



Geopolitical imaginaries in climate and ocean governance: Seychelles and the Blue Economy

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ABSTRACT

Climate change and ocean management are significant challenges for small island developing states (SIDS). Compounding these challenges, research suggests that the ability of SIDS to enact environmental governance, and their ability to mobilise international support, remain constrained by resource limitations and broader geopolitical discourses of marginality. However, Seychelles' Government has challenged these imaginaries via its engagement with the "Blue Economy" as a framing for ocean-climate governance. This paper argues Seychelles' construction, and utilisation, of the Blue Economy is built upon particular geopolitical imaginaries underpinning ocean-climate governance in SIDS. Drawing on elite interviews conducted in Seychelles in 2017, this paper explores how the Seychelles Conservation and Climate Adaptation Trust (SeyCCAT) acts as a mechanism that incorporates ocean governance and climate adaptation. It argues the Blue Economy serves as a geopolitical imaginary that underpins Seychelles' ocean-climate governance. Moreover, elites have drawn upon three separate geopolitical island imaginaries to justify Seychelle's role within the Blue Economy, Seychelles as: a pristine island state, an island of experimentation, and a large oceanic state. This paper will argue that such geopolitical imaginaries underpin ocean-climate governance through the Blue Economy and highlight the significance of considering them in analysing the Blue Economy. Further, it highlights the important insight of elite perspective in uncovering the geopolitical logics underpinning ocean-climate governance in SIDS.

1. Introduction

Small island developing states (SIDS) are among the polities most vulnerable to climate change due to a range of biophysical and societal factors (McGranahan et al., 2007). Transformations in the world's oceans due to climate change will disproportionately affect SIDS. Sea level rise, ocean warming, ocean acidification, and declining warm-water coral reefs will all have adverse impacts on SIDS, who often also have the lowest adaptive capacity (IPCC, 2019). Compounded by broader concerns on ocean governance, like fishing rights (Havice, 2018), oceans are thus a key diplomatic space for SIDS. However, SIDS are often understood to be marginal actors with limited influence within international relations (McNamara, 2009). "Blueness" has been mobilised by SIDS in order to resist discourses of marginality through an emphasis on contemporary concern for ocean and climate issues. For instance, the propagation of the "Blue Pacific" discourse has created a counter discourse for the Pacific that highlights the centrality of the ocean to Pacific regionalism and identity, as well as emphasising the challenges posed by climate change (Kabutaulaka, 2021). Globally, SIDS are repositioning themselves as "large ocean states" under the banner of the "Blue Economy" to resist geopolitical imaginaries of marginality and to highlight their ocean and climate governance issues (Chan, 2018;

Silver and Campbell, 2018).

Seychelles has utilised the Blue Economy to frame its foreign policy and domestic governance, providing a valuable study to unpack the imaginaries which underpin it. Located in the Indian Ocean 1,500 km off the African coast, Seychelles is the smallest African state by land mass and population, with a population of 97,017 (CIA Factbook, 2019; Lopes, 2013). Seychelles' "natural habitats and biodiversity, the coastal zone and human settlements, agriculture, water resources, fisheries, human health, natural disasters and insurance" are all vulnerable to climate change (UNDP, 2019). This vulnerability is closely linked to shifts in ocean conditions such as acidification, increasing sea surface temperature and rising sea levels (Payet and Agricole, 2006).

Although Seychelles has the highest GDP per capita in Africa and the World Bank graduated it to "high income" status in 2015, Seychelles continues to be widely categorised and represented as a SIDS (World Bank, 2021). Its economy is dependent on marine activities, with tourism and fishing making up 55 % and 20 % of GDP respectively, thus making the Blue Economy an attractive geopolitical imaginary (CIA Factbook, 2019; World Bank, 2017). James Michel, Seychelles' President from 2004 to 2016, was an early proponent of the Blue Economy embracing the concept in the mid-2010s to assist in the conceptualisation and implementation of Seychelles' ocean-climate governance. As

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noted by Chan (2021), ocean-climate governance is part of a broader ocean-climate bandwagon to institutionalise oceans within climate governance. The Seychelles Conservation and Climate Adaptation Trust (SeyCCAT) is Seychelles' flagship Blue Economy initiative. This public-private trust fund was established by Seychelles' government in 2015 to manage the funds from a debt-for-nature swap with the UK, France, Belgium, and Italy facilitated by the Nature Conservancy and philanthropists such as Leonardo DiCaprio which saw a reduction in Seychelles' sovereign debt by US\$21.6 m (WOI, 2020).

This paper explores how the mobilisation of multiple geopolitical imaginaries has supported a particular manifestation of ocean-climate governance through the Blue Economy that emphasises the Seychellois government's priorities. It will argue that the Blue Economy has served as a geopolitical imaginary to underpin Seychelles' ocean-climate governance. This imaginary has, in turn, facilitated three distinct, but intersecting, geopolitical island imaginaries. These are described as island imaginaries as islandness is central to the discourses which underpin them. Among these imaginaries, there is a tension between the construction of Seychelles' as an island state of pristine nature in which climate-ocean governance experiments can be conducted and a "large oceanic state" of geopolitical significance. The Government of Seychelles' engagement with the Blue Economy offers an insight into the geopolitics of ocean-climate governance from SIDS. Seychelles has sought to instigate a shift in the understanding and governance of SIDS by using the Blue Economy to highlight their oceanic and terrestrial territory.

2. Blue Economy, Islands and critical geopolitics

This section firstly reviews contemporary literature on the Blue Economy within human geography and the social sciences more broadly which draws on a range of theoretical perspectives. Secondly, it outlines how work in critical geopolitics on the role of discourse in constructing geopolitical imaginaries can be useful for understanding the Blue Economy.

Coined in 2010 by entrepreneur Gunter Pauli, the Blue Economy concept was initially focused on stimulating entrepreneurship and raising standards for sustainability beyond ocean spaces. Subsequently, understandings of the term have shifted. Building on sustainability discourses from the 1987 Brundtland Report, the Blue Economy concept emerged within international discussions on environmental governance leading up to the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro (Voyer et al., 2018). Understandings of the Blue Economy place a focus on economic production with the World Bank (2017) defining it as the "sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods and jobs, and ocean ecosystem health". Moreover, the Blue Economy has been constructed as a framework to help with climate mitigation and adaptation via ocean-based renewable energy and blue carbon storage in ocean and coastal ecosystems (Agrippine, et al., 2014). However, definitional heterogeneity has proliferated with multiple interpretations of the concept promoted by international actors (Smith-Godfrey, 2016; Voyer et al. 2018). Multiple manifestations of "blueness" have propagated within the governance of island states worldwide in polities like the French Pacific territories, Kiribati, and New Zealand (Silver et al., 2015; Maclellan, 2018; Mallin, 2018; Bargh, 2014). Indeed, Voyer et al. (2018) argue that "perhaps the one universally agreed aspect of the Blue Economy is that it is a fluid concept, employed differently in different contexts by different actors" (pp. 598), with Silver et al. (2015) identifying four competing discourses focusing on oceans as: natural capital, good business, integral to Pacific SIDS and small-scale fisheries livelihoods.

