

# The Diplomacy of State Derecognition: When and Why States Lose Diplomatic Recognition

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## Abstract

This article examines the overlooked practice of state derecognition as a dynamic instrument of contemporary international politics. Drawing on a critical-geopolitics framework, it demonstrates how the strategic withdrawal of diplomatic recognition undermines assumptions of permanent sovereignty and reconfigures territorial orders. Through comparative case studies of Taiwan, Western Sahara, and Kosovo, the article shows that derecognition is rarely grounded in changes to legal criteria for statehood; instead, it reflects broader political calculations, including economic leverage, domestic political consolidation, and geopolitical influence. By treating derecognition as a deliberate diplomatic contestation strategy launched by the former base state vis-à-vis the secessionist state, this article reveals the contingent and reversible nature of sovereignty itself and the protracted nature of statehood conflicts. It concludes that the increasing use of derecognition as a tool of statecraft erodes international norms, intensifies great-power rivalries, and poses a significant challenge to the international order. This research offers a critical framework for understanding the contested dynamics of statehood in an era of shifting geopolitical alignments.

**Keywords:** state derecognition, sovereignty, political expediency, chequebook diplomacy

## Introduction

Diplomatic recognition has long functioned as a cornerstone of international legitimacy. It provides political entities with access to global institutions, legal protections, and diplomatic engagement (Fazal and Griffiths, 2014; Besson, 2020). Conversely, the absence of recognition poses numerous challenges, such as vulnerability to foreign military occupations, hybrid wars, and regional instability (Ker-Lindsay, 2012). These unrecognised entities struggle to establish political, security, and economic ties, often resulting in poverty, isolation, and stagnation (Caspersen, 2014). Moreover, their exclusion from international norms and regulatory frameworks hampers democratic progress, human rights protections, and effective resource management. Historically, recognition has accompanied processes of state formation, most notably during the mid-20th-century decolonisation and the post-Cold War restructuring of the international order following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia (Caplan, 2005; Fabry, 2010). However, the pursuit of statehood remains one of the most contentious

issues in international politics, particularly in cases outside the decolonisation framework and consensual secession (Williams, 2021: 127). In such instances, third countries, through their recognition, non-recognition, or derecognition of aspirant states, can exert significant influence on the trajectory of self-determination disputes and the prospects for their resolution (Visoka, Doyle, and Newman 2020). In short, the prospect of international recognition can serve as a powerful incentive for both the base state and the secessionist movement to engage in negotiations and achieve a peaceful settlement.

While the legal and normative dimensions of recognition have been extensively theorised, its inverse, state derecognition, whereby a recognised state loses its diplomatic status, remains undertheorised in both international relations and political geography (see de Oliveira, 2023; Kilibarda, 2024). However, derecognition is not merely a conceptual outlier (Visoka, 2024). In recent years, it has emerged as a critical tool in geopolitical struggles over sovereignty. Taiwan has seen its diplomatic partners steadily decline as China pressures states to adopt a “One China” policy. Morocco has led successful campaigns to reverse recognition of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), undermining claims to self-determination in Western Sahara. Serbia, with Russia's support, has sought to reverse Kosovo's recognition, leveraging bilateral relations across Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific. These cases illustrate how derecognition functions not as a legal aberration but as a strategic practice - one that is deeply embedded in global power struggles, regional contestations, and the shifting terrain of international legitimacy.

This article argues that state derecognition must be understood through a critical geopolitical lens as a performative, contingent, and highly politicised practice. Far from being a legal technicality or reversal, derecognition reveals how sovereignty is constructed, contested, and renegotiated across space and time. Unlike recognition, which affirms sovereignty and territorial legitimacy (Crawford, 2007), derecognition is employed by the former base states to undermine these claims, aiming to delegitimise contested states, isolate them diplomatically, and compel political compliance (Visoka, 2024). In this sense, state derecognition operates as a strategic intervention in protracted statehood conflicts to change the status-quo, and is utilised by third countries for their economic and geopolitical interests without much regard for the fundamental norms of international law.

Theoretically, the article draws on critical geopolitics as a framework to examine the discursive politics and geopolitical implications of state derecognition. It contends that sovereignty is not a static legal status but a negotiated and reversible assemblage of power, space, and legitimacy. State derecognition, therefore, challenges the foundational assumption of international law that statehood is permanent once achieved. The strategic withdrawal of recognition, often under economic inducements, diplomatic coercion, or ideological alignment, reveals the fluidity of statehood and the susceptibility of international recognition to geopolitical manipulation (Visoka, 2025). Empirically, the article examines contemporary cases of derecognition, focusing on Taiwan, Western Sahara, and Kosovo. These case studies demonstrate how derecognition contributes to prolonged conflicts, regional instability, and the erosion of legal certainty in the global order. Taiwan's exclusion from multilateral forums, the Western Sahara's declining recognition in Africa and Latin America, and the reversal of Kosovo's recognition in the Balkans, all illustrate the symbolic and material consequences of derecognition as a tool of statecraft.

