

Reconceptualizing Statehood: A Critical Analysis of Contemporary State Definitions and an Alternative Framework

Mosab Hawarey

Alumnus, University of Wales, mhawarey@my.wales.ac.uk

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Abstract

The definition of statehood remains a foundational yet contested concept in international law and political theory. This paper critically examines the prevailing definitions of the state, with particular focus on the Montevideo Convention criteria that have dominated international legal discourse since 1933. Through systematic analysis of scholarly definitions and international legal frameworks, this study identifies significant conceptual and practical limitations in current approaches to defining statehood, particularly regarding issues of self-referentiality, subjective recognition, and inadequate standardization. Drawing upon political theory, international law, and state formation literature, this paper proposes an alternative definition grounded in five objective criteria: territorial existence, population presence, territorial sustainability, defensive capacity, and institutional differentiation from society. This reconceptualization offers more rigorous analytical framework that addresses the shortcomings of recognition-based approaches while providing clearer standards for assessing statehood claims. The implications of this alternative framework for international relations, state recognition practices, and contested sovereignty cases are discussed.

Keywords: Statehood Definition; State Formation; Montevideo Convention; International Law; Sovereignty; State Recognition; Political Theory.

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1. Introduction

The state represents the primary organizing unit of contemporary international relations, serving as the fundamental building block of the global political order (Krasner, 1999; Philpott, 2001). Despite its centrality to political organization and international law, the conceptual definition of statehood remains surprisingly contested and problematic (Fabry, 2010; Grant, 1999). The identification of what constitutes a state carries profound implications for international recognition, diplomatic relations, membership in international organizations, treaty-making

capacity, and the application of international humanitarian law (Crawford, 2006; Worster, 2009).

1.1 Research Problem and Significance

Current approaches to defining statehood, particularly those enshrined in international law through the Montevideo Convention (1933) and adopted by the United Nations, exhibit fundamental conceptual weaknesses that undermine their utility as objective standards (Vidmar, 2012; Ker-Lindsay, 2012). These definitions suffer from circular reasoning, subjective application, and inadequate standardization of key criteria (Raič, 2002; Talmon, 2005). The practical consequences of these definitional ambiguities manifest in inconsistent recognition practices, prolonged sovereignty disputes, and challenges to the legitimacy of international legal frameworks (Fabry, 2010; Coggins, 2014).

The ambiguity surrounding state definition has real-world implications for numerous entities experiencing contested statehood. As of 2025, at least 15-20 political entities claim statehood but lack widespread international recognition, affecting an estimated 60-80 million people living under contested sovereignty (Caspersen, 2012). Major cases include Kosovo (approximately 1.8 million affected), Somaliland (4-5.5 million), Taiwan (23.8 million), Palestine (5.3 million in Palestinian territories), Northern Cyprus (326,000), and several post-Soviet entities including Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh (Pegg, 1998; Bolton & Visoka, 2012; Ker-Lindsay, 2012). These populations experience significant practical consequences including restricted international travel, limited access to international institutions, constraints on trade and investment, and uncertainty regarding legal status and rights (Geldenhuis, 2009). Furthermore, the recognition-dependent nature of prevailing definitions creates power asymmetries wherein existing states exercise arbitrary authority over the legitimacy of emerging political entities, with recognition decisions often reflecting geopolitical considerations rather than principled application of statehood criteria (Ryngaert & Sobrie, 2011; Fabry, 2010).

1.2 Research Objectives

This study pursues three primary objectives:

- To conduct a systematic critical analysis of existing scholarly and legal definitions of the state, identifying their conceptual and practical limitations;
- To propose an alternative definition of statehood grounded in objective, observable criteria that eliminate dependence on recognition by existing states;
- To examine the implications of this reconceptualization for state formation processes, international recognition practices, and contemporary sovereignty disputes.

1.3 Methodological Approach

This research employs conceptual analysis and normative political theory to examine the definitional problem of statehood (Gerring, 1999; Goertz, 2006). The methodology involves: (1) systematic review of scholarly literature on state definitions across political science, international relations, and international law; (2) critical examination of legal frameworks, particularly the Montevideo Convention and UN practices; (3) logical analysis of the internal coherence and practical applicability of existing definitions; and (4) construction of an alternative framework

based on necessary and sufficient conditions for statehood.

This methodological approach was selected as most appropriate for the research questions posed. Conceptual analysis is the proper method for examining what states are—the definitional question is fundamentally about concept formation rather than empirical measurement (Sartori, 1970; Collier & Levitsky, 1997). Alternative methodological approaches were considered but deemed less suitable: (a) Comparative case analysis could identify patterns across cases but cannot resolve the prior question of which entities constitute the appropriate universe of cases without first defining statehood—this would create circularity; (b) Formal modeling could specify logical relationships between statehood criteria but requires prior conceptual work to identify relevant variables; (c) Purely empirical approaches (surveys, statistical analysis) could measure state capacity or effectiveness but cannot address the boundary question of what distinguishes states from non-states; and (d) Historical narrative could illuminate state formation processes but does not resolve definitional ambiguities.

The chosen approach enables systematic examination of existing definitions' logical coherence, identification of conceptual problems, and construction of alternative frameworks addressing those problems. While empirical testing of the proposed framework is essential for validation (addressed in Section 6.5.5), the initial task of developing a logically coherent definition requires conceptual analysis. This represents a deliberate methodological choice appropriate to the paper's core contribution: proposing an improved conceptual framework for defining statehood.

1.4 Structure of the Paper

Following this introduction, Section 2 provides a comprehensive literature review examining the evolution of state theory and contemporary definitional approaches. Section 3 establishes the theoretical framework guiding this analysis. Section 4 presents a critical analysis of current state definitions, highlighting their limitations. Section 5 introduces the proposed alternative definition with its justification. Section 6 discusses implications and applications, while Section 7 concludes with theoretical contributions and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Classical Foundations of State Theory

The conceptualization of the state has evolved considerably across Western political thought. Classical theorists established foundational understandings that continue to influence contemporary definitions. Thomas Hobbes (1651/1996) conceived the state as a sovereign authority emerging from a social contract, possessing absolute power to maintain order and security. John Locke (1689/1988) emphasized the state's role in protecting natural rights and property, viewing governmental authority as conditional upon consent of the governed. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762/1997) further developed social contract theory, emphasizing popular sovereignty and the general will as the foundation of legitimate state authority.

Max Weber's (1919/1946) definition has proven particularly influential in modern social science. Weber characterized the state as "a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly

of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” (p. 78). This definition emphasizes three elements: territoriality, monopoly on violence, and legitimacy claims. Weber’s conceptualization has become a touchstone for subsequent scholarly work, though scholars have debated each of its components (Poggi, 1990; Tilly, 1992; Mann, 1993).

2.2 Contemporary Political Science Perspectives

Modern political science offers diverse conceptualizations of statehood reflecting different theoretical orientations. Tilly (1985, 1992) developed a historical-institutional approach, examining state formation through the lens of coercion, capital accumulation, and war-making. His definition emphasizes “relatively centralized, differentiated organizations the officials of which more or less successfully claim control over the chief concentrated means of violence within a population inhabiting a large, contiguous territory” (Tilly, 1985, p. 170). This coercion-centered view links state development to military competition and resource extraction (Ertman, 1997; Centeno, 2002).

Mann (1984, 1986) distinguished between despotic and infrastructural power, defining the state as a power organization engaged in “centralized, institutionalized, territorialized regulation of many aspects of social relations” (Mann, 1986, p. 26). This approach emphasizes the state’s organizational capacity to penetrate society and implement decisions (Soifer, 2008; Lee & Zhang, 2017).

Institutional perspectives emphasize the state’s organizational apparatus and rule-making capacity. Rueschemeyer and Evans (1985) define the state as “a set of organizations invested with the authority to make binding decisions for people and organizations juridically located in a particular territory and to implement these decisions using, if necessary, force” (pp. 46-47). This definition highlights institutional authority, territorial jurisdiction, and enforcement capacity (Skocpol, 1985; Evans, 1995).

Migdal (1988, 2001) offers an anthropological approach, examining state-society relations through a multi-level framework encompassing “trenches, dispersed field offices, agency’s central offices, and commanding heights” (Migdal, 1994, p. 16). His work emphasizes the contested nature of state authority and variation in state capacity across territories and policy domains (Migdal, 2001; Kohli, 2004).

Sociological perspectives have explored the state’s constitutive role in shaping social relations, identities, and categories of thought (Bourdieu, 1994; Loveman, 2005). Mitchell (1991, 1999) argues that the state should be understood not as a freestanding entity but as a structural effect of practices that make political power appear external to society. This approach questions the state-society boundary itself (Abrams, 1988; Sharma & Gupta, 2006).

2.3 International Law Frameworks

International law approaches statehood through the lens of legal personality and capacity for international relations. The most influential legal framework derives from Article 1 of the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States (1933), which specifies four criteria:

(a) permanent population, (b) defined territory, (c) government, and (d) capacity to enter into relations with other states (Crawford, 2006; Shaw, 2008). This framework has been widely adopted in international legal scholarship and practice, though its interpretation and application remain contested (Grant, 1999; Talmon, 2005).

The United Nations has generally followed the Montevideo criteria while emphasizing the importance of recognition and UN membership as indicators of statehood (Worster, 2009). The UN Juridical Yearbook (1996) defines a state under international law as “an entity that has a defined territory and a permanent population, under the control of its own government, and that engages in, or has the capacity to engage in, formal relations with other such entities” (p. 522).

