only if they had some other values to attract others. We know that Cuba has done a great deal both militarily and in technical areas (its medical diplomacy is widely touted), based primarily on its ideological attractiveness and this recent specialty in humanitarianism.

Of the other Caribbean states, sifting out the larger ones, Haiti has a large enough population of about 10 million as well as a reputation to uphold as the first independent republic ruled by African descendants, and also a history of sustained activity in international organizations. However, its poverty and continual political instability preclude it from any effective exercise of soft power. For a long time, the Dominican Republic was politically unstable and later, ruled by a dictator, and with its dependence on the U.S. it has not stood out in the foreign policy arena. Jamaica has long been the most well known nation in the English-speaking and, in the Cold War days,
made a reputation for itself as an outspoken anti-imperialist and supporter of nonalignment. Guyana also shared that reputation but its influence potential was harmed by excessive authoritarianism and political and economic decay. Jamaica too has been limited by economic circumstances. Only Trinidad and Tobago has had the resources to play a sustainable leadership role. Thus the mantle of regional leadership and possibilities in so far as soft power in concerned has fallen on it. Yet it is one thing to have the money and another to use it or even want to use it effectively for influence. Note that this discussion is not about whether the choice of a proactive foreign policy by a small state is a “good” strategy to pursue or whether it has positive yields in terms of domestic development. Indeed, there are many liabilities domestically to pursuing a vibrant foreign policy just as there are many benefits as well. I am only interested here in whether a small state can effectively pursue influence, where and how.

In a previous work, I added Pertti Joenniemi’s concept of “smart” power to the idea of soft power: in applying the concept to Finland, he noted that in today’s globalized world, what matters is not so much whether you are big or small but whether you are innovative or “smart.” (Joenniemi 1998, 61-2). In the Caribbean region, innovation—scientific, technical, knowledge generation—is relatively new and not yet particularly obvious, except in the area of culture. From the region has come musical innovations including a new musical instrument (steel pan originating in Trinidad and Tobago), and new music genres (reggae, calypso-soca). However, while I recognize the power of attraction through popular culture, I deal here only with the economic and associated political context of small power where outcomes are fairly easily guaged. The international environment has changed from one rigidly influenced by ideology to one in
which economic stature is highly important. The rise of the south continues to be touted and puzzled over, in that countries such as Brazil, India, and China, as well as less spectacularly South Africa, and others which are part of an expanded Group of 7—that is, expanded to Group of 20—are viewed as the *avant garde* of a more wealthy, hence more influential and vocal, south. So long as economics remains center stage—notwithstanding the diversion of terrorism and other forms of political instability—soft power is most likely to be used by resource-rich countries, absent the innovation Joenniemi found in Finland.

**Trinidad and Tobago**

Trinidad and Tobago is a very small state lying just off the east coast of Venezuela. Its territory, covering two main islands and a few tiny offshore islets, is only 5,130 kilometers (1,980 sq miles); its population is 1.3 million. It is ranked by the United Nations Development Program as high in human development (67th in 2012 [UNDP 2013]). Its economy, measured by gross domestic product (GDP), is relatively large for a state of its size, at $30.6 billion in 2011 (Estonia, a high development country in Europe ranked at 33, had a similar profile of 1.3 million people and $24 billion GDP.) In per capita GDP (PPP), Trinidad and Tobago stood at $22.761 in 2011 (again, compare Estonia at $17,885). In the Caribbean region, only The Bahamas exceeds Trinidad and Tobago’s GDP per capita, at $28,239 in 2011 but its GDP was $9.8 billion [UNDP, Human Development Report 2013]).

The comparatively large size of Trinidad and Tobago’s economy is attributable to extractive and industrial activity. Less than 1 percent of the country’s GDP is derived
Energy dominates all aspects of the economy: accounting for an estimated 66 percent of merchandise exports in 2012 (World Bank Indicators) and 40 percent of GDP (6 percent of the GDP comes from manufacturing, and the rest comes primarily from construction, financial and other services). Trinidad and Tobago is by far the most industrialized economy in the Caribbean region. Although it is a small oil producer, it is a significant natural gas producer and the largest exporter of ammonia and second largest exporter of methanol in the world. According to the US Energy Information Administration, Trinidad and Tobago had 728 million barrels of proven crude oil reserves as of January 2013. The country produced 119,000 bbl/d of oil in 2012 (US DOE/EIA 2014) production is down from a peak of 179,000 bbl/d in 2006. With declining oil reserves, Trinidad and Tobago became an early converter to capturing rather than flaring natural gas, to the extent that it supplied 65 percent of the U.S. market in 2012. Trinidad and Tobago’s gas exports are in the form of liquefied natural gas (LNG), and it possesses one of the hemisphere’s largest LNG processing plants. Proven gas reserves stood at 17 trillion cubic feet in 2007 (Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries 2008) but was down to 13.3 tcf in 2012. In 2012, according to the US Energy Information Administration, Trinidad and Tobago was the world's sixth largest LNG exporter.