Geographers have been increasingly attentive towards oceanic matters (e.g., Mansfield, 2001; Sievanen et al., 2013; Steinberg and Peters, 2015). Over the past decade, there has been a coordinated international effort, primarily by scientists and conservationists from the Global North, for a global system of marine protected areas (MPAs) to

counter ocean degradation (Gray et al., 2014). Large MPAs are a space in which struggles over ocean governance are particularly apparent (Gruby et al., 2016) both within territorial waters (Mallin et al. 2019) and on the high seas (Gray, 2018). Despite this growing body of literature, Bear (2017) notes "human geographers' engagement with the Blue Economy [is] almost non-existent" (pp. 29). Notable exceptions include Silver et al.'s (2015) aforementioned paper considering the competing discourses surrounding the Blue Economy, and Garland et al.'s (2019) meta-analysis of published work on the Blue Economy. They argue existing literature has failed to theorise key geographical concepts such as space, place, scale, and power relations. Winder and Le Heron (2017) reverberate this in their call for geographers to critically engage with the Blue Economy arguing the concept has been used to enrol oceans, coasts and marine resources into new economic assemblages thereby changing the spaces, scale, and dynamics by which natural resources are enlisted into the economy. In response to Winder and Le Heron, Morrissey (2017, p. 44), asks whether "a social and cultural critique of the Blue Economy will expand the current knowledge base of our oceans and seas? Or will it be a narrative built on a critique of the research done to date in other disciplines". Echoing Morrissey's concerns, Choi (2017) argues geographers should be cautious about their consideration of the Blue Economy as its ambiguity and flexibility raises questions of knowledge, space, and power as the concept travels. She stresses geographers should "pay attention to the actual processes through which the ether of the Blue Economy touches ground, not simply as an economic project but as a specific mechanism of government in a particular geographic context" (p. 40). Concern over the specific mechanisms of government of the Blue Economy have led to calls that highlight a need for a "much greater engagement with the political nature of ocean and coastal management and governance" (Bennett, 2019a, p.68). Bennett (2018, 2019b) emphasises the inadequate attention paid to issues of social justice and inclusion in relation to the ocean, and the necessity of evidence-based decision making to understand the human dimension of coastal management.

Although this growing body of literature is increasingly critiquing the Blue Economy, this paper suggests there has been a neglect of the geopolitical component of the Blue Economy. Reflecting on the concerns of Choi (2017), Bennett (2019a), Garland et al. (2019), Winder and Le Heron (2017), this paper argues that the Blue Economy acts not only as a specific mechanism of government but constitutes, and relies upon, a series of geopolitical imaginaries, whose spatiality and power relations can be analysed through engagement with literature in critical geopolitics. Critical geopolitics can offer a crucial toolkit to assess the role of the discourse in constructing the geopolitical imaginaries which underpin the Blue Economy. Within critical geopolitics, scholars have been attentive to the power-knowledge nexus in discourse and the possibility of seeing geopolitics as both material and discursive (Dalby, 1991). Gregory (2004, p.17) argues that "we might think of imaginative geographies as fabrications, a word that usefully combines 'something fictionalized' and 'something made real,' because they are imaginations given substance". In the context of the Blue Economy, imaginaries fold together fiction and reality, the material and the discursive (Dalby, 1991) and are invoked to justify particular forms of ocean-climate governance. In their consideration of geopolitics and discourse in American foreign policy, Ó Tuathail and Agnew (1992, p. 202) argue that contemporary geography must play a role "in deconstructing its own vocabulary and critically exploring the forms of practical geopolitical reasoning that circulate within states". This paper extends this approach to the Blue Economy in Seychelles to demonstrate the utility of taking a critical geopolitics approach to unpacking the island imaginaries of ocean-climate governance.

As argued by Sharp (2020, p.47), "geopolitical discourse is clearly linked to identity formation. All those on the inside have particular character traits (or should have, in this normative vision) which are completely at odds with those of the outside". This inside/outside binary is present in island imaginaries, with the ocean providing a clear

spatial demarcation which can be utilised by actors within their policy decisions. Mountz (2015, p.636) argues that “islands evoke infinite imaginaries, from dreams of development, escape, and exoticism to exploitation and imprisonment”. Climate change and sea level rise are prominent within the geopolitical imaginaries of SIDS with states like the Maldives becoming a synecdoche for climate change (Hirsch, 2015). As argued by Dittmer and Sharp (2014, p.5), “critical geopolitics [sees] language as the building blocks from which reality emerged. Geopolitics, then, can be understood as a discourse through which the world is made intelligible”. Yet the world is made intelligible through discourses which rarely feature islander voices, with “those identified as imminent climate refugees...being held up like ventriloquists to present a particular (western) crisis of nature” (Farbotko and Lazarus, 2012, p. 382). Scholars have highlighted how silencing islander voices within these imaginaries closes down alternative geopolitical futures. Ratter (2018, p.189) argues “vulnerability itself is a Western concept based on the perspective of islands as peripheral”. As emphasised by Agnew (2003, p.9) “the modern geopolitical imagination has, however, provided meaning and rationalization to practice by political elites the world over”. Seychelles’ elites, whilst reinforcing these hegemonic geopolitical imaginaries in some respects, have also sought to subvert them by using the Blue Economy to emphasise Seychelles’ extensive territory and present Seychelles as a key player in ocean governance.

Silver and Campbell (2018), focusing on Seychelles, explore how SIDS’ Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) are understood as a frontier for conservation and development in relation to the post-2015 sustainable development agenda. They argue Seychelles’ debt-for-nature swap is “a product of, and inseparable from, a much longer geopolitical and political-economic history of SIDS” (p.250). Within the article, they focus on the macroeconomic circumstances of the swap, the governance implications, and negotiations of the Paris Club. Given the proliferation of the Blue Economy concept among SIDS, this paper takes a critical geopolitics approach as outlined above. As such, it draws upon and aligns with Dodds’ (2013, p.1) understanding of geopolitics as he asks “How does geopolitics work? One way to answer this question is to focus attention on the representation of geographical space.”.