Two theoretical approaches to statehood in international law have emerged: the declarative theory and the constitutive theory (Crawford, 2006; Grant, 1999). The declarative theory, associated with the Montevideo Convention, holds that statehood is a matter of fact determined by meeting objective criteria, while recognition by other states is merely declaratory of an existing status (Vidmar, 2012). The constitutive theory, by contrast, maintains that recognition by other states is essential to achieving legal personality and statehood (Lauterpacht, 1947; Chen, 1951). Contemporary practice reflects a complex mixture of both approaches, with recognition playing a *de facto* determinative role despite the theoretical primacy of declarative criteria (Fabry, 2010; Coggins, 2014).

2.4 State Recognition and Formation

The literature on state recognition reveals significant gaps between formal legal criteria and actual recognition practices (Fabry, 2010; Ker-Lindsay, 2012). Recognition decisions often reflect political considerations, strategic interests, and power relations rather than objective assessment of statehood criteria (Coggins, 2014; Ryngaert & Sobrie, 2011). Case studies of contested statehood—including Kosovo, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Northern Cyprus, Somaliland, and Taiwan—demonstrate the highly political nature of recognition processes (Caspersen, 2012; Pegg, 1998; Lynch, 2004; Geldenhuys, 2009).

State formation literature examines the historical processes through which states emerge and consolidate control (Tilly, 1992; Ertman, 1997; Spruyt, 1994). Classical accounts emphasized European experiences of war-making, capital accumulation, and institutional development (Tilly, 1990; Downing, 1992). More recent scholarship has questioned the universality of European models and examined alternative paths to statehood in post-colonial contexts (Herbst, 2000; Clapham, 1996; Jackson, 1990).

The concept of “juridical statehood” versus “empirical statehood” has proven influential in analyzing post-colonial states (Jackson & Rosberg, 1982; Jackson, 1990). Many contemporary states possess international legal recognition (juridical statehood) despite lacking effective control over their territories or capacity to provide basic governmental functions (empirical statehood). This disconnect highlights limitations in recognition-based approaches to defining statehood (Englebert, 2009; Coggins, 2014).

2.5 Failed States and State Fragility

The failed states literature has challenged conventional assumptions about statehood by examining entities that retain international recognition despite severe governance deficits (Rotberg, 2003, 2004; Call, 2008). Failed state concepts emphasize functional criteria—security provision, rule of law, basic services, and legitimacy—rather than formal legal status (Gros, 1996; Milliken & Krause, 2002). This literature implicitly critiques recognition-based definitions by highlighting cases where juridical statehood persists absent meaningful governmental authority (Zartman, 1995; Bilgin & Morton, 2002).

State fragility indices developed by organizations such as the Fund for Peace (2019) and the World Bank (2020) operationalize statehood through measurable indicators of capacity and performance. While methodologically distinct from definitional exercises, these frameworks reflect growing emphasis on empirical attributes rather than formal legal status (Call, 2011; Carment et al., 2008).

2.6 Contemporary Challenges and Debates

Recent scholarship has identified new challenges to traditional state definitions. Globalization has been argued to erode state sovereignty through transnational flows of capital, information, and people, though evidence remains contested (Strange, 1996; Krasner, 1999; Sassen, 2006). Non-state actors including multinational corporations, international organizations, and transnational advocacy networks exercise governance functions traditionally associated with states (Avant et al., 2010; Hall & Biersteker, 2002).

Emerging phenomena such as cyber sovereignty, climate change-induced territorial loss, and transnational governance arrangements pose questions for territorially-based state definitions (Buchan, 2012; McAdam, 2010; Zürn, 2018). The potential for states to lose territory to sea-level rise has sparked debate about whether statehood can persist without territorial control (Yamamoto & Esteban, 2014; Rayfuse, 2009).

2.7 Gaps in the Literature

Despite extensive scholarship, several gaps remain. First, insufficient attention has been paid to the internal logical coherence of legal definitions, particularly the Montevideo criteria. While scholars have noted practical difficulties in application, systematic analysis of conceptual problems within the definitions themselves remains limited (Raič, 2002; Vidmar, 2012).

Second, the literature lacks rigorous examination of the circularity problem in recognition-dependent definitions. Though scholars acknowledge recognition's role, the logical implications of defining statehood partly through capacity to engage with other states have not been thoroughly analyzed (Crawford, 2006; Grant, 1999).

Third, alternative definitional frameworks grounded in objective, observable criteria independent of recognition remain underdeveloped. Most critical analyses identify problems with existing definitions but do not offer fully articulated alternatives (Talmon, 2005; Fabry, 2010).

This paper addresses these gaps by providing systematic critique of definitional shortcomings and proposing an alternative framework based on objective criteria.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Definitional Requirements

Effective conceptual definitions in social science should meet several criteria (Gerring, 1999; Goertz, 2006; Collier & Levitsky, 1997). First, definitions should possess internal logical consistency, avoiding circular reasoning or self-referential criteria. Second, definitions should be based on observable attributes that can be empirically assessed rather than subjective judgments. Third, definitions should clearly distinguish the concept from related but distinct phenomena. Fourth, definitions should provide necessary and sufficient conditions for concept membership. Fifth, definitions should demonstrate practical applicability across relevant cases (Sartori, 1970; Adcock & Collier, 2001).

Applied to statehood, these requirements suggest several challenges for existing definitions. The concept must be distinguished from related forms of political organization including empires, city-states, tribal confederations, and supranational unions (Spruyt, 1994; Nexon, 2009). The definition must accommodate historical variation in state forms while identifying core attributes shared across contexts (Poggi, 1990; Ertman, 1997). Simultaneously, the definition should not be so broad as to encompass all forms of political authority nor so narrow as to exclude generally accepted cases of statehood (Collier & Mahon, 1993).

3.2 Normative Versus Descriptive Definitions

Definitions can serve normative or descriptive purposes (Oppenheim, 1975; Goertz, 2006). Descriptive definitions aim to capture empirical regularities and classify observed phenomena based on shared attributes. Normative definitions establish criteria for what should count as legitimate instances of a concept, potentially excluding empirical cases that lack desired characteristics (Collier et al., 2008).

State definitions in international law contain both descriptive and normative elements (Crawford, 2006). The Montevideo criteria ostensibly describe objective attributes possessed by states, yet their application in recognition decisions often reflects normative judgments about legitimacy (Fabry, 2010). This tension between descriptive accuracy and normative prescription complicates assessment of definitional adequacy (Ryngaert & Sobrie, 2011).

This analysis adopts a primarily descriptive approach while acknowledging normative implications. The proposed definition aims to identify necessary and sufficient conditions for statehood based on observable attributes, allowing empirical classification of political entities as states or non-states. However, any definition of statehood carries normative weight given its role in legitimating political authority and structuring international relations (Philpott, 2001; Bartelson, 2001).

3.3 Recognition Independence

A crucial theoretical consideration concerns the role of recognition by other states in defining statehood. Recognition-dependent definitions face a bootstrapping problem: if recognition by other states is necessary for statehood, how did the first states become states (Fabry, 2010)? More fundamentally, recognition-dependent definitions grant existing states arbitrary power to determine which emerging political entities achieve legitimacy, creating potential for abuse and reflecting power relations rather than objective criteria (Coggins, 2014; Ryngaert & Sobrie, 2011).

An adequate definition should identify intrinsic attributes that constitute statehood independent of recognition by external actors (Vidmar, 2012). Recognition may serve as evidence that an entity possesses state attributes, but should not itself be a definitional criterion (Crawford, 2006). This theoretical commitment to recognition-independence guides the alternative framework proposed in Section 5.

3.4 Analytical Framework

The analysis proceeds through several stages. First, existing definitions are examined for internal logical consistency, focusing on circular reasoning, ambiguous terms, and self-referential criteria. Second, definitions are assessed for their reliance on subjective versus objective criteria. Third, the practical applicability of definitions is evaluated through consideration of borderline and contested cases. Fourth, an alternative definition is constructed by identifying necessary attributes of statehood through analysis of historical and contemporary cases. Finally, the proposed definition is evaluated against the criteria established above and compared to existing frameworks.

4. Critical Analysis Of Current State Definitions

4.1 Scholarly Definitions: Conceptual Limitations

Contemporary scholarly definitions of the state exhibit several recurring limitations that constrain their analytical utility. While each approach offers valuable insights, none provides a fully satisfactory framework for defining statehood.

4.1.1 Structural Emphasis Without Definitional Clarity

Some definitions emphasize the institutional structures and apparatuses that embody state authority. Whaites (2008) suggests the state is embodied in “structures: ministries, agencies and forces that have been created to act on the instructions of the individuals who have gained political decision making power” (p. 4). Similarly, Migdal’s (1994) multi-level framework examining “trenches, dispersed field offices, agency’s central offices, and commanding heights” (p. 16) provides rich description of state organizational complexity.

However, these approaches tend toward description of state manifestations rather than definition of statehood itself (Mitchell, 1991). Structural definitions face difficulty distinguishing states

from other complex organizations possessing hierarchical arrangements and specialized agencies. Large corporations, military organizations, and religious institutions may exhibit similar structural characteristics without constituting states (Hall & Biersteker, 2002). Furthermore, structural approaches struggle to account for early states that lacked elaborate bureaucratic apparatuses yet clearly exercised state authority (Ertman, 1997).

4.1.2 Overemphasis on Coercive Capacity

Multiple definitions center on the state's monopoly on violence and coercive authority. Tilly's (1985) emphasis on control over "concentrated means of violence within a population inhabiting a large, contiguous territory" (p. 170) exemplifies this approach. Rueschemeyer and Evans (1985) similarly stress authority "to implement decisions using, if necessary, force" (pp. 46-47).