Possession of hydrocarbons gives a country the opportunity to exert leverage on more dependent countries but scholars have also long focused on the poor governance of oil-producing majors. While not exactly exempt from some of the plagues of the oil “curse,” including corruption, Trinidad and Tobago has to some degree managed its resource gift better than most. As a former British colony which gained its independence
in 1962, Trinidad and Tobago and its fellow English-speaking Caribbean nations have a
global reputation as stable and democratic nations that respect the rule of law.\textsuperscript{2} Despite its
ethnic diversity—its primarily composed of people of African and East Indian heritage
supplemented by Chinese, European, Lebanese and various mixtures—political tension,
which certainly exists, between the two main groups has never developed into open
conflict, and social harmony is normal.

Until the recession of 2008, global oil and natural gas producers were enjoying
some of the highest prices since the late 1970s. The combined effect of instability in
Nigeria and Venezuela, war between Israel and Lebanon in 2006, a standoff between the
United States/Europe and Iran over its nuclear enrichment policy, limited refinery
capacity, and speculation caused by middlemen were all responsible for a huge run up in
prices that brought the price of oil per barrel to more than $100 in 2008. By 2000, a
number of oil producing nations had turned to monetizing associated natural gas as well.
Natural gas prices are less volatile than oil prices but there have also been highs and lows
related to supply and demand. Spot prices peaked at above $14 in 2005, were above $13
in July 2008, and then decreased (US DOE/EIA 2014). In 2014 the spot price has
hovered only around $4 (more during the winter).

The world’s reliance on hydrocarbon energy has given a certain political
capability to even small energy producing nations such as Trinidad and Tobago, and
more so of course, to the large producers. At periods of peak prices, oil and gas
producing and exporting countries have not only been able to increase their revenues for
domestic development but also to exercise some foreign policy power to bring attention
to and to achieve their interests.
As outlined in an earlier article (Braveboy-Wagner 2010), at the time of higher hydrocarbon prices not only was Trinidad and Tobago, therefore, enlarging its capacity to influence via increased revenues but also this coincided with a redefinition of foreign policy goals on the part of the leadership, to give priority to attempts to proactively exert influence in the region and somewhat beyond. The government at the time wished to be seen as a regional leader (i.e. within CARICOM) and also relatedly, articulated a goal of serving as a bridge in trade and finance between north and south America, given its geographical location. With respect to the United States, the reliance of the United States on Liquified Natural gas from Trinidad and Tobago also led the country’s leadership to entertain ideas about more fulsome collaboration than in the past.

The country was (and remains) a focal point for regional trade, accounting at the time for 86 percent of intra-Caricom exports (but only about 4 percent of regional imports) (CARICOM Statistics Sub-Program 2009). This continues today: the latest figures (2011) show that the percentages are about 77 percent for exports and about the same 4 percent for imports (CARICOM Statistics online). The wide gap between Trinidad and Tobago and its regional partners stems not only from its energy-related exports, but also its dominant manufacturing exports. Moreover, as a result of the liberalization of the 1990s and 2000s, Trinidadian financial firms have also established their dominance in the region (including the Dominican Republic), buying shares or buying out both financial and manufacturing operations in many countries.

Given the country’s trade and financial dominance (or economic power) within the CARICOM area, it would be natural to expect Trinidad and Tobago to play a leadership role in the region and to seek to exert political and economic influence over its
neighbors. However, my previous research highlighted the following points with respect to some key regional areas:  

1) Although Trinidad and Tobago had led efforts to establish CARICOM and continues to be fully supportive of its development, it has long been the target of grumbling by other CARICOM partners regarding the unequal distribution of benefits. This had led it to adopt a low-key stance in regional affairs over the years.

2) Nevertheless, its stature had grown every time there was an oil crisis, precisely because at those times it had been called upon to help the region financially. This occurred in the 1970s when Trinidad and Tobago disbursed about $400 million in aid to the region in various forms: concessionary project aid; financing purchases of petroleum products through an oil facility; counterpart contributions to the regional development bank; balance-of-payments support; purchasing of bonds and debentures of other member countries; granting of access to its domestic capital market; and floating of Caribbean Development Bank (the regional bank) and Inter-American Bank bond issues in the domestic market with the proceeds going to CARICOM countries (Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Finance 1983). In the 2000s with the oil price skyrocketing once again, Trinidad and Tobago established a $50 million Petroleum Fund to be used for poverty alleviation and disaster recovery efforts in the region. Some of this went to finance a regional development fund to strengthen regional economies within the context of the efforts to establish a regional single market and economy by providing
assistance to disadvantaged countries, regions, and sectors (Braveboy-Wagner 2007: 125). Trinidad and Tobago also proposed to build an intra-Caribbean natural gas pipeline as well as two smelter plants that would source aluminum from Jamaica, Suriname, and Guyana. Every year, too, the country has been the regional financial first-responder for humanitarian assistance after natural disasters, primarily hurricanes.