Silver and Campbell (2018) identify that “research that examines how the Swap rolls out and that documents the perspectives of people within affected communities, TNC, and the Government of Seychelles is urgently needed to complement our analysis but is beyond the scope of our work” (p. 243). Through a focus on elite interviews in Seychelles, this paper seeks to complement their work and explore a different perspective on the perceived geopolitical logics which underpin Seychelles’ Blue Economy. This paper is based on research undertaken in Seychelles in June and July 2017. Nineteen semi-structured elite interviews were conducted with participants from NGOs, Seychelles’ government ministries, high commissions and embassies, international organisations, and the private sector. This research focused on stakeholders located within Seychelles itself as opposed to actors such as diplomats posted overseas and representatives of the Nature Conservancy. A snowball sample was utilised, with two initial gatekeepers, one diplomat and an NGO representative. Snowball samples generate a “unique type of social knowledge that is emergent, political and interactional” leading to dynamic moments that allow insights into the social production of knowledge (Noy, 2008, p. 327). However, this sampling strategy relies on the social and professional networks of gatekeepers and thus may exclude some relevant stakeholders. Alongside this, specific institutions, ministries, and diplomatic representatives were approached to ensure coverage of key stakeholders beyond the network of the gatekeepers.

All interviews were conducted in English with interviews lasting between thirty minutes and two hours. Open questions were asked covering themes such as the Blue Economy, climate governance and Seychelles’ foreign policy. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants except for former President James Michel.

“Elites” is not an unproblematic categorisation of participants. Smith

(2006) disputes the anticipated dynamic of power, stressing the importance of researchers in identifying their positionality and limits to reflexivity. However, it is important to move beyond elites as merely a descriptor of “powerful” actors and think about elites as a concept to elucidate understandings of the operation of power relations (Woods, 1998). Subsequently, Woods (1998, p.2108) argues elites can be regarded as possessing the following characteristics: “privileged access to, or control over, particular resources which may be mobilised in the exercise of power or influence”; “linked by a network of social or professional relations, performed in exclusive back-region spaces”; “socially and discursively constructed as an elite, either by themselves or by others”. In this paper, “elites” encapsulates policymakers, politicians or diplomats who are involved either within environmental governance structures or Seychelles’ foreign relations.

While elites may, due to their rhetorical and social skills, merely reproduce public relation talking points, their proximity to events and subjective accounts of foreign policy is a valuable resource (Richards, 1996; Kuus, 2013). Although this approach provides rich empirics for considering Seychelles’ foreign policy, it does not explore everyday understandings of the Blue Economy which, whilst ripe for future research, lie beyond the scope of this paper. This research was conducted following ethical approval from the central University’s research ethics committee and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Interviews were transcribed by the researcher, with care taken to note the tone, hesitations, and more-than-verbal components. Analysis began during the fieldwork process with initial coding, with these emergent codes guiding subsequent data collection.

The structure of this paper is as follows. Initially, it will consider how the Blue Economy has been constructed as a geopolitical imaginary by Seychelles’ Government before turning to three geopolitical imaginaries which underpin the Blue Economy. Firstly, Seychelles has been portrayed as a “pristine island state” thereby justifying external support to “save” Seychelles’ environment. Secondly, Seychelles has been constructed as a space of island experimentation by which novel policies and initiatives can be trialled in a low-risk, small scale manner. Thirdly, it explores how these renditions of smallness come into conflict with the discourse of Seychelles as a “large oceanic state” that disrupts discourses of “smallness”.

3. Seychelles and the Blue Economy Imaginary

In the early 2010s, the then Seychelles’ president James Michel began to construct the Blue Economy as a geopolitical imaginary which could be used to frame sustainable management of Seychelles’ economy. According to Michel’s book, “Rethinking the Oceans: Towards the Blue Economy” (2016), the concept refers to sustainable ocean governance to meet human needs and incorporates a broad range of values concerning the environment and climate change, sustainable development, security, and international cooperation. Reflecting the enhanced decision-making capacity of political leaders within SIDS, Michel played a pivotal role in supporting, developing, and championing the Blue Economy imaginary internationally and domestically (Hey, 2002). Jasper, an academic working in Seychelles, stated:

[Michel] really saw the potential and having that powerful ambassador or mentor for the program has been incredibly important. So, he was able to come back and as President just develop the department of the Blue Economy, just develop a research institute, a foundation. (Interview, 10/07/2017).

Michel promoted the Blue Economy within Seychelles’ by using his influence as President to institutionalise the imaginary. He did this both within and beyond Seychelles’ state apparatus, creating a Blue Economy government department, establishing the James Michel Blue Economy Research Institute within the University of Seychelles, and promoting the Blue Economy via the James Michel Foundation. Michel’s role in institutionalising the Blue Economy can be understood through

Kingdon's (2011) multiple streams framework which envisages political decision making as the culmination of events in three separate process streams: problems, policies, and politics. The policy stream is described as a community within which ideas and proposals float around, "much as molecules floated around in what biologists call the primeval soup", with policy entrepreneurs investing their time, reputation, and money to promote a particular position in anticipation of future gains (Kingdon, 2011, p. 145; Palmer, 2014). Michel, in his conceptualisation of the Blue Economy, acted as a policy entrepreneur investing significant political capital in promoting a particular form of ocean-climate governance in expectation of future economic prosperity and environmental protection for Seychelles.

As a geopolitical imaginary, Blue Economy has been utilised to frame economic and environmental issues. Framing is a "way of selecting, organizing, interpreting, and making sense of a complex reality so as to provide guideposts for knowing, analysing, persuading and acting... in short, this strategy serves to render knowable not just problems, but also potential solutions to those problems" (Gieryn, 1983, p. 782). The Government of Seychelles' framing of the Blue Economy has integrated ocean governance, sustainable development, and security. Encompassing terrestrial space, as well as ocean space, The Government of Seychelles' Blue Economy framing highlights the interconnectedness of islands, economy, and ocean. Bear (2017) argues that the Blue Economy can offer an opportunity to challenge the ontological separation of land and sea by the conceptualisation of "marine space". However, the Seychellois Government's construction of the Blue Economy as a geopolitical imaginary extends further to incorporate the atmosphere and climate change as governable alongside land and sea. Seychelles elites' rendering of the Blue Economy has focused on an island-ocean-climate nexus that emphasise the interconnectedness between oceans and climate. By placing such a prominent focus on climate-ocean governance, the Blue Economy imaginary seeks to render the climate as a tangible object of ocean governance to the material benefit of Seychelles. This construction of the Blue Economy is not merely an example of a travelling policy, but a deliberate imaginary by the Seychellois elite to advance their own geopolitical interests. Such an understanding of the Blue Economy has not only been utilised domestically but also has underpinned Seychelles' image internationally.