While coercive capacity undoubtedly constitutes an important attribute of states, definitions centered exclusively on violence face theoretical problems. Many historical and contemporary states have lacked complete monopolies on violence yet remained recognizable as states (Migdal, 1988; Nordstrom, 2000). Non-state actors including warlords, paramilitary groups, and criminal organizations may exercise substantial coercive power within state territories without themselves constituting states (Marten, 2012; Lessing, 2020). Furthermore, coercion-centered definitions risk normative implications that legitimize violence rather than other bases of political authority including consent, tradition, or religious authority (Weber, 1919/1946).

4.1.3 Neglect of Territorial Dimensions

An-Nabhani's (1963) definition of the state as "an executive entity of the collection of concepts, measures and convictions that is accepted by a group of people" (p. 6) exemplifies ideational approaches that emphasize intellectual or ideological foundations of political authority. While recognizing the importance of shared beliefs and legitimacy, this approach entirely omits territorial considerations.

Such definitions struggle to distinguish states from other ideologically-based organizations including political movements, religious communities, or transnational advocacy networks that lack territorial control (Tarrow, 2005). Historical and contemporary states have invariably exercised authority over defined territories, making territorial control a seemingly necessary attribute of statehood (Ruggie, 1993; Sack, 1986). Definitions that neglect territoriality therefore appear incomplete.

4.1.4 Social Relations Focus

Mann's (1986) emphasis on "centralized, institutionalized, territorialized regulation of many aspects of social relations" (p. 26) and King's (1986) focus on "rule over territorially circumscribed societies" (p. 30) foreground the state's relationship to society. These perspectives valuably highlight that states do not exist in isolation but rather in complex interaction with social structures and populations (Migdal, 1988, 2001).

However, society-centered definitions face boundary problems in distinguishing states from other institutions that regulate social relations including religious authorities, traditional leadership structures, and customary legal systems (Berman, 2009; Tamanaha, 2008). In contexts of legal pluralism or fragmented authority, multiple institutions may simultaneously regulate different aspects of social relations without each constituting a separate state (Griffiths, 1986; von Benda-Beckmann, 2002).

4.2 The Montevideo Convention: Systematic Critique

The Montevideo Convention's four criteria—permanent population, defined territory, government, and capacity to enter into relations with other states—have achieved near-canonical status in international law (Crawford, 2006; Shaw, 2008). Nevertheless, systematic analysis reveals fundamental conceptual and practical problems with this framework.

4.2.1 Circularity and Self-Reference

The fourth criterion—capacity to enter into relations with other states—creates logical circularity. This criterion presumes the existence of “other states” with which the entity in question might interact (Raič, 2002). How are these “other states” identified? Presumably, by applying the same four criteria, including capacity to engage with yet other states. This creates an infinite regress that provides no logical foundation for determining statehood (Talmon, 2005).

Consider a hypothetical scenario: Entity A seeks recognition as a state. Applying the Montevideo criteria, we must assess whether A has capacity to enter into relations with other states. This requires identifying existing states B, C, and D. But how do we know B, C, and D are states? By applying the Montevideo criteria to each, including assessing their capacity to enter into relations with other states—such as hypothetical Entity A. The definition thus refers to itself without providing independent grounds for classification (Vidmar, 2012).

This circularity problem is not merely theoretical. In practice, it means the fourth criterion reduces to: “capacity to enter into relations with entities that other states recognize as states.” This transforms an ostensibly objective criterion into one dependent on the subjective recognition decisions of existing states (Fabry, 2010; Coggins, 2014). The declarative theory of statehood, which holds that meeting objective criteria is sufficient regardless of recognition, becomes incoherent when one of the criteria itself depends on recognition by existing states (Crawford, 2006).

4.2.2 Inadequate Standardization

The Montevideo criteria suffer from fundamental vagueness regarding the standards for each requirement (Grant, 1999; Talmon, 2005). What constitutes a “permanent” population, and how large must it be? The term “permanent” excludes nomadic populations, yet many historical states governed primarily nomadic peoples (Khazanov, 1984). Must the population be permanently resident in the territory, or is it sufficient that the territory is permanently associated with the population? No clear standard exists for minimum population size. The Vatican has fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, Monaco has approximately 39,000, while China has over 1.4 billion—yet all

are considered states (CIA, 2020).

Similar ambiguity surrounds “defined territory.” How precisely must boundaries be defined? Many internationally recognized states have contested boundaries or undefined border segments (Prescott & Triggs, 2008). Must the territory be continuous, or can it consist of separated territories? Federal systems, archipelagic states, and states with exclaves demonstrate territorial discontinuity. What constitutes the minimum territorial size? No clear threshold exists between territories too small to constitute states and those sufficiently large. The Vatican occupies 0.44 square kilometers, smaller than many university campuses, yet is considered a state (CIA, 2020).

The “government” criterion remains similarly unspecified (Grant, 1999). Must the government be democratic, authoritarian, or is any organized authority sufficient? Must it exercise effective control throughout the territory, or is *de jure* authority sufficient? Failed states like Somalia in the 1990s retained international recognition despite lacking effective governmental authority over large portions of national territory (Menkhaus, 2007; Rotberg, 2003). Conversely, some entities exercise effective governmental control without international recognition, such as Somaliland (Pegg, 1998; Hoehne, 2015). These cases reveal the gap between formal criteria and actual recognition decisions.

4.2.3 Insufficient Criteria for Meaningful Statehood

Even setting aside circularity and standardization problems, the Montevideo criteria may be insufficient to distinguish genuine states from other political entities. Consider the following thought experiment: The permanent residents of a sub-national administrative unit (such as Texas or California in the United States) decide to declare independence. They already possess: (a) permanent population—Texas has 29 million inhabitants; (b) defined territory—Texas boundaries are precisely demarcated; and (c) government—Texas has an elaborate governmental structure including executive, legislative, and judicial branches (US Census Bureau, 2020).

For the fourth criterion, suppose multiple other separatist entities in different countries simultaneously declare independence and mutually recognize each other as states, agreeing to engage in diplomatic relations. According to the Montevideo criteria interpreted literally, each would now qualify as a state, rendering the federal or national governments of their parent countries “foreign occupiers” with no legitimate authority over these territories (Kohen, 2006; Pavković & Radan, 2007).

This *reductio ad absurdum* demonstrates that the Montevideo criteria, taken at face value, would legitimate virtually any separatist movement that secures recognition from like-minded entities. The fact that international practice does not accept such claims reveals that additional unstated criteria operate in recognition decisions (Fabry, 2010). These might include: effective control independent of the previous sovereign, international community acceptance, consistency with principles of territorial integrity, or geopolitical considerations (Weller, 2008; Kohen, 2006).

4.3 Cases Exposing Definitional Inadequacies

4.3.1 Microstates and Dependent Entities

Vatican City and Monaco exemplify the malleability of statehood criteria in practice. Vatican City, with 0.44 square kilometers and 826 inhabitants, possesses no military forces except ceremonial Swiss Guards who are citizens of Switzerland (CIA, 2020; Pollard, 2006). Its defense is entirely dependent on Italy. Monaco, with 2 square kilometers and 39,000 inhabitants, relies entirely on France for defense under treaty arrangements (CIA, 2020; Grinda, 2007). By any meaningful standard of self-sufficiency or capacity for independent action, these entities would not qualify as states.

Yet both enjoy international recognition, maintain diplomatic relations, and participate in international organizations (Duursma, 1996). This reveals that international recognition of statehood reflects political decisions rather than application of objective criteria (Coggins, 2014). The willingness to recognize microstates with negligible defensive capacity while denying recognition to larger, more capable entities like Somaliland demonstrates the subjective nature of current definitional frameworks (Pegg, 1998; Richards & Smith, 2015).

4.3.2 Puppet States and Nominal Independence

The concept of puppet states—entities with nominal sovereignty under effective foreign control—further exposes problems with recognition-dependent definitions (Crawford, 1979). Historical examples include Manchukuo under Japanese control (1932-1945), various Soviet satellite states during the Cold War, and contemporary cases of disputed sovereignty in post-Soviet spaces (Duara, 2003; Caspersen, 2012). These entities formally met the Montevideo criteria—possessing populations, territories, governments, and engaging in international relations—yet lacked meaningful independence.

If statehood can exist absent genuine autonomy from foreign control, the concept loses analytical and normative significance (Raič, 2002). Conversely, if external control negates statehood, many currently recognized states would not qualify, as various forms of dependence on powerful states are widespread (Lake, 2009; Cooley & Nexon, 2020). This dilemma reflects the absence of clear criteria regarding the degree of autonomy necessary for statehood.

4.3.3 States-in-Exile and Government Without Territory

Governments-in-exile present another conceptual challenge to territorial definitions of statehood (Shain, 1991; Talmon, 1998). During World War II, numerous European governments continued to claim statehood while their territories were occupied and their governments operated from exile in London (Warbrick, 1992; Wilde, 2004). Contemporary cases include the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (Western Sahara), whose government operates largely from refugee camps in Algeria while claiming sovereignty over territory controlled by Morocco (Zunes & Mundy, 2010; Pazzanita, 2006).

Do such entities remain states despite lacking territorial control? If so, what distinguishes them from other organizations claiming governmental authority without territorial presence? If not, at what point does temporary loss of territorial control terminate statehood? These questions remain unresolved within existing definitional frameworks (Grant, 1999; Crawford, 2006).

4.3.4 Contested Statehood and Recognition Politics

Contemporary cases of contested statehood—including Kosovo, Taiwan, Somaliland, Northern Cyprus, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Nagorno-Karabakh—reveal the highly political nature of recognition decisions (Caspersen, 2012; Bolton & Visoka, 2012; Lynch, 2004; Geldenhuys, 2009). These entities vary considerably in their empirical attributes:

Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008 and has received recognition from approximately 100 UN member states but remains unrecognized by Serbia, Russia, China, and others (Ker-Lindsay, 2012; Vidmar, 2012). It possesses effective governmental control, substantial population (approximately 1.8 million), defined territory, and engages in international relations (CIA, 2020). Yet its statehood remains contested.