In doing so, this article makes three key contributions. First, it challenges the assumption that recognition is permanent, highlighting how sovereignty remains vulnerable to political recalibration. Second, it reframes derecognition as a geopolitical instrument, used to reward allies, pressure adversaries, and shape regional configurations. Third, it explores the broader implications of derecognition for international legal norms, global governance, and the survival of contested states. The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. The next section

reviews legal scholarship on state recognition and challenges its assumptions about the permanence and universality of statehood and recognition. A critical geopolitical framework on state derecognition is then introduced, outlining the methodological approach and the selection of cases. The core sections offer a critical evaluation of the process, discourses, and effects of diplomatic derecognition in state practice. In conclusion, the article examines the theoretical and normative implications of derecognition for our understanding of sovereignty and the international order.

## **Can States Withdraw the Recognition of Other States? The Promise and Limits of Legal Formalism**

While extensive literature exists on the recognition of states in international law, political studies, and diplomatic history, little attention has been given to state derecognition (see Visoka, 2020; Kilibarda, 2024: 251-66). Yet, the legal discourse on state derecognition is deeply contentious. While some scholars argue that recognition is irrevocable, others maintain that states retain the discretion to withdraw recognition under specific circumstances. Most legal scholars argue that once a state has been recognised, this recognition is irrevocable (see Visoka, 2024: 34-45). This argument primarily relies on the declaratory theory of recognition, which asserts that a state's existence is independent of recognition, provided it meets substantive criteria. Vincent Lowe (2007: 161) maintains that "the declaratory theory is correct...it is the most accurate description of what goes on in State practice in relation to the recognition of states." The Montevideo Convention further supports this stance, asserting that "the political existence of the state is independent of recognition by other states" and that recognition "is unconditional and irrevocable." Legal scholars and judicial authorities have reinforced this perspective. Similarly, Vincent Lowe (2007: 165) emphasises that "the road to Statehood is a one-way street. Once an entity has become a State, it will remain one, regardless of how ineffective its government might become". Jure Vidmar (2013: 41) concurs, arguing that "once states have acquired statehood, the latter is difficult to lose, even when the Montevideo criteria are no longer met." Stefan Talmon (2005: 125) affirms that "the creation of a State cannot be undone by non-recognition alone, and so non-recognition cannot have a status-destroying effect either." While derecognition can impact diplomatic relations, it does not extinguish a state's legal existence (Crawford (2007: 21-27). Moreover, legal scholars make a significant distinction between derecognition and the mere severance of diplomatic relations, arguing that "a breach of diplomatic relations does not imply the withdrawal of recognition" (James, 2016: 257).

Legal scholars contend that derecognition contravenes international legal norms, including the principles of good faith, estoppel, and sovereign equality. Georg Schwarzenberger (1955: 316) corroborates this viewpoint, noting that "irrespective of any other criterion, recognition estops the State which has recognised the title from contesting its validity at any future time." Consequently, derecognition is regarded as an inconsistent and destabilizing diplomatic practice. Antonio Cassese (2005: 74) asserts that "recognition is legally relevant in that, once granted, it bars the recognizing State from altering its position and claiming that the new entity lacks statehood." This is consistent with the principle of estoppel, which prohibits states from retracting recognition once it has been bestowed. Considering that diplomatic recognition constitutes a bilateral agreement, derecognition may be interpreted as an unwarranted violation of international obligations. The irrevocability of state recognition remains the prevailing perspective among scholars, with the declaratory theory offering a legal and normative foundation for this stance (Visoka, 2024: 36-45). Once granted, recognition cannot be retracted unless the state ceases to function as a viable entity. Notwithstanding these

legal and normative assertions, they downplay the function of both recognition and derecognition and geopolitical tools. The claim that recognition is unconditional and irrevocable serves to normalise the current international order, suggesting that once a state joins the system, its status is secure, despite the fact that statehood and recognition have always been notably uneven and politicised. Furthermore, the claim that derecognition is destabilising or incompatible with international law and norms fails to recognise how the entire recognition system is rooted in asymmetry and geopolitical calculations (see Hecht, 2024).