Seychellois politicians and diplomats have utilised this construction of the Blue Economy, and its institutionalisation within Seychelles' domestic environmental governance, as a means of nation branding. The state's image is a "fluid, socially constructed view of a nation which exists on both the domestic and foreign level" with nation branding describing the phenomenon of a state consciously promoting its activities to construct a brand to attract capital and investment (Saunders, 2017, p. 13; Bolin and Stahlberg, 2010; Fan, 2010). As president, Michel facilitated Seychelles' association with, and promotion of, the Blue Economy as a distinctive attribute of the Seychellois state itself, beyond his own association, thereby seeking to transform the Seychellois state into a policy entrepreneur polity (Hey, 2002; Kingdon, 2011). As a policy entrepreneur polity, Michel hoped for Seychelles to become known as an entity willing to invest the resources, time, and reputation in the Blue Economy. As such, the Blue Economy imaginary has served as a framework for domestic governance and a tangible asset to underpin international framings of Seychelles. Seychelles' promotion of the Blue Economy has served as a form of niche diplomacy by which Seychelles' association with the Blue Economy transcends its diplomatic network and is also promoted by other regional and global organisations (Graham, 2017; Fan, 2010; Saunders, 2017). Thus, the promotion of a particular imaginary of the Blue Economy has formed the backbone of Seychelles' engagement with organisations such as the African Union, the Alliance of Small Island States, and the Commonwealth on ocean-climate governance.

Seychelles' nation branding has not only focused on its domestic engagement with the Blue Economy but its leadership within the international community on ocean governance. Jasper, an academic

working in Seychelles, stated:

[Early adaptation] enabled Seychelles to become a big fish in the Blue Economy very quickly, locally, and set us apart internationally so we were then viewed differently... we were perceived as being fairly advanced on the idea. (Interview, 10/07/2017).

The Government of Seychelles' construction of the Blue Economy as a specific manifestation of the island-ocean-climate nexus has created conceptual space for its policy initiatives to be presented as novel solutions to global ocean-climate governance challenges. Here, Michel and the Seychellois state were aided by the ambiguity, openness and flexibility of the Blue Economy imaginary. Choi (2017) argues the Blue Economy opens up new governable spaces and rationalises particular ways of governing that space "which fundamentally change how we perceive sea space and dispose things and relations in that space" (p. 38). The incorporation of climatic issues alongside ocean governance created a new nexus of governable space by which Seychelles' policy initiatives can solve particular framings of environmental problems. Lorraine, a government representative, stated:

The Blue Economy, it does offer a lot of new opportunities. Usually with these new opportunities, you have to start with some flagship projects, pilot projects, and show that there is a return in it. (Interview, 30/06/2017)

In order to "prove" the utility of Seychelles' construction of the Blue Economy, policy initiatives are promoted as novel and valuable. Key to this has been the implementation, and promotion, of flagship initiatives such as SeyCCAT, by which the Blue Economy approach is portrayed as reconfiguring societal-environmental interactions around ocean-climate governance thereby leading to new forms of economic development. SeyCCAT is described as:

"a ground-breaking debt conversion for marine conservation and climate adaptation [which] was initiated and structured with the Seychelles government. As a result, SeyCCAT was created to manage the blended capital proceeds from the debt conversion and, in exchange, the Seychelles government committed to improved policies and increased investment around marine conservation and climate adaptation" (SeyCCAT, 2019).

Seychelles, with help from the Nature Conservancy and its impact investing unit NatureVest, raised impact capital and philanthropic grants to achieve a US\$21.6 million debt conversion through a debt-for-nature swap which saw Seychelles protect 210,000 km² of the ocean (SeyCCAT, 2019). Through this, SeyCCAT aims to grant at least US \$750,000 per annum "to support the stewardship of Seychelles' ocean resources, island life and blue economy" (2019). Seychelles' debt swap and the subsequent establishment of SeyCCAT have been promoted as an implementation of the Blue Economy. Since its foundation, SeyCCAT's remit has broadened to include the management of Blue Bonds issued by the Seychellois government which raised US\$15 million to finance marine and ocean activities (World Bank, 2018). The fluidity, ambiguity and openness of the Blue Economy concept (Garland et al., 2019), has allowed the Seychellois state to discursively construct a particular imaginary of the Blue Economy which facilitates their diplomatic goals and secure financial support. Within Seychelles, this discursive Blue Economy and subsequent policies have rested upon three distinct but interconnected imaginaries: Seychelles as a pristine island state, Seychelles as an island of experimentation and Seychelles as a large oceanic state.

4. Pristine island state

Dominant imaginaries of islands see them as spaces of exoticism, romanticism and remoteness that host pristine nature which have resulted in particular forms of environmental governance (Mountz, 2015). In Seychelles, colonial imaginaries of islands as sites of natural

beauty have been appropriated, reworked, and deployed via various forms of situated agency to serve as valuable cultural resources within the luxury tourist industry (Kothari and Wilkinson, 2010). Whilst these reworked imaginaries are being utilised by actors in SIDS, they continue to occupy the same conceptual spaces as colonial discourses as opposed to actively producing new understandings and alternative representations.

Yvonne, from a sustainable development NGO, stated: “tourism and the environment work hand in hand so you cannot attract tourists unless you have this pristine environment, that cannot be found elsewhere” (Interview, 03/07/2017). As illustrated by Yvonne, Seychelles’ construction as a space of pristine nature rests on a uniqueness that cannot be found elsewhere to attract international tourists. Whilst focused on the tourist industry, the marketing of Seychelles as a space of pristine nature has percolated into environmental governance. Internationally, Seychelles is perceived as a space of beauty deserving of protection due to its pristine islands. The government has utilised this geopolitical island imaginary alongside contemporary environmental policy to project itself as proactive within environmental governance. Amita, from an international development body, stated:

We have always managed to conserve pretty much half of our landmass. It is still green, we have a lot of national parks... we have been actively looking at and enabling the image and the environment and putting in place the laws to protect [it] (Interview, 10/07/2017)