Taiwan exercises effective governmental authority over 23 million people across defined territory, maintains extensive (if informal) international relations, and possesses significant military capacity (Copper, 2019; Hickey, 2007). Yet China's opposition ensures it lacks recognition by most states and UN membership. Taiwan arguably meets all empirical criteria for statehood more thoroughly than many recognized states, yet political considerations prevent its recognition (Crawford, 2006).

Somaliland declared independence from Somalia in 1991, has maintained stable governance, holds democratic elections, and exercises effective territorial control (Pegg, 1998; Renders & Terlinden, 2010; Hoehne, 2015). Despite meeting empirical statehood criteria more fully than internationally recognized Somalia (which has struggled with state failure and limited governmental authority), Somaliland remains unrecognized, largely due to African Union opposition to redrawing colonial boundaries (Reno, 2003; Clapham, 1996).

These cases demonstrate that recognition decisions reflect geopolitical considerations, principles like territorial integrity, concerns about precedent-setting, and relations with parent states rather than objective assessment of statehood criteria (Fabry, 2010; Coggins, 2014; Ker-Lindsay, 2012). The disjunction between empirical attributes and recognition reveals fundamental problems with recognition-dependent definitions.

4.4 Summary of Definitional Problems

The analysis above identifies several systematic problems with current state definitions:

- Logical circularity: Recognition-dependent criteria, particularly the Montevideo Convention's fourth requirement, create circular reasoning that provides no independent basis for determining statehood.
- Inadequate standardization: Vague terms like "permanent population" and "defined territory" lack clear thresholds, enabling subjective and inconsistent application.

- Recognition dependence: Practical application of supposedly objective criteria depends on recognition decisions by existing states, introducing power politics and arbitrary judgments.
- Insufficient criteria: The Montevideo framework permits entities that lack meaningful statehood attributes (microstates entirely dependent on other states for defense) while excluding entities that possess substantial statehood attributes (unrecognized entities with effective governance).
- Descriptive-normative confusion: Existing definitions conflate empirical description of state attributes with normative judgments about legitimate political authority.
- Boundary problems: Current definitions struggle to distinguish states from related forms of political organization or to specify the degree of autonomy required for statehood.

These limitations undermine the utility of existing definitions for theoretical analysis and practical application. An alternative framework addressing these shortcomings is therefore warranted.

5. Toward An Alternative Definition Of Statehood

5.1 Methodological Principles

Constructing an improved definition of statehood requires adherence to several methodological principles derived from the theoretical framework established in Section 3:

- Recognition independence: The definition should identify intrinsic attributes of states rather than depending on recognition by other states or external actors.
- Observable criteria: Definitional components should reference empirically observable conditions rather than subjective judgments or legal fictions.
- Logical coherence: The definition must avoid circular reasoning, self-reference, or internal contradictions.
- Clear standards: Criteria should be specified with sufficient clarity to enable consistent application across cases, even if some ambiguity necessarily remains.
- Necessary and sufficient conditions: The definition should identify attributes that are both individually necessary and collectively sufficient for statehood.
- Historical and contemporary validity: The definition should accommodate both historical states and contemporary political entities while distinguishing states from other forms of political organization.

5.2 Deriving Necessary Conditions

Analysis of historical and contemporary states, combined with conceptual analysis of what distinguishes states from non-state political entities, suggests five necessary conditions:

5.2.1 Territorial Foundation

All states, historical and contemporary, have exercised authority over defined territories (Ruggie, 1993; Sack, 1986). Territorial control distinguishes states from non-territorial organizations including transnational movements, religious communities, or international organizations. While

territorial boundaries may be contested and territorial control may vary in intensity across space, some territorial foundation is necessary for statehood (Agnew, 2005; Elden, 2013). This condition invalidates the concept of “state-in-exile” as a genuine form of statehood; entities that have lost territorial control may retain claims to statehood but do not presently constitute functioning states (Talmon, 1998).

5.2.2 Population Presence

States govern populations rather than existing as abstract authorities (Torpey, 2000; Brubaker, 1992). The presence of people residing on state territory is necessary for statehood; uninhabited territories do not constitute states regardless of other attributes. Population is the object of state authority and the source from which state institutions draw personnel, resources, and legitimacy (Weber, 1919/1946; Mann, 1993).

5.2.3 Territorial Viability

The territory must be capable of supporting the existence of its population through a combination of territorial resources, economic activity, and external trade. This criterion requires assessment across four indicators: (1) Basic habitability—the territory possesses sufficient fresh water, arable land, or marine resources to support human settlement (Diamond, 1997); (2) Economic foundation—the territory enables economic activities (agriculture, resource extraction, services, manufacturing, or trade) that can sustain population subsistence (Herbst, 2000); (3) Trade accessibility—the territory's location and characteristics enable external economic exchange when domestic resources prove insufficient (Ostrom, 1990); and (4) Population-resource balance—the territorial resource base is adequate relative to population size and density.

A territory meets this criterion if it demonstrates at least two of three conditions: (a) domestic production of essential goods sufficient for basic needs; (b) economic activities generating resources exchangeable for essential goods; or (c) geographic position enabling sustainable trade relationships. A territory fails this criterion only if it fundamentally lacks capacity to support human habitation even with trade—such as territories lacking fresh water, arable land, marine resources, extractable resources, and geographic position prohibiting trade (e.g., extremely remote, small, resource-barren islands). This standard distinguishes potentially viable states from entities occupying territories inadequate for sustained habitation. It does not require self-sufficiency in all resources—trade has always been essential for most states—but rather that the territory can support human habitation and economic activity sufficient to sustain a population.

5.2.4 Defensive Capacity

States must possess capacity to defend their territories and populations against external intrusions (Tilly, 1992; Centeno, 2002). This criterion does not require absolute security or the ability to defeat all potential adversaries, which would disqualify most states. Rather, it requires sufficient defensive capacity that the state's existence depends primarily on its own efforts rather than on permission or protection by external powers (Desch, 1996; Resende-Santos, 2007).

This criterion invalidates the concept of “puppet states”—entities with nominal sovereignty under effective foreign control (Crawford, 1979). An entity that exists only because foreign powers permit its existence, and whose security depends entirely on external protection, does not constitute a genuine state but rather a dependent political entity (Lake, 2009). Historical examples of puppet states like Manchukuo illustrate this principle: despite possessing the formal attributes of government, population, and territory, such entities lacked the autonomy necessary for genuine statehood (Duara, 2003).

The defensive capacity criterion does not prohibit alliances, defense agreements, or military cooperation among states (Morrow, 1991; Leeds, 2003). Rather, it requires that the entity possess its own military or defensive capabilities beyond purely ceremonial forces. States may choose to rely partially on allies for security enhancement, but they must possess baseline defensive capacity independent of external actors (Walt, 1987).

A critical assessment question arises for entities with close alliance relationships: when does alliance support supplement autonomous capacity versus substitute for it entirely? Three indicators help distinguish these cases: (1) Indigenous military forces—does the entity maintain organized forces under its own command with combat capabilities, or only ceremonial guards with no combat function? (2) Defense expenditure and infrastructure—does the entity invest resources in its own defense, maintain military infrastructure, and possess defense industries, or does it contribute nothing to its own security? (3) Contingency capacity—if alliance support were withdrawn, could the entity mount any territorial defense, or would it be immediately defenseless?

Entities demonstrating indigenous forces, defense investment, and contingency capacity meet the defensive capacity criterion even with alliance support (example: NATO members, Taiwan with U.S. relations). Entities demonstrating only ceremonial forces, no defense investment, and complete dependence on foreign military presence fail this criterion (example: puppet states, some microstates). The distinction is between enhancing existing capacity through alliances (acceptable for statehood) versus existing only through foreign military permission (disqualifying). Most contemporary contested cases fall in the former category—they possess autonomous baseline capacity that alliances enhance rather than replace entirely.

5.2.5 Institutional Differentiation

The state must be differentiated from the mass of population inhabiting its territory through identifiable organizational structures that claim and exercise authority (Evans, 1995; Mitchell, 1991). This criterion can be operationalized through three indicators: (1) Organizational distinctness—identifiable institutions exist separate from kinship networks, religious organizations, or informal social structures; (2) Functional specialization—some individuals occupy roles specifically dedicated to exercising authority (leaders, administrators, enforcers) rather than authority being diffused equally among all members; and (3) Institutional persistence—authority structures continue across personnel changes rather than dissolving when particular individuals depart (Migdal, 1988, 2001).

A minimal threshold is met when an entity demonstrates: (a) designated leadership positions distinct from general population membership; (b) organized enforcement capacity (military forces, police, or armed groups under centralized command); and (c) administrative capacity to make and implement collective decisions. This distinguishes states from stateless societies or acephalous political systems where authority is diffused throughout the population without differentiated institutions (Middleton & Tait, 1958; Fortes & Evans-Pritchard, 1940).

The degree of institutional elaboration may vary considerably across states (Ertman, 1997; Soifer, 2008). Early states possessed relatively simple institutional structures—perhaps only a chief, a small retinue, and organized warriors—compared to modern bureaucratic states with elaborate administrative apparatus, yet both maintained organizational differentiation from society (Mann, 1986; Flannery, 1999). This criterion does not specify the internal organization of state institutions, their degree of centralization, or their effectiveness—only that differentiated authority structures meeting the minimal threshold exist.

5.3 The Proposed Definition

Based on the five necessary conditions identified above, statehood may be defined as follows:

A state is an institutionally differentiated authority that emanates from a population residing on a territory capable of supporting that population's existence, which possesses capacity to defend its territory and population against external intrusions.