3) Notwithstanding this petro diplomacy, Trinidad and Tobago has found itself continually competing with Venezuela which in both eras mentioned above extended its own oil facilities to the region, garnering what Trinidad and Tobago perceived as much more gratitude than that shown to Trinidad itself.

4) Jamaica, in particular, has chafed at Trinidadian manufacturing dominance which has extended to include multinational investment in Jamaican industrial sectors. Moreover, Jamaica and others have engaged in several trade battles with Trinidad and Tobago over the balance of trade gap, and Jamaica argued vociferously over the price set for Trinidad-supplied LNG for electricity generation at its regasification plant.

5) While Trinidad and Tobago had played a key role in fostering CARICOM trade agreements with Venezuela, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Cuba, and Costa Rica, it has more of an interest than the other CARICOM members in pursuing free trade with Latin American countries. It is, however, bound by common market regulations to obtain CARICOM agreement to close these deals. Getting CARICOM to move forward in this respect has been difficult. Trade talks with Central America have moved forward quite slowly while
trade with Mercosur has been placed on the back burner. Thus Trinidad and Tobago has felt rather “held back.”

6) All in all, the other countries often seek to counter or balance rather than bandwagon (using the term non-militarily) with Trinidad and Tobago.

7) The Trinidad and Tobago public also seems ambivalent about the relationship with CARICOM. While intellectual sentiment, and usually, leadership stances are generally supportive of regionalism, the public at large often articulates sentiments that pose CARICOM as a burden for Trinidad. (A survey of attitudes on integration, as has been done recently in East Africa, would surely be helpful in defining exactly how people feel).

8) Trinidad and Tobago, already historically CARICOM’s most proactive state in promoting relations with Latin America (which were initially focused on nearby Venezuela), tried during the favorable pre-2008 era to consolidate its status as a link between the two regions. Already successful as the host of the Caribbean office of the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, and the headquarters of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS)—which promotes functional cooperation and free trade between the Caribbean and Central America--Trinidad and Tobago initiated a lobbying campaign for the headquarters of the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas, with Port-of-Spain competing against such better-known cities as Miami, Atlanta, Puebla [Mexico] and Panama City. However, with the failure of talks, and their virtual abandonment in 2005, the headquarters issue remains on the hemispheric backburner. In the meantime, however, Trinidad
and Tobago scored a significant success when it was approved as the host of the Fifth Summit of the Americas scheduled for April 2009. Previous summits had been held in Miami, Santiago (Chile), Quebec City and Mar del Plata (Argentina). Trinidad and Tobago was the smallest country to host such a large gathering of heads of government from the hemisphere. Since the gathering fortuitously coincided with the coming to power of a new and popular African-American president in the United States, the presence of this president, along with his counterparts from the hemisphere, brought Trinidad and Tobago far more international visibility than might have been the case otherwise. In this respect, Trinidad and Tobago has been successful in projecting leadership.

9) In its position as the country responsible for regional security in CARICOM, Trinidad and Tobago has been playing a significant role providing ideas and financial support for CARICOM’s efforts to counter drug trafficking, gun running, money laundering and human and sex trafficking. Counter-terrorism efforts became another focus after 9/11. In the flush period prior to 2008, Trinidad and Tobago (and much of the Caribbean) experienced high levels of crime stemming from drug trafficking initiated in South America, and gun running, much of it linked to outflows from the U.S.. Criminal deportees from the U.S. were widely seen as another disruptive force by CARICOM leaders. The Trinidad and Tobago leadership responded to security threats in a “big” way: with arrangements for deep-pocket investment in the acquisition of offshore patrol vehicles, fast boats or interceptors, and radar intended to
protect the southern Caribbean. Nevertheless since the region’s security is of major concern to the United States, there was the expectation that the US would also dispense a goodly amount of aid to the region for security purposes.

During this time (2006), some CARICOM leverage was seen in the fact that the United States exempted Trinidad and Tobago, a firm and original supporter of the International Criminal Court (ICC), as well as most other Caribbean states, from its “Article 98” requirement exempting U.S. citizens from the court’s jurisdiction. The waiver allowed the United States to resume offering military training programs to Trinidad that had been cut off in 2003. U.S. security cooperation was tightened during the Caribbean’s hosting of the World Cricket Cup in 2007 as well as Trinidad and Tobago’s hosting of the Fifth Summit of the Americas. There was also no undue U.S. pressure as expected, on Trinidad and Tobago to attenuate its close relations with either Cuba or with Hugo Chávez’s Venezuela.