Historically, the construction of Seychelles as a space of pristine nature has focused on the terrestrial and the high percentage of protected land area. These “green” credentials have been reinforced by the imagery of lush tropical forests that dominate Seychelles’ protected areas. Under the Blue Economy, this geopolitical imaginary of Seychelles as an island nation of pristine nature has been extended to the marine stressing the ecological significance of Seychelles’ waters. Under the debt-for-nature swap, a commitment was made to increase Seychelles’ protected waters from < 1 % to 30 % (SeyCCAT, 2019). Images of Seychelles’ greenery that reinforce common perceptions of what “nature” should be are increasingly supplemented by “blue” nature such as coral and beaches. These island imaginaries, supported by a reputation of proactive environmental legislation, have been mobilised to galvanise support for Seychelles as a site for innovative climate policies. Former President James Michel, speaking about the state’s reputation, commented:

We just have to promote it still more, to show what we are and what we can do to maintain and protect that... what we have is not only for us but for the world to come and see and enjoy. Perhaps it is one part of the only parts of the world that is still pristine and can be enjoyed by other countries as well. (Interview, 05/07/2017)

This geopolitical island imaginary is being promulgated by elites not only as a resource to promote Seychelles but also as a justification for external support to protect a space that is “still pristine” as a common good that should be preserved for humanity, not just for the Seychellois. Moreover, this justification for support rests on a discourse of Seychelles’ exceptionalism in its protection of nature. Gray (2018, p.268) argues that a “range of scientific and technical representations laid foundation for an imaginative geography of high seas as a space that is both in need of conservation action and amenable to the spatial logic management typically reserved for state territory”. These scientific and technical representations are supplemented by moral arguments, around the necessity of protecting such spaces for wider publics. Notably, Michel is not proposing extending existing environmental protection measures but merely increasing international awareness by the perceived need to “promote it still more”.

This geopolitical imaginary of Seychelles as a space of pristine nature is not always reflected in the lived experiences of Seychellois in the environmental sphere. Louise, from a Seychellois environmental NGO, stated:

There are lots of contradictions, developments taken place that seem to undermine this ethic of environmental sustainability and concern for climate change... Seychelles has licensed out most of our waters for oil exploration, so in one way we are out there in international conferences fighting climate change and on the other hand, we are making money selling licenses (Interview, 19/06/2017)

Seychelles’ continued development, particularly through hydrocarbon contracts, contradicts its tropical pristine image. Voyer et al. (2018) note the debate surrounding the inclusion of carbon-intensive industries within the Blue Economy. SeyCCAT’s states that:

“Oil companies have been exploring the ocean for hydrocarbon deposits since the 1960 s, an activity that is ongoing, along with a search for minerals found in poly-metallic nodules. The ocean as a source of clean, renewable energy and sustainable power for a small, remote island nation is also being studied” (2019)

Continuing hydrocarbon exploration within Seychellois waters juxtaposes with the Blue Economy’s focus on preserving ocean ecosystems, sustainable development, and Seychelles’ vulnerability to climate change. Despite the discourses of sustainability surrounding the Blue Economy, hydrocarbon extraction continues to feature within Seychelles’ imagined future economy. Whilst acknowledged by SeyCCAT’s literature, hydrocarbon exploitation is glossed over with an attempt at reconciling it by emphasising how the ocean is being “studied” for renewable energy options. Tension remain between the “Blueness” and conservation and the “Economy” extractions of the Blue Economy. Following the signing of a petroleum exploration agreement in 2022, now Seychellois President Ramkalawan said “we firmly believe we can do both: conserve and develop at the same time” (Joubert-Lawen, 2022). These tensions are brushed aside as elites and institutions, by selectively drawing upon environmental governance, have sought to exclude particular aspects of Seychelles’ economy from the global geopolitical imaginary of Seychelles as an environmentally engaged state. Here we see the disjuncture between the discursive component of the island imaginary as a discursive exercise and the material reality. The fictionalized component of Seychelles’ proactive environmental governance which has been ‘made real’ through the Blue Economy (Gregory, 2004). Experimental climate and ocean policies remain a key component within this geopolitical imaginary of Seychelles’ proactive approach to environmental governance.

5. Island of experimentation

Small states, particularly postcolonial states, are often depicted as having limited international influence due to economic, diplomatic, bureaucratic, and cultural resource limitations (Bailes, 2009). Despite this, scholars have explored the creative strategies that small states such as Singapore (Chong, 2010) have employed to enhance their influence with Gruby and Campbell (2013) exploring how Palau has mobilised the Pacific Region to overcome imagined smallness. “Smallness”, rather than restricting small states, can empower them as “more positive renderings of smallness in constructing state identities will entail broader possibilities for foreign policies” (Browning, 2006, p.674). Research has suggested that although climate change is a foreign policy priority for many SIDS, their efforts remain restricted by broader geopolitical discourses of marginality (McNamara, 2009; Farbotko, 2010; Heileman, 1993). The nature of Seychelles’ islands as small and separated by vast expanses of ocean has helped to create a perception of marginality within the international sphere. Nevertheless, Seychelles has drawn upon contemporary discourses of SIDS as “sovereign extremes” and “micro-states” to render its smallness as a positive attribute for conducting experimental environmental governance to overcome discourses of marginality (Sharman, 2017).

Islands have long been constructed as peripheral spaces in which mainstream ideas and orthodoxies can be tested, with islands such as

Iceland being constructed as an “island laboratory” (Baldacchino, 2007; Greenhough, 2011). Colonial imaginaries have seen islands constructed as experimental sites of utopian visions (Connell, 2003). Crucially, within Seychelles’ construction as an island of experimentation “smallness” has been rendered a key desirable asset rather than a limitation. An environmental policymaker Remi, when asked why ocean-climate policies were trialled in Seychelles suggested, “there is an interest in small islands as places where you can experiment with new approaches to doing business. So, they come as a litmus test” (Interview, 30/06/2017).

Traditionally, the small economy of SIDS would be seen as a deterrent for some foreign investors due to the perceived vulnerability to external shocks and limited opportunities for returns on investments. Within the Blue Economy framework, Seychelles’ small economy has been promoted as an asset, rather than a liability, for testing innovative climate governance mechanisms which are deemed to be high-risk. Arthur, a representative of SeyCCAT, when asked about the attractiveness of Seychelles, stated:

Size of the country makes a difference... investors will screen the risk of their investment and it all comes down to the risk factor. So, projects like we are running here are generally seen as quite high-risk as you are dealing with marine management, fisheries management, all exposed to many exogenous factors, climate being one of them... but there is enough appetite in the impact market... to say we need to test this because it is a mechanism that could be scalable elsewhere. (Interview, 04/07/2017)