This definition integrates the five necessary conditions:

- Territorial foundation (residing on a territory)
- Population presence (emanating from a population)
- Territorial viability (territory capable of supporting existence)
- Defensive capacity (capacity to defend against external intrusions)
- Institutional differentiation (institutionally differentiated authority)

The definition is recognition-independent: an entity either possesses these attributes or does not, regardless of recognition by other states. The criteria are empirically observable: territorial extent, population presence, resource adequacy, military capacity, and institutional organization can be assessed through observation. The definition avoids circularity by referencing only intrinsic attributes of the entity itself rather than its relationships with other states.

5.3.1 Why These Five Criteria Are Sufficient

The claim that these five criteria are jointly sufficient—that meeting all five guarantees an entity constitutes a state—requires careful justification. Why couldn't there be additional necessary criteria? Several lines of argument support the sufficiency claim.

First, logical completeness through conceptual analysis: A state is fundamentally a territorially-based political authority exercising governance over a population. This core concept implies: (a) territorial foundation—"territorially-based" requires territory; (b) population presence—"over a population" requires people; (c) institutional differentiation—"political authority" requires

organizational structures distinct from society; (d) territorial viability—sustained territorial presence requires territorial capacity to support habitation; and (e) defensive capacity—"exercising governance" requires capacity to maintain territorial control against external challengers. These five attributes exhaust the logical requirements of the core concept.

Second, historical analysis of potential additional criteria: Several candidate criteria might be proposed, yet each proves either reducible to the five or not genuinely necessary. (a) Government effectiveness is not necessary—weak and failed states remain states despite limited capacity. Effectiveness is a matter of degree rather than a binary statehood requirement. (b) Democratic legitimacy is not necessary—authoritarian regimes clearly constitute states. Making democracy definitional would exclude much of human political history. (c) International recognition, as extensively argued, should not be definitional as it reflects political decisions rather than intrinsic attributes. (d) Sovereignty in the sense of legal independence is captured by defensive capacity—entities that exist only through foreign permission lack genuine statehood. (e) Monopoly on violence is not necessary—many states coexist with substantial non-state armed groups yet remain states. (f) Provision of public goods, rule of law, or specific governmental functions are matters of state capacity rather than statehood itself.

Third, the principle of parsimony: In concept formation, simpler definitions with fewer criteria are preferable when they capture the phenomenon adequately (Gerring, 1999). Adding criteria beyond what is logically necessary and empirically distinguishing increases complexity without corresponding benefit. The five criteria successfully distinguish states from: non-territorial political organizations (which lack territorial foundation), uninhabited territories (which lack population), stateless societies (which lack institutional differentiation), puppet states (which lack defensive capacity), and unsustainable entities in uninhabitable territories (which lack territorial viability).

Fourth, boundary testing: If we consider marginal cases and ask what would be needed to exclude them or include them, the five criteria prove sufficient. An entity with all five criteria but lacking some sixth hypothetical criterion would be indistinguishable from recognized states in its fundamental attributes. Conversely, entities lacking any of the five criteria can be shown to lack core statehood characteristics. This suggests the five criteria capture what is essential and sufficient.

This is not to claim the five criteria eliminate all ambiguity—threshold questions remain regarding how much population, territory, or defensive capacity suffices—but rather that additional criteria beyond these five are unnecessary for defining statehood. The framework is complete in identifying the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions that distinguish states from non-states.

5.4 Definitional Implications and Clarifications

5.4.1 Authority Rather Than Conformity to Popular Will

The definition specifies "authority" without requiring that this authority conform to the will of the governed population or possess democratic legitimacy (Philpott, 2001). While conformity to

popular preferences enhances internal stability and may strengthen legitimacy, making such conformity definitional would exclude many historical and contemporary states (Gilley, 2009; Hurd, 1999).

Dictatorships, authoritarian regimes, and various forms of non-democratic governance have clearly constituted states throughout history, even when imposed through force against population preferences (Linz, 2000; Brooker, 2009). Making democracy or popular consent definitional would require the counterintuitive claim that authoritarian regimes are not states, conflating empirical classification with normative judgment about legitimate governance (Munck & Verkuilen, 2002). The proposed definition therefore remains normatively neutral regarding governmental form, focusing on empirical attributes rather than legitimacy assessments.

5.4.2 Emanation From Population

The authority “emanates from” the population in the sense that state institutions are constituted by persons drawn from the population, state authority is exercised over that population, and state existence depends on extraction of resources from that population (Mann, 1986, 1993). This phrasing does not imply popular sovereignty, democratic consent, or bottom-up authority; rather, it indicates that states necessarily emerge from and operate through human populations rather than existing independently of them (Poggi, 1990).

5.4.3 External Versus Internal Intrusions

The definition specifies defense against “external intrusions” rather than comprehensive security provision or monopoly on violence (Weber, 1919/1946). This focuses on capacity to maintain territorial integrity and political autonomy against foreign actors rather than requiring complete domestic order or absence of internal armed groups (Centeno, 2002; Thomson, 1994). Many states have coexisted with significant internal violence, insurgencies, or armed non-state actors while maintaining state status (Kalyvas, 2006; Staniland, 2014). The key criterion is capacity to resist external control that would terminate autonomous existence.

This distinction has important implications for assessing weak and fragile states. An entity experiencing civil war, insurgency, or limited territorial control may still constitute a state if it maintains capacity to resist external conquest or occupation. Somalia in the 1990s presented a borderline case: while central government authority collapsed internally, various Somali factions retained capacity to resist foreign military intervention, suggesting some residual defensive capacity despite state failure (Menkhaus, 2007). By contrast, puppet states under effective foreign military occupation lack autonomous defensive capacity even if internal order is maintained. The criterion thus focuses on external rather than internal dimensions of security: can the entity defend its territory against external actors seeking to impose control, regardless of internal challenges to governmental authority?

5.4.4 Defensive Not Offensive Capacity

The definition requires defensive capacity but does not specify offensive military capability, power projection beyond borders, or capacity to wage aggressive war (Levy & Thompson,

2010). A state must be capable of resisting external conquest or effective foreign control, but need not possess capability to conquer other territories (Fazal, 2007). This accommodates states with limited military forces focused on territorial defense while excluding puppet entities that exist only through foreign permission.

5.4.5 Degree of Control and Effectiveness

The definition does not specify that states must exercise complete or effective control throughout their territories, recognizing that many recognized states struggle with limited state capacity, contested authority, or fragmented control (Migdal, 1988; O'Donnell, 1993). The definition requires institutional differentiation and defensive capacity but does not demand uniformly high levels of either. This accommodates variation in state capacity while maintaining distinction between states and non-state entities (Soifer, 2008; Slater, 2010).

5.5 Addressing Common Objections

5.5.1 Objection 1: Definition Excludes Microstates

Critics might argue that the defensive capacity criterion excludes microstates like Vatican City, Monaco, Liechtenstein, or small island states that lack significant military forces and rely on larger neighbors or international law for security (Duursma, 1996; Maass, 2009).

Response: This objection accurately identifies an implication of the proposed definition. Entities that lack meaningful defensive capacity and exist only through larger states' forbearance do not constitute genuine states under this framework. Vatican City, for example, is more accurately understood as a *sui generis* entity—the sovereign territorial base of the Catholic Church's international institutional presence—rather than a state in the same sense as Italy or Brazil (Pollard, 2006). Its international recognition reflects political accommodation rather than statehood in a meaningful sense.

This implication is a feature rather than a flaw of the definition. Clarity regarding what constitutes genuine statehood is preferable to definitions so elastic that they encompass entities with radically different attributes. Microstates might be classified as a distinct category of internationally recognized entities without full statehood (Dumienski, 2014). Alternatively, defensive capacity could be understood to include effective diplomatic protection or collective security arrangements where these genuinely constrain potential aggressors—though this risks reintroducing recognition-dependence.

5.5.2 Objection 2: Definition Is Too Stringent for Many Recognized States

Critics might argue that many currently recognized states fail to meet the defensive capacity criterion, particularly failed states or those with very weak militaries (Rotberg, 2003; Call, 2008).

Response: The defensive capacity criterion requires capability for territorial defense, not actual effectiveness against all threats or absence of state failure. Even weak states typically maintain some military forces, police, or other security structures that distinguish them from entities

possessing no autonomous defensive capacity whatsoever (Herbst, 2000). The criterion aims to exclude puppet states and entirely dependent entities rather than to require high levels of military capability.

Failed states present complex cases. To the extent that state collapse eliminates defensive capacity and functional institutions, the entity may lose empirical statehood even while retaining juridical recognition (Jackson, 1990). This highlights the distinction between current statehood (possessing the attributes defined) and historical claims to statehood (having previously been a state). The proposed definition focuses on current attributes rather than historical status or international legal recognition.

5.5.3 Objection 3: Definition Neglects Recognition's Practical Importance

Critics might argue that regardless of theoretical merits, recognition by other states and international organizations remains essential for participation in international relations, making recognition-independent definitions impractical (Fabry, 2010; Coggins, 2014).

Response: The objection conflates two distinct issues: defining what states are versus determining which entities are treated as states in international practice. Recognition unquestionably matters for practical participation in international institutions, treaty-making, and diplomatic relations (Crawford, 2006). However, the practical importance of recognition does not mean it should be definitional.

Distinguishing empirical statehood (possessing the defining attributes) from juridical statehood (being recognized as a state) enables more sophisticated analysis of international relations (Jackson, 1990; Clapham, 1996). Entities may possess statehood attributes without recognition (Somaliland) or possess recognition without meeting statehood criteria (failed states, puppet states). Making recognition definitional obscures rather than illuminates these patterns.