On the other hand, Trinidad and Tobago was frustrated by what was seen as a U.S. lack of attention to the region’s security needs. At one point the prime minister complained publicly that the concern about terrorism had diverted US attention away from drug interdiction but that “the drug cartels in South America are no less active today than they were two or three or five years ago and … we are seeing a heightened use of Caribbean countries as transshipment centers …. Trinidad and Tobago has offered to patrol the eastern Caribbean; we will acquire the assets to do that but we cannot afford to finance it. The security that will be
provided … is as much the security of the United States as it is the security of the Caribbean” (Manning 2006). Between this lack of money for security and other complaints about the ending of trade preferences and barriers to Trinidad and Tobago’s manufactured products, the prime minister actually felt compelled to suggest that his country diversify its LNG exports away from the United States. Not long after this, trade preferences under the Caribbean Basin Initiative due to expire, were extended until a free trade agreement could be negotiated. Although this was attributable to collective Caribbean lobbying, Trinidad and Tobago’s complaints were part of that effort. The extension came some time after a major meeting of the U.S. President (George W. Bush) with all Caribbean leaders in Washington DC in June 2007. Then, as an outcome of the Summit of the Americas 2009 held in Port-of-Spain, the new President Obama committed to assist the region more profoundly in security areas. As a result, the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI) was launched in 2010 with a congressional commitment to fund this drug trafficking-citizen security-social justice initiative at $37 million for FY 2010. Despite some complaints since then about the level of funding, the program has been sustained and was reported at CARICOM’s 2014 summit to be making inroads.

Post 2010

In 2010, Trinidad and Tobago experienced a change in leadership. This, along with the global (and therefore local as well) economic decline led to a change in the country’s enthusiasm about seeking leadership through petrodiplomacy. The new
government came in on a platform that was far more focused on social needs than on external relations. There was in fact a general popular revulsion against expenditures such as had been the case in the preceding years – on large scale construction, on hosting of international meetings (Summit of the Americas as well as a Commonwealth meeting).

At first the new government seemed to be retracting from the regional scene, with the new prime minister publicly stating, referring to the Caribbean Development Fund and the Petroleum Fund, that Trinidad and Tobago was not an “ATM card,” (machine) available for withdrawals every time there was a shortfall. In addition, the prime minister set aside or reconsidered almost all the security initiatives of the previous administration: the proposed expenditure on offshore patrol vessels, and radar arrangements. However, with time, the new government assumed a softer stance and in fact arrangements within CARICOM remained much as before. In addition, although a foreign policy was not specifically articulated, the government continued to deepen the thrust toward Latin America, joining the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) formed in 2011, continuing to negotiate gas exploration arrangements with Venezuela, and consolidating relations with Brazil, Colombia and others. (The government also solidified diplomatic and economic relations with India and China, where an embassy was finally established.) On the other hand, the United States continued to be diverted to pressing global issues in the Middle East and Asia, and except for the continuing dialogue on security under CBSI, not much changed. As of this writing, CARICOM nations have been waiting and hoping for some time to have a meeting with President Obama.
Conclusion

Can a small state, indeed a very small state, leverage its resource endowments so as to achieve some influence in the international system? Clearly this is possible only of those endowments are exceptional and needed by other countries. In any case any influence gained is more likely to be at the regional than other levels. In the case examined here, Trinidad and Tobago, has been a low-key regional leader since its independence, important to the region by virtue of being the most industrialized country and the sole energy producer. However, whether a state becomes a significant regional leader or not depends not just on its state but on its proactive search for status. The urge to acquire status, through the dynamic use of soft power, depends on what the country’s leadership wants.

As seen in the case of Trinidad and Tobago, the mere fact that others are dependent on the influencing nation’s resources does not translate into success either in being seen as a leader or in influencing others to accept one’s preferences. The country has had a mixed bag of success with respect to CARICOM, more success with Latin America, and another mixed bag with respect to the United States. (Other initiatives are not discussed here.) On the other hand, as Browning notes, smallness is constructed, and “more positive renderings of smallness in constructing state identities will entail broader possibilities for foreign policies” (Browning 2006: 674). The case of Trinidad and Tobago shows that, if the leadership is so inclined, it can craft a foreign policy that seeks to break out of the limited visions of what a small state, indeed a very small state, can and should do. The case also shows, however, that such a foreign policy will meet with
domestic opposition if it is seen as engagement outside without sufficient benefit to the home. In that case, it will have a short shelf life.
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1 This paper is an update of an article previously published in the Cambridge Review of International Affairs. See Braveboy-Wagner 2010 in the bibliography. Substantial parts of the original are reproduced.

2 This history of stability was, however, interrupted by two coup attempts in 1970 and 1990.

3 This section is largely a summary of findings from Braveboy-Wagner 2010, with minor additions.