Within global discourses, SIDS have been considered especially vulnerable to natural and anthropogenic hazards and are stylised as flagship spaces of climate change and environmental pressure neglecting broader histories of resilience (Ratter, 2018). Challenging this discourse of vulnerability, Seychelles’ “smallness” has been rendered as a valuable asset to provide a manageable space for experimental governance. By limiting the amount of capital exposed to risk, Seychelles is presented as a desirable space for novel initiatives to be trialled because they will be small enough to fail. Although popular during the late 1980s and early 1990s, debt-for-nature swaps have declined in number to around two per year since 2000 (Deacon and Murphy, 1997; Sheikh, 2010). Seychelles’ ocean focus has attempted to cultivate a sense of uniqueness and experimentation by distinguishing its debt-for-nature swap with previous terrestrial swaps. Furthermore, elites’ focus on the multilateral nature of the swap has sought to construct a distinctive discourse from the green bonds utilised elsewhere. Arthur, from SeyCCAT, stated:

It was the world’s first multilateral debt swap... this debt swap happened not just on [SIC] the creation of a new financial flow for the country but on the government making a commitment to protect 30 % of its marine area. (Interview, 4/07/2017)

Crucially, this projection of Seychelles as an experimental space of innovation has been linked to the Government of Seychelles’ nation branding which associates Seychelles with the Blue Economy. In doing so, Seychelles has been able to attract significant external funding from other states and international organisations to establish SeyCCAT to support ocean governance and climate adaptation (SeyCCAT, 2019). This discourse of innovation around the Blue Economy has been amplified by international organisations, like the Commonwealth, utilising Seychelles as an example of best practice. If initiatives are deemed “successful” they can be exported, scaled, and replicated in other SIDS and coastal states. Seychelles has henceforth been seen as an experimental island space to trial policies. Arthur, from SeyCCAT, stated:

Nature Conservancy... is looking at other places where it can replicate the model, and this is where it is now going to scale. The debt conversion has been shown mechanically it can be done here, it can be mechanically achieved elsewhere. (Interview, 04/07/2017)

Despite the confidence elites have in SeyCCAT’s transferability, it is worth questioning its scalability. Whilst Arthur highlights that “mechanically” the debt-for-nature swap can be achieved elsewhere, this neglects the wider geopolitical context behind its implementation. Not all states have the reputation, political leadership, or economic stability to implement debt-for-nature swaps. Emphasising the prospect of scalability acts as a persuasive strategy to entice other actors into supporting Seychelles who otherwise may not be interested in such mechanisms. Seychelles’ broader neoliberal reforms are a key component in its construction as an island of experimentation. Silver and Campbell (2018, p.252) question “would the Paris Club consider negotiating a swap with a government that was not already involved in a larger economic reform overseen by the IMF?”. Here, the notion of the island imaginary is useful in understanding Seychelles’ attractiveness as a site of experimentation. Material conditions facilitated by the IMF are enhanced and promoted through discourses of potential constructed by elites.

Seychelles’ diplomatic activities surrounding climate change and oceans are underpinned by the Blue Economy. Bueger and Wivel (2018, p.184) argue that by “experimenting with new ways of thinking, as exemplified in the story of the Blue Economy, the country could maximise its reputation, but also influence the international debate on ocean governance”. Elites have presented their domestic governance as experimental and novel to prove the utility of the Blue Economy framework. In doing so, they have sought to position Seychelles as a key site in the uneven geographies of scientific authority, in which knowledge on climate-ocean governance can be tried, tested, and tweaked (Mahony and Hulme, 2018). “Successful” policy initiatives not only demonstrate the value of the Blue Economy but reinforce Seychelles’ position as a space to test novel approaches to governing the island-ocean-climate nexus. This position is underpinned by contradictory discourse in which Seychelles is a unique island space to enact environmental governance whilst simultaneously providing a scalable example for other SIDS to replicate. Furthermore, by promoting Seychelles as a large oceanic state, elites have sought to demonstrate the Blue Economy’s applicability beyond SIDS.

6. Large oceanic state

Seychelles’ 115 islands constitute a landmass of just 455 km², making Seychelles the smallest African state (Veenendaal, 2014). Nevertheless, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) grants coastal states maritime jurisdictional zones based on delimited areas adjacent to certain baselines based on the low-water mark of large-scale coastal charts (Warner and Schofield, 2012). Consequently, island states can claim to be archipelagic states and thus define a baseline from which they can control a 200-nautical mile EEZ. As an archipelagic state, Seychelles’ EEZ is just under 1.4 million km². James Michel, referring to his role with the Alliance of Small Island States and GLISPA (Global Island Partnership), stated:

I refuse to call ourselves small island states [sic]. I call ourselves large oceanic states. Because look at Seychelles: we have 1.3 million square kilometres of ocean. So, that is a large expanse of ocean. So, we are a big state. (Interview, 05/07/2017)

Michel’s description of Seychelles as a “large oceanic state” is a recurring motif among Seychellois diplomacy. Initiatives such as SeyCCAT reinforce this, with Seychelles’ protection of 30 % of its EEZ forming part of the debt-for-nature swap. Therefore, SeyCCAT ties together ocean governance and protection, climate adaptation and Seychelles’ oceanic territory. Chan (2018, p.548) argues the process seeks “to ultimately make visible, manage and govern what it has always had authority over, but hitherto has not fully seen”. Seychelles has sought to demonstrate that policy experimentation within its jurisdiction not only resonates with other SIDS but coastal states more generally. Lorraine, a government representative, stated:

When we came out with Blue Economy, there were a lot of like-minded countries that identified with what we were doing, or were planning to do, moving forward. For example, New Zealand not a small island, Norway, not a small island, but they have been on that trajectory as well, so it was very like-minded countries speaking the same language. (Interview, 30/06/2017)

This comment represents a distinct dissociation between Seychelles and the category of SIDS. Highlighting its similarities with New Zealand and Norway reinforces the idea of Seychelles as a “large oceanic state” suggesting the Blue Economy can serve as a concept that Seychellois diplomats can use to engage with other states. [Voyer et al. \(2018, p.598\)](#) note that some SIDS (like Seychelles) have championed the notion of a Blue Economy, reframing their place in global economies as “Large Ocean States”. Seychelles’ construction as a “large oceanic state” appeals to continental states that also have large EEZs, thereby raising international interest in its policies.

Conservation is a key process by which this Blue Economy can be made visible. [Gruby et al. \(2016\)](#) highlight how large MPAs dwarf the size of islands and thus produce a newfound presence on global maps. However, Seychelles’ utilisation of its EEZ to construct itself as a “large oceanic state”, not only builds on environmental and economic discourses but also security. The Indian Ocean is increasingly prominent within geopolitical discourses as both China and India build up their naval presences and influences in the region alongside the established, and ongoing, role of the US ([Hornat, 2016](#)). Thus, Seychelles’ emphasis on its EEZ and regional security through the Blue Economy has tangible geopolitical consequences.