Furthermore, a clear understanding of what constitutes statehood independent of recognition politics is necessary to critique current recognition practices. If statehood is defined by recognition, there is no external standard by which to evaluate whether recognition decisions are justified (Fabry, 2010; Ker-Lindsay, 2012).

6. Discussion: Implications and Applications

6.1 Analytical Advantages

The proposed definition offers several analytical advantages over existing frameworks:

- Logical Coherence
 - By eliminating reference to relations with other states and grounding all criteria in observable attributes of the entity itself, the definition avoids the circularity that plagues recognition-dependent approaches (Raič, 2002; Vidmar, 2012). Each criterion can be assessed independently without requiring prior determination of what other entities constitute states.

- Empirical Assessability
 - All five criteria reference observable conditions: territorial extent and location, population presence and size, resource availability, military capabilities, and institutional structures. While measurement challenges exist and borderline cases will arise, these criteria are more susceptible to empirical assessment than legally fictive concepts like “capacity to enter into relations with other states” (Goertz, 2006).
- Recognition Independence
 - The definition provides an external standard for evaluating recognition decisions and analyzing disjunctions between empirical and juridical statehood (Jackson, 1990; Englebert, 2009). Scholars and policymakers can assess whether entities deserve recognition based on possession of statehood attributes rather than treating recognition itself as constitutive of statehood.
- Clarity Regarding Exclusions
 - The definition clearly excludes: (1) states-in-exile, which lack territorial control; (2) puppet states, which lack autonomous defensive capacity; and (3) microstates entirely dependent on foreign protection. These exclusions enhance conceptual clarity and may be normatively desirable if the concept of statehood is to retain meaningful content.

6.2 Application to Contemporary Cases

6.2.1 Contested Statehood

The proposed definition provides a framework for analyzing contemporary cases of contested statehood:

- Kosovo: This case demonstrates clear satisfaction of all five criteria despite contested recognition. (1) Territorial foundation—Kosovo exercises effective control over 10,887 km² with internationally recognized boundaries inherited from its former status as an autonomous province within Serbia (Ker-Lindsay, 2012). (2) Population presence—approximately 1.8 million people reside within Kosovo's territory, with stable settlement patterns and established communities (CIA, 2020). (3) Territorial viability—Kosovo's agricultural capacity, mineral resources (particularly lignite coal, lead, zinc), and service economy provide economic foundation sufficient to support its population, supplemented by remittances and trade relationships with neighboring states. (4) Defensive capacity—the Kosovo Security Force (established 2009) consists of approximately 3,300 active personnel with light infantry capabilities, providing baseline territorial defense capacity, though NATO's KFOR mission provides additional security guarantees (Ker-Lindsay, 2012). The existence of autonomous military forces meeting the minimal threshold for defensive capacity satisfies this criterion despite alliance support. (5) Institutional differentiation—Kosovo maintains a presidential-parliamentary system with differentiated executive, legislative, and judicial branches, bureaucratic ministries, and organized security apparatus clearly distinct from the general population. Assessment: Kosovo meets all five criteria and would qualify as a state under the proposed framework. The contested recognition reflects political considerations (Serbian opposition, concerns about secession precedents) rather than absence of statehood

attributes. The case demonstrates that the framework can identify empirical statehood independent of recognition politics.

- Taiwan: This case presents clear satisfaction of most criteria with complexity in defensive capacity assessment. (1) Territorial foundation—Taiwan exercises complete control over 36,193 km² including Taiwan island, Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu, with clearly demarcated maritime boundaries (Copper, 2019). (2) Population presence—approximately 23.8 million people reside within Taiwan's territory with one of the world's highest population densities and highly developed urban centers (CIA, 2020). (3) Territorial viability—Taiwan possesses a highly developed economy (GDP per capita ~\$33,000), advanced manufacturing capacity (semiconductors, electronics), substantial agricultural production, and extensive trade relationships that clearly support its large population (Copper, 2019). (4) Defensive capacity—Taiwan maintains substantial military forces (approximately 165,000 active personnel, 1.7 million reserves) with indigenous defense industries producing missiles, naval vessels, and aircraft, demonstrating autonomous baseline defensive capacity (Hickey, 2007). However, the extent to which Taiwan could maintain territorial integrity against its primary potential adversary (China) without U.S. support is debatable. The question is whether U.S. security assurances supplement autonomous capacity or substitute for it. Taiwan's substantial indigenous military forces suggest the former—it possesses autonomous baseline capacity that U.S. support enhances rather than replaces. (5) Institutional differentiation—Taiwan operates a sophisticated presidential-parliamentary system with comprehensive bureaucratic apparatus, independent judiciary, and highly developed state institutions clearly distinct from society. Assessment: Taiwan meets all five criteria under the proposed framework. The defensive capacity criterion is satisfied by Taiwan's substantial autonomous military forces despite uncertainty about capacity against China without U.S. support. The framework distinguishes alliance-supported defense (acceptable) from puppet state scenarios where entities possess no autonomous military capacity (disqualifying). Taiwan's lack of widespread recognition reflects Chinese diplomatic pressure rather than absence of statehood attributes, demonstrating disjunction between empirical and juridical statehood.
- Somaliland: This unrecognized entity demonstrates clear satisfaction of all five criteria, illustrating disjunction between empirical and juridical statehood. (1) Territorial foundation—Somaliland exercises effective territorial control over approximately 176,000 km² corresponding to former British Somaliland boundaries, with functioning border controls and minimal territorial disputes except with Puntland over Sool and Sanaag regions (Pegg, 1998). (2) Population presence—approximately 4-5.5 million people reside within Somaliland's territory with stable settlement patterns (CIA estimates vary; Hoehne, 2015). (3) Territorial viability—Somaliland's livestock economy (particularly sheep and goat exports to Gulf states), fishing resources, agricultural production in river valleys, and remittances from diaspora provide economic foundation supporting its population, supplemented by Port of Berbera trade revenues (Renders & Terlinden, 2010). (4) Defensive capacity—Somaliland maintains organized military forces (approximately 20,000-30,000 personnel) and police that have successfully defended territorial integrity against incursions and maintained internal stability since 1991, demonstrating autonomous defensive capacity without foreign military presence (Pegg, 1998). (5) Institutional differentiation—Somaliland operates a presidential system

combining traditional clan elders (guurti) with elected lower house, executive ministries, judiciary, and bureaucratic apparatus providing clear organizational differentiation from society (Renders & Terlinden, 2010). Assessment: Somaliland unambiguously meets all five criteria under the proposed framework. Its lack of international recognition stems from African Union opposition to altering colonial boundaries and international community deference to Somalia's territorial integrity claims rather than absence of statehood attributes (Clapham, 1996). Comparatively, Somaliland demonstrates greater governmental effectiveness, territorial control, and institutional capacity than internationally recognized Somalia, which has experienced prolonged state failure (Menkhaus, 2007). This case strongly supports the framework's utility in distinguishing empirical statehood from recognition politics.

- Northern Cyprus: Meets basic criteria for population, territory, government, and defensive capacity (through Turkish military presence), but the extent to which it possesses autonomous defensive capacity independent of Turkey is debatable (Bahcheli, 2004; Ker-Lindsay, 2011). Again, as with Taiwan, this case highlights the difficulty of assessing defensive capacity in contexts of close military alliances or dependencies (with or without suggesting puppet state status).
- Transnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia: These entities maintain governmental control and possess defensive capacity primarily through Russian military support (Lynch, 2004; Caspersen, 2012). Assessment of their statehood depends on whether Russian protection constitutes their primary defensive capacity (with or without suggesting puppet state status) or merely supplements autonomous capabilities.

6.2.2 Microstates and Dependent Territories

As discussed in Section 5.5, microstates like Vatican City and Monaco would not qualify as states under the proposed definition due to lacking autonomous defensive capacity. This classification may more accurately reflect their actual status as dependent entities enjoying special international recognition for historical or political reasons (Duursma, 1996).

Dependent territories including Puerto Rico, Greenland, French Polynesia, and others clearly do not meet the defensive capacity criterion as they rely entirely on parent states for defense and lack autonomous foreign policy capacity (Baldacchino & Milne, 2000). The definition appropriately excludes these entities from statehood.

6.2.3 Failed States

Failed states present complex analytical challenges. To the extent that state collapse eliminates functioning institutions and defensive capacity, affected entities may lose empirical statehood even while retaining juridical recognition (Rotberg, 2003; Call, 2008). Somalia during the 1990s, for example, arguably lost multiple statehood attributes—particularly institutional differentiation and defensive capacity—even though it retained UN membership and international recognition (Menkhaus, 2007).

The proposed definition enables analysis of failed states as entities that historically possessed statehood but have lost it through institutional collapse, distinguishing current status from

historical legacy and legal recognition (Jackson, 1990). This analytical distinction may prove more useful than treating failed states as continuous members of the category despite lacking key attributes.

Table 1: Application of Five-Criterion Framework to Contested Cases

Entity	Territorial Foundation	Population Presence	Territorial Viability	Defensive Capacity	Institutional Differentiation	Overall Assessment
Kosovo	✓ (10,887 km ²)	✓ (~1.8M)	✓	✓ (3,300)	✓	MEETS CRITERIA
Taiwan	✓ (36,193 km ²)	✓ (~23.8M)	✓	✓* (165k)	✓	MEETS CRITERIA
Somaliland	✓ (176,000 km ²)	✓ (~4-5.5M)	✓	✓ (20-30k)	✓	MEETS CRITERIA
Northern Cyprus	✓ (3,355 km ²)	✓ (~326k)	✓	~ Turkish**	✓	AMBIGUOUS
Transnistria	✓ (4,163 km ²)	✓ (~475k)	~ Limited	~ Russian**	✓	AMBIGUOUS
South Ossetia	✓ (3,900 km ²)	✓ (~53k)	~ Minimal	~ Russian**	~ Limited	QUESTIONABLE
Abkhazia	✓ (8,660 km ²)	✓ (~245k)	✓	~ Russian**	✓	AMBIGUOUS
Vatican City***	✓ (0.44 km ²)	✓ (~826)	X Dependent	X None	✓	FAILS CRITERIA
Monaco***	✓ (2 km ²)	✓ (~39k)	✓	X France	✓	FAILS CRITERIA
Somalia (1990s)	✓ (637,657 km ²)	✓ (~7-10M)	✓ Potential	~ Fragmented	X Collapsed	FAILED STATE

Notes:

- Checkmarks (✓) indicate clear satisfaction of criterion, tildes (~) indicate ambiguous or borderline cases, and X marks (X) indicate failure to meet criterion.
- *Taiwan's defensive capacity is autonomous though alliance-enhanced with the USA.
- **Ambiguous defensive capacity indicates heavy reliance on foreign military presence; assessment depends on whether this supplements or substitutes for autonomous capacity.
- ***Microstates shown for comparison; currently recognized but fail proposed criteria.
- Table summarizes application of the five-criterion framework to contemporary contested and comparative cases. The framework distinguishes entities with empirical statehood from those lacking key attributes despite (or without) international recognition.

6.2.4 Recognition Paradoxes: The Israel-Somaliland Case

The Israel-Somaliland Recognition Paradox: On December 26, 2025, Israel became the first country to formally recognize Somaliland's statehood, creating a theoretically illuminating paradox. Israel itself lacks recognition from approximately 30 UN member states—primarily in the Middle East and Muslim-majority regions—many of which consider it an occupational entity on Palestinian territory rather than a legitimate state. Yet under the proposed framework, Israel unambiguously meets all five criteria: it exercises effective territorial control over defined territory (approximately 22,000 km² within pre-1967 borders, with contested control over additional territories), governs a population of approximately 9.7 million, possesses an economy capable of supporting this population, maintains substantial autonomous defensive capacity through the Israel Defense Forces (approximately 170,000 active personnel plus significant reserves and indigenous defense industries), and operates sophisticated differentiated state institutions (CIA, 2020). This paradox demonstrates a key insight of the framework: entities can simultaneously possess empirical statehood (meeting all objective criteria) while experiencing contested juridical statehood (partial recognition). Israel's recognition of Somaliland—itsself possessing empirical statehood without widespread juridical recognition—illustrates that recognition decisions reflect political considerations rather than objective assessment of statehood attributes. An unrecognized or partially-recognized state can coherently recognize another unrecognized state because recognition is a political act distinct from the empirical question of whether entities meet statehood criteria. The framework enables analysis of such complexities by distinguishing what states are (empirical attributes) from who acknowledges them (political recognition).

6.3 Implications for State Formation

The definition carries implications for understanding processes of state formation and emergence of new states.

6.3.1 Conditions for New State Emergence

For a new state to emerge, all five criteria must be satisfied: territorial foundation, population presence, territorial viability, defensive capacity, and institutional differentiation (Tilly, 1992; Spruyt, 1994). Various obstacles may prevent realization of these conditions:

- An aspiring group may lack territorial control despite possessing organizational capacity and popular support. Palestinian movements before 1994, for example, lacked territorial control that would enable state formation (Hassassian, 2002; Khalidi, 2006).
- Existing states may possess superior military power that prevents emerging entities from establishing defensive capacity. This explains why most secessionist movements fail to achieve statehood: parent states' military superiority prevents secessionists from satisfying the defensive capacity criterion (Griffiths, 2016; Walter, 2009).
- Populations may be geographically dispersed rather than concentrated in contiguous territory, preventing territorial consolidation necessary for statehood. Diaspora populations or culturally defined groups without territorial concentration cannot form states despite strong collective identity (Sheffer, 2003).

- Territories may lack resources to support sustainable populations, preventing long-term state viability even if other criteria are temporarily met.
- Organizational capacity may be insufficient to create differentiated institutions capable of exercising authority and defending territory.

6.3.2 Paths to Statehood

The definition suggests multiple paths through which new states might emerge:

- **Internal transformation:** An existing state might undergo revolutionary change that replaces governing institutions while maintaining territorial continuity and defensive capacity (Skocpol, 1979; Goldstone, 2001). Revolutionary France, the Soviet Union, and Iran exemplify this path.
- **Decolonization:** Colonial territories may achieve statehood when imperial powers withdraw, enabling colonized populations to establish autonomous institutions and defensive capacity (Strang, 1991; Chamberlain, 1999). The process requires development of institutional capacity and military forces capable of independent territorial defense.
- **Secession:** Sub-national groups may achieve statehood by developing institutions and defensive capacity sufficient to resist incorporation by parent states (Buchanan, 2004; Pavković & Radan, 2007). Successful secessions (Bangladesh, Eritrea, South Sudan) required military victory or negotiated settlements establishing autonomous defensive capacity (Heraclides, 1991; Coggins, 2011).
- **State fragmentation:** Existing states may fragment into multiple successor states when central authority collapses and regional entities establish autonomous institutions and defensive capacity. Soviet Union and Yugoslavia's dissolutions exemplify this pattern (Barkey & von Hagen, 1997; Bunce, 1999).

6.4 Normative Implications

6.4.1 Implications for Self-Determination

The definition has significant implications for debates about self-determination and recognition of new states. It provides objective criteria for assessing when self-determination claims have achieved practical realization through state formation (Cassese, 1995; Buchanan, 2004). Groups seeking self-determination must not merely declare independence but establish the institutional, territorial, and defensive attributes that constitute statehood.

This framework resists the tendency toward either permissiveness (recognizing any self-proclaimed entity) or excessive restrictiveness (denying recognition based purely on political considerations) (Weller, 2008; Kohen, 2006). It suggests that recognition decisions should be grounded in empirical assessment of statehood attributes rather than geopolitical calculations or abstract legal principles divorced from actual circumstances.

6.4.2 Implications for International Law

Adopting this definition would require significant revision of international legal approaches to statehood and recognition. The Montevideo Convention's fourth criterion would need

reformulation to eliminate circularity. Greater attention would be needed to standardizing assessment of territorial viability and defensive capacity. Most significantly, recognition would be understood as acknowledgment of empirically existing statehood rather than as constitutive of statehood itself (Vidmar, 2012; Crawford, 2006).

Such revision might reduce the power of existing states to arbitrarily grant or withhold recognition, potentially democratizing international relations by reducing great power privilege (Fabry, 2010). However, it would also require international institutions to develop more rigorous assessment mechanisms for evaluating statehood claims against empirical criteria.

6.4.3 Challenges to Status Quo

The proposed definition would delegitimize the statehood of entities that exist primarily through foreign protection or recognition rather than autonomous capacity. This includes certain microstates, puppet states, and potentially some failed states that retain juridical recognition despite lacking empirical statehood attributes (Jackson, 1990; Englebert, 2009). While potentially controversial, such clarification might enhance the coherence and legitimacy of the international state system.

Conversely, the definition would support statehood claims of currently unrecognized entities that possess the requisite attributes—particularly Somaliland and Taiwan, which demonstrate stable governance, territorial control, and defensive capacity exceeding many recognized states (Pegg, 1998; Copper, 2019).

6.5 Limitations and Boundary Cases

6.5.1 Threshold Problems

Despite improvements over existing definitions, the proposed framework does not eliminate all ambiguity. Threshold questions remain: How much territory is sufficient? What population size is required? What level of defensive capacity satisfies the criterion? These questions admit no precise universal answers (Collier & Levitsky, 1997). Context-dependent judgment remains necessary, though the proposed criteria provide clearer guidance than recognition-dependent frameworks.

6.5.2 Defensive Capacity Assessment

Determining adequate defensive capacity presents particular challenges. Military capability exists on a continuum, and the level necessary for autonomous territorial defense varies with geopolitical context (Fazal, 2007). A landlocked state surrounded by powerful neighbors faces different defensive requirements than an island state with natural maritime barriers. States in stable regions with strong international norms against aggression may require less military capacity than states in conflictual neighborhoods (Owsiak, 2012).

Furthermore, military alliances and collective security arrangements complicate assessment. When does alliance membership supplement autonomous defensive capacity versus substitute for

it entirely? No clear line distinguishes these cases, requiring contextual judgment about whether an entity could maintain territorial integrity absent alliance support (Morrow, 1991).

6.5.3 Temporal Dynamics

States may gain or lose statehood attributes over time. Civil wars, state collapse, foreign occupation, or economic collapse may erode institutional capacity or defensive capability, potentially causing loss of statehood (Tilly, 1992; Rotberg, 2003). The definition does not specify when temporary loss of capacity becomes permanent loss of statehood, leaving temporal boundaries somewhat ambiguous.

6.5.4 Federations and Composite States

Complex sovereignty arrangements including federations, confederations, and associated states present classification challenges (Watts, 2008; Elazar, 1987). Federal sub-units may possess many statehood attributes—defined territories, populations, governments, and sometimes military forces—yet are not typically considered separate states. The defensive capacity criterion helps distinguish federal sub-units (which lack autonomous defensive capacity) from independent states, but federal systems with significant sub-unit military forces present ambiguous cases.

6.5.5 Need for Empirical Testing and Validation

The proposed framework has been developed through conceptual analysis and theoretical reasoning, but it has not yet been systematically tested against empirical cases. While the framework appears logically sound and preliminary application to contested cases (Section 6.2) suggests utility, empirical validation is essential before the framework can be adopted with full confidence (Goertz, 2006; Adcock & Collier, 2001).