Within the Seychelles Blue Economy Policy [Framework and Roadmap \(2018\)](#), the document suggests Seychelles’ strategy is to “[incorporate] blue economy/ocean risks in national marine security strategies and regional cooperation to address the impacts of illegal activities, resource degradation and improved capacity for monitoring, control and surveillance (MCS)”. Piracy has featured prominently as a threat within Seychelles’ territorialisation of its ocean space. Jafari, a Seychellois diplomat, stated: “Seychelles has been faced with piracy which we took the lead again to fight [sic] piracy with other countries... our maritime space is vast, it has to be controlled” (Interview, 05/07/2017). Jafari draws attention to Seychelles performing international norms and expectations of how large states govern their territory by excluding coercive elements such as pirates from their marine space.

However, despite the prominence of security within the Blue Economy framework, Seychelles’ capacity to patrol, survey and monitor its EEZ remains constrained by its limited naval capability. As noted by [Chan \(2018\)](#), claims of ocean largeness of SIDS must be qualified by the challenges SIDS face in exercising sovereign control over their EEZs. Thus, Seychelles has relied on partnerships with larger powers and multilateral organisations as well as acting as a facilitator within anti-piracy efforts. Lorraine, a government representative, stated:

We have led on piracy, a lot of the results of the piracy conversation have ended up in Seychelles, for example, we have the main anti-piracy hub... a lot of the pirate prosecutions in the area in 2014/2015 came to Seychelles. So, we started to get a reputation internationally to be at the forefront of certain things. (Interview, 30/06/2017)

Among Western nations, there has been a lack of political will, and capacity, to prosecute captured Somali pirates within their domestic courts ([Kontorovich, 2010](#)). Given the reliance on national courts to prosecute pirates, Seychelles has acted as a willing partner signing a memorandum of understanding with the EU and prosecuting, convicting, and imprisoning 272 Somali pirates by early 2015 ([Gardner, 2012; Gilmer, 2017](#)). Consequently, Seychelles has built a reputation as a key actor in anti-piracy efforts in the Indian Ocean ([Bueger and Wivel, 2018](#)). Consequently, by framing its actions as a key component of its Blue Economy, Seychelles’ anti-piracy efforts have reinforced its

reputation in ocean governance more broadly. Lorraine argued:

[Seychelles’ action on piracy] has given us a bit more of an edge, we had been successful in getting the chairmanship of AOSIS (Alliance of Small Island States). So, people were looking towards us to guidance [sic], and leadership, and I think we need to continue that. (Interview, 30/06/2017)

Here, Seychelles’ anti-piracy actions are linked with its emergence as a leader within SIDS climate diplomacy. Rather than occupying the same conceptual space as colonial discourses of islands as remote, virgin, sparsely populated spaces, foreign policy elites are constructing Seychelles as a “large oceanic state” with geostrategic importance actively subverting and resisting these imaginaries. Rhetorical shifts are being supported by performed practices, like the piracy trials and convictions, which are helping Seychelles construct a new geopolitical imaginary. [Mountz \(2011\)](#) highlights how islands are used as sites of exclusion where sovereign and biopolitical power operate. Seychelles has actively engaged in a performance of its own sovereign power by detaining and trying pirates. Via these new performances, Seychelles is offering an alternative subaltern identity to the hegemonic political script of small tropical islands ([Sharp, 2011](#)).

By conforming to global norms on piracy, Seychelles has gained legitimacy as an international ocean governance actor. Sara, a Western diplomat, when asked about the EEZ, stated Seychelles is:

thinking about how to protect that, whether it is from pirates, drug smuggling, pollution, illegal fishing, [or] overfishing...it is vital that if they are going to develop the Blue Economy and extract value sustainably from their oceans, that they can control and protect it as well. (Interview, 23/06/2017)

As increasing attention is focused on the Indian Ocean, Seychelles has sought to emphasise the role of security within its construction of the Blue Economy. By extending the Blue Economy concept beyond merely environmental and economic concerns, Seychelles’ elites have sought to capitalise upon its anti-piracy reputation to reinforce the legitimacy of Seychelles as a large oceanic state. Orthodox geopolitical concerns based on state-based security for control of the Indian Ocean have been extended to encompass new areas of environmental change within the imaginary of the “large oceanic state”. Drawing upon the diplomatic capital generated by cooperating with regional and global partners on security, Seychelles has sought to position itself as a leader among SIDS within ocean governance. Emphasising Seychelles’ responsibilities and capabilities as a large oceanic state, Seychelles’ elites have sought to resist representations of SIDS as marginal international actors and instead demonstrate their importance within international diplomacy.

7. Conclusion

Within the four imaginaries identified in this paper, there remains considerable geopolitical tension between Seychelles as a large oceanic state and as a SIDS. Imaginaries of Seychelles as a series of pristine, tropical islands deserving of protection are mobilised alongside positive representations of its “smallness” as an asset for innovation, risk-taking and experimentation. Simultaneously, domestic innovations by local elites in collaboration with international practices such as the Blue Bond, SeyCCAT and anti-piracy operations have been used to construct Seychelles as a “large oceanic state” engaged in responsible ocean governance thereby resisting hegemonic discourses surrounding post-colonial SIDS. Seychelles is presented as a unique site of experimentation, yet policies tested there are promoted as transferable to other larger states. Mobilising these multiple geopolitical imaginaries has helped depict Seychelles as small enough for risk-taking in ocean-climate governance but large enough for policies to remain attractive to other states. Attractiveness remains a fragile and transient characteristic that has been carefully cultivated through discourses and continued performances focusing on the perceived ability to transfer

Seychelles' policies elsewhere but also the uniqueness of Seychelles as a space in need of protection. Consequently, Seychelles has attracted investment from international actors who want to experiment with ocean-climate governance. Marshalling the Blue Economy to frame ocean-climate governance has sought to reconcile this tension between "smallness" and "largeness". This is evidenced by the flagship Blue Economy policy, SeyCCAT, which has linked the perceived vulnerabilities of a SIDS with the economic opportunities of a large oceanic territory. These tensions matter as they show the careful balance for actors in the Global South wishing to appropriate colonial geopolitical imaginaries of natural spaces in need of saving for their own benefit and the desire to be recognised as partners within global environmental governance enacting sovereignty over their territory.