Several empirical tests would validate or refine the framework: (1) Systematic coding of historical and contemporary cases—apply the five criteria to a large sample of recognized states, contested entities, and failed states to assess whether the framework correctly classifies cases and where it produces ambiguous results; (2) Inter-coder reliability testing—have multiple researchers independently apply the criteria to the same cases to assess whether the operationalized criteria produce consistent classifications; (3) Comparative analysis with alternative frameworks—systematically compare the proposed framework against Montevideo criteria and other definitions to assess comparative explanatory power; (4) Longitudinal analysis—examine cases of state formation, state failure, and state recovery over time to assess whether the framework tracks empirical changes in statehood; and (5) Boundary case analysis—focus detailed analysis on entities at the margins (microstates, puppet states, failed states, states-in-exile) to identify where the framework succeeds or fails in classification.

Such testing may reveal the need for refinements to the criteria, adjustments to threshold specifications, or additional considerations not captured in the current framework. The framework should be understood as a theoretical contribution requiring empirical validation rather than a finalized standard ready for immediate adoption. This limitation does not

undermine the framework's theoretical value but acknowledges the iterative nature of concept development in social science (Lakatos, 1970; Laudan, 1977). Future research should prioritize systematic empirical testing to refine and validate the framework.

6.6 Future Research Directions

The proposed framework suggests several avenues for future research:

- Operationalization and Measurement
 - Systematic operationalization of the five criteria would enable empirical assessment of statehood claims across cases. Developing standardized measurement approaches for territorial viability, defensive capacity, and institutional differentiation would facilitate comparative analysis and test the framework's applicability (Adcock & Collier, 2001). Quantitative indicators could be developed for each criterion, enabling scaled assessment rather than binary classification.
- Historical Application
 - Applying the framework to historical cases of state formation and state collapse could test its validity across temporal and geographical contexts (Ertman, 1997; Tilly, 1992). Comparative historical analysis might reveal whether the five criteria successfully distinguish states from other forms of political organization across diverse historical settings (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003).
- Recognition Politics
 - Empirical analysis of recognition decisions could examine whether actual recognition patterns reflect assessments of statehood attributes or primarily reflect political considerations divorced from empirical criteria (Coggins, 2014; Fabry, 2010). Systematic comparison of recognized and unrecognized entities' attributes could reveal the determinants of recognition beyond statehood itself.
- Alternative Formulations
 - Scholars might propose alternative formulations addressing perceived weaknesses in this framework or emphasizing different dimensions of statehood. Constructive dialogue among competing frameworks could advance theoretical understanding (Lakatos, 1970; Laudan, 1977).

7. Conclusions

7.1 Summary of Argument

This paper has demonstrated significant conceptual and practical limitations in prevailing definitions of statehood, particularly those enshrined in the Montevideo Convention and adopted in international legal practice. The analysis identified multiple problems: logical circularity in recognition-dependent criteria, inadequate standardization of key terms, subjective application reflecting power politics rather than objective standards, and insufficient criteria to distinguish genuine states from dependent entities or symbolic entities lacking meaningful autonomy.

In response to these limitations, this paper has proposed an alternative definition grounding statehood in five necessary and observable criteria: territorial foundation, population presence,

territorial viability, defensive capacity, and institutional differentiation. This definition offers several advantages: logical coherence through elimination of circular reasoning, empirical assessability through observable criteria, recognition independence enabling external evaluation of recognition decisions, and clarity regarding excluded categories including states-in-exile, puppet states, and entities entirely dependent on foreign protection.

7.2 Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to scholarly understanding of statehood in several ways.

- First, it provides systematic critique of conceptual problems in existing definitions that have received insufficient attention in prior literature. While scholars have noted practical difficulties with the Montevideo criteria, the logical circularity inherent in the fourth criterion has not been adequately analyzed.
- Second, the paper offers a recognition-independent framework for defining statehood that addresses theoretical and practical limitations of current approaches. By grounding statehood in intrinsic attributes observable independent of recognition, the framework enables analysis of disjunctions between empirical and juridical statehood.
- Third, the analysis clarifies the distinction between defining what states are and determining which entities should be recognized as states—a distinction often conflated in international law scholarship. Separating these issues enables more sophisticated analysis of recognition politics and state formation.

7.3 Practical Implications

The practical implications of adopting this definitional framework would be profound. Some currently recognized entities would lose theoretical justification for statehood claims, while some currently unrecognized entities would gain stronger grounds for claiming statehood. This would challenge existing power structures in international relations, potentially democratizing processes of recognition and state formation by reducing the arbitrary authority of existing states.

International legal frameworks would require revision to eliminate circular and recognition-dependent criteria in favor of empirically assessable standards. This might entail development of more systematic assessment mechanisms within international institutions for evaluating statehood claims against objective criteria.

Recognition practices would ideally become more consistent and principled, grounded in empirical assessment rather than geopolitical expediency. However, political considerations will inevitably continue to influence recognition decisions regardless of theoretical frameworks. The contribution of improved definitions is to provide clearer standards by which actual practices can be evaluated and critiqued.

7.4 Limitations and Future Directions

This paper has acknowledged several limitations of the proposed framework. Threshold ambiguities remain regarding how much territory, population, or defensive capacity suffices for statehood. Temporal boundaries between temporary loss of capacity and permanent loss of

statehood remain imprecise. Complex sovereignty arrangements including federations and associated states present ongoing classification challenges.

Future research should pursue operationalization and measurement of the five criteria to enable systematic empirical testing across cases. Historical application to diverse contexts could evaluate whether the framework successfully distinguishes states from other political forms across time and space. Analysis of actual recognition patterns could assess whether recognition reflects empirical statehood or primarily political considerations.

7.5 Concluding Reflection

The definition of statehood is not merely an academic exercise but a foundational question with profound implications for international relations, human rights, self-determination, and global governance. Ambiguous or inadequate definitions perpetuate inconsistent recognition practices, prolonged sovereignty disputes, and challenges to international legal legitimacy. While no definition can eliminate all ambiguity or resolve all contested cases, more rigorous conceptual frameworks can provide clearer standards for analysis and evaluation.

The proposed definition represents an attempt to ground statehood in objective, observable criteria independent of the power politics that inevitably influence recognition decisions. Whether this particular formulation proves superior to alternatives is ultimately an empirical question requiring testing across cases and refinement through scholarly debate. The fundamental contribution of this research is to demonstrate the inadequacy of prevailing definitions and to propose a viable alternative that addresses their limitations while maintaining conceptual rigor.

The evolution of international relations requires clear understandings of its foundational concepts. As the global political order continues to develop—confronting challenges including contested sovereignties, state fragmentation, transnational governance, and changing forms of political organization—rigorous theorization of statehood remains essential. This paper offers one contribution to that ongoing project.

8. Glossary of Key Terms

This glossary provides concise definitions of technical terms used throughout the paper to aid interdisciplinary readers.

- **Constitutive Theory of Recognition:** The view that recognition by existing states is essential to achieving statehood and legal personality in international law. An entity becomes a state only when recognized by other states (Lauterpacht, 1947).
- **Declarative Theory of Recognition:** The view that statehood is determined by meeting objective criteria, while recognition by other states is merely declaratory of an already-existing status. An entity either is or is not a state based on factual attributes, regardless of recognition (Crawford, 2006).
- **Defensive Capacity:** An entity's capability to defend its territory and population against external intrusions or conquest. This does not require ability to defeat all adversaries but

rather sufficient autonomous military or security forces that the entity's existence depends primarily on its own efforts rather than foreign permission.

- **Empirical Statehood:** Actual possession of the attributes and capabilities traditionally associated with states (effective governance, territorial control, institutional capacity), regardless of formal international recognition. Distinguished from juridical statehood (Jackson, 1990).
- **Failed State:** A state that has lost the capacity to provide basic governmental functions including security, rule of law, and public services, often characterized by collapse of central authority and loss of territorial control (Rotberg, 2003).
- **Institutional Differentiation:** The existence of organizational structures and authority positions that are distinct from the general population and from other social institutions such as kinship networks or religious organizations.
- **Juridical Statehood:** Formal legal recognition as a state in international law, including UN membership and diplomatic recognition by other states, regardless of actual governmental capacity or effectiveness. Distinguished from empirical statehood (Jackson, 1990).
- **Montevideo Convention:** The 1933 Convention on the Rights and Duties of States that established four criteria for statehood: permanent population, defined territory, government, and capacity to enter into relations with other states. This framework has dominated international legal approaches to statehood.
- **Puppet State:** An entity with nominal sovereignty and formal attributes of statehood but under effective foreign control, existing only through the permission and military protection of another state. Historical examples include Manchukuo under Japanese control.
- **Recognition:** The formal acknowledgment by existing states or international organizations that an entity constitutes a state. Recognition decisions have significant practical consequences for diplomatic relations, treaty-making capacity, and international organization membership.
- **Recognition Independence:** The principle that statehood should be defined by intrinsic attributes of an entity rather than recognition decisions by other states. A core theoretical commitment of the proposed framework.
- **State Formation:** The historical processes through which states emerge and consolidate control, including patterns of war-making, capital accumulation, institutional development, and establishment of territorial authority (Tilly, 1992).
- **Territorial Viability:** The capacity of a territory to support the existence of its population through some combination of territorial resources, economic activity, and external trade. Does not require complete self-sufficiency but rather that the territory can sustain human habitation.
- **Unrecognized State (De Facto State):** An entity that exercises effective governmental control over defined territory and population but lacks widespread international recognition. Examples include Somaliland, Transnistria, and Northern Cyprus.

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Intelligence tools have been used to polish the manuscript.

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