The geopolitical identities of Seychelles are defined by competing binary imaginaries: water and land, blue and green; large and small. These conflicting descriptors have arisen as an attempt to transcend the categorisation of Seychelles solely as a SIDS and reflect a sovereign state whose elites are constructing multiple identities which attend to its equally complex national interests. Through the mobilisation of the Blue Economy, the Seychellois government is attempting to alleviate concerns around future climate impacts, conservation, and ocean governance. Utilising the Blue Economy, it has sought to transform these threats into a governable and, economically profitable, phenomena. Since fieldwork was undertaken in 2017, SeyCCAT has continued to underpin Seychelles' ocean-climate governance through a "blue" framing. Following its call for proposals for the Blue Grants Fund in 2017, the first projects were financed in June 2018 with the first full funding cycle ending in 2020 (SeyCCAT, 2020). Under the label of "The Seychelles Model", Seychelles launched its first US\$15 m Blue Bond which is administered by SeyCCAT (SeyCCAT, 2020).

Geographers should pay close attention to the geopolitical imaginaries underpinning the Blue Economy. Critical geopolitics can provide a useful theoretical toolkit and this paper provides a case study which considers the representation of climate change within geopolitics beyond the Global North (Manzo and Padfield, 2016). As demonstrated through the intentional focus on governance of oceanic space, the Government of Seychelles has mobilised multiple imaginaries under the Blue Economy to simultaneously challenge the geopolitical assumptions of SIDS as remote, small polities of limited significance whilst also drawing upon long-established island imaginaries. Havice and Zalik (2018) argue that oceans are simultaneously conceptualised as spaces that are separate from the terrestrial, ungoverned, or under-governed, and as sites which may be protected from or incorporated into market relations. Similarly, climate change, and its impacts on oceans, is seen as both a potential threat to coastal economic activity and as an opportunity to leverage climate adaptation funding. Not only does the Blue Economy challenge the ontological separation of land and sea, but through the island-ocean-climate nexus, it creates a new governable space. "Strategies of power always require the use of space and, thus, the use of discourses to create particular spatial images, primarily of territory and boundaries in statecraft, is inseparable from the formation and use of power" (Sharp, 1993, p. 492). Through the discursive construction of this new space, the Blue Economy imaginary is utilised a strategy of power of SIDS to overcome perceived "smallness". Emphasising the blue aspect of environmental governance shifts attention away from the terrestrial green, thereby emphasising the significance of SIDS as environmental actors as custodians of vast marine space.

Ocean governance approaches, like large MPAs, can help SIDS to push back against the colonial legacies of smallness and globalisation that threaten to undermine their autonomy and authority (Gruby et al., 2016; Gruby and Campbell, 2013). This paper extends this argument, to suggest that these initiatives also push back against pessimistic discourses of environmental degradation through climate change which may threaten the livelihoods of SIDS. Denton (2017, p.70) argues that "struggles in the Pacific Islands over climate change governance reflect larger questions about the role of states in shaping their own futures,

especially as many of these states are reliant on external project funding". Critical geopolitics can bring a focus to the material and the discursive aspects of these questions and the relationship between them (Dalby, 1991). As well as creating new opportunities for SIDS to reduce their dependence on external funding, ocean governance approaches also allow SIDS to exert agency over the geopolitical imaginaries of their climate futures thereby facilitating conditions for attracting future funding.

Crucial to this is the broadening of ocean-climate governance to incorporate more traditional security issues which attract the attention of external powers. Via its anti-piracy efforts and security cooperation, Seychelles has promoted itself as a large oceanic state and vital partner in the Indian Ocean enacting sovereign control over its waters. Through this broader conceptualisation, key issues around climate adaptation and conservation are placed on parity with security. Bueger and Wivel argue (2018, p.183) "the success of Seychellois diplomacy depends on playing within the confines of great power discourses and taking advantage of these in its own policy proposals". They identify that factors such as "location, expertise, culture and smart strategies make a major difference [to diplomacy]" (2018, p. 183). This paper argues that in addition to these factors, the construction and maintenance of multiple geopolitical imaginaries is an important component in understanding how SIDS engage in diplomacy.

However, it is worth reflecting on the limits of SIDS' agency. Given the significant role of NGOs within projects like SeyCCAT, do these new forms of ocean-climate governance merely reconfigure existing power relations? Mallin et al. (2019) argue that Kiribati has relinquished significant control over its territorial waters to access financial compensation. SeyCCAT, however, has a governance structure which "envision[s] for Seychelles' ocean and islands to be stewarded by the people of Seychelles" (SeyCCAT, 2021). To what degree is the SeyCCAT model transferable to other polities? Silver and Campbell (2018) question whether Seychelles remains a unique case regarding its debt-to-nature swap due to its economic reforms. As argued within this paper, the implementation of SeyCCAT has rested not just upon Seychelles' economic characteristics but upon geopolitical imaginaries.

This paper highlights the need to interrogate and critique the assumptions which underpin the category of SIDS and their broader role in climate geopolitics. Islands are crucial spaces in which the governance of climate change is imagined, conceptualised, and enacted. Given the predictions of continuing and intensifying climate change, geographers must consider how geopolitical imaginaries are being mobilised and contested within SIDS environmental governance. Returning to Dodds' (2013, p.1) question "How does geopolitics work?", this article has demonstrated through its focus on "elites", the necessity of being attentive to how multiple geopolitical imaginaries are scripted by elite actors.

As policy entrepreneurs (Kingdon, 2011) elite actors from SIDS subvert and co-opt wider geopolitical imaginaries of the state to their own advantage. However, in addition to acting as policy entrepreneurs, this paper argues that elites have drawn upon and subverted geopolitical imaginaries to transform the state itself into a policy entrepreneur polity. Thereby, island states have been constructed as ideal spaces to test experimental climate and ocean policy thereby both attracting support for domestic projects and bolstering the international reputation of the state. Although partial, interviews allow an insight into the rationales, perceptions and understandings of elites who play a key role in ocean-climate governance. In doing so, this provides a better understanding not only about the imaginaries themselves but how and why these are promoted by key stakeholders. Moreover, interviews with elites do not shed light on the possible tensions between how the Blue Economy is mobilised within geopolitical discourses and potential disconnects from climate change adaptation or mitigation on the ground. Further research is needed to consider how these elite discourses shape everyday understandings of the Blue Economy and the category of SIDS.

Beyond SIDS, the incorporation of oceanic space within imaginaries

of the state, economic activity and governance has proliferated across the globe from the South China Sea to the Arctic. These new oceanic imaginaries intersect with contemporary climate geopolitics, as the ocean is increasingly recognised as a key space in climate governance. Geographers are well placed to critique and unpack the geopolitical imaginaries which underpin such interactions.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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