Nonetheless, leading legal scholars acknowledge that recognition is inherently a discretionary and political act. They argue that recognition remains a discretionary act and that, under certain circumstances, withdrawing recognition may be appropriate. Hans Kelsen (1941: 610) states that since international law does not strictly regulate the recognition of states, “the states would be free not only to determine whether in a given case, a community is a state in an international law sense, but also free to determine what a state is and what conditions a community has to fulfil in order to become a state according to international law.” In the early period of the expansion of UN-based system of states, there was a discussion of withdrawal of recognition in the context of absence of governance capacity and its impact on resulting in the “international outlawry” of derecognised states (see Devine and J.E.S.F., 1971: 411). Later on, Malcolm Shaw (2021: 407) observes, “recognition may be withdrawn. This is essentially a political act. It is not usual, but it does happen.” Other scholars underline that recognition functions as a political instrument subject to change. Stephen Tierney (2013: 376-377) claims that “recognition is a uniquely political act, operating largely, if not entirely, at the discretion of states.” Beat Dold (2012: 91) agrees with this view, arguing, “no state can be compelled to grant recognition”. In this sense, the act is of a discretionary, political nature. It is often used to demonstrate approval or disapproval.” Jean d’Aspremont (2012) further asserts that “any subject of international law decides for itself how it interprets and construes the facts or the situation that is the object of recognition,” and that “once granted, recognition can also be subsequently withdrawn if the author changes its interpretation (and policies) or wishes to make it known differently.” This insight reveals an important flaw in the formalist edifice of international law: recognition is not solely determined by objective legal criteria, but also by how states interpret facts in light of their interests, ideologies, and geopolitical alliances.

This discretionary nature has led to a strategic use of recognition and derecognition, particularly by powerful or opportunistic states seeking to shape geopolitical alignments. John Dugard (2013: 6) asserts that “as long as international law does not prohibit the withdrawal of recognition, it will be difficult to discipline state practice.” Similarly, David Raič (2002: 83-84) underscores that “because of the decentralized nature of international law and the absence of a centralized organ authorized to decisively and determinately decide upon the existence or non-existence of a State, existing States have to fulfil that function by granting or withholding recognition.” There are scholars who contend that smaller states play a pivotal role in this discretionary practice, frequently utilising recognition and derecognition to further their interests. For example, J.C. Sharman (2017: 560) posits that “small states have taken a pick-and-choose approach to their sovereign prerogatives: energetically wielding some, delegating others in selectively forming hierarchical relationships, and commercialising yet others.” However, unrestricted derecognition poses significant risks. Ti-Chiang Chen (1951: 259-260) cautions that “there is, therefore, no greater threat to international legal order than the unrestricted notion of the revocability of recognition.” Maziar Jamnejad and Michael Wood (2009: 373) acknowledge that while states are not legally required to grant recognition, exceptions may exist. They argue that “a state’s failure to recognise an entity that meets the criteria for statehood will not ordinarily constitute intervention. International law does not generally impose an obligation to recognise. However, in certain exceptional circumstances,

where non-recognition aims to compel a change of policy, there could be a violation of the non-intervention principle.”

Yet, distinguished legal scholars have not ruled out that derecognition may be permissible under specific conditions, particularly when a state no longer meets the criteria for statehood (see Oppenheim 1948: 145; Devine and J.E.S.F., 1971: 411). This argument follows from the idea that recognition is a factual acknowledgement of statehood rather than a permanent legal guarantee. If a state loses its independent government, effective authority, or territorial control, derecognition may be justified. For example, Chen (1951: 263) posits that “the only legitimate consideration for the withdrawal of recognition is the disappearance of the requirements of statehood or governmental capacity.” Similarly, Lauterpacht (1945: 180) asserts that derecognition “cannot properly be used as an instrument of political pressure or disapproval,” but that it may be permissible when a state no longer meets fundamental statehood criteria. Other scholars emphasise that states should not be permanently recognised if they fail to uphold the criteria that justified their recognition. Peter Radan (2020: 57) contends that “territorial entities that satisfy the criteria for statehood are not recognized as states. Furthermore, it is arguable that recognized states that cease to meet the criteria for statehood should be derecognized.” A growing body of influential IR scholars suggest that recognition and derecognition should be used to uphold governance and human rights standards. Stephen Krasner (2013: 174) criticises the current system, stating, “poorly governed and states without autonomy are recognized; states that are autonomous and effectively governed have not been recognized.” Similarly, Danny Auron (2013: 480) asserts, “since recognition is granted based on the existence of certain elements of statehood or capacity...the definite disappearance of these can justify derecognition.” Jeffrey Herbst (2004: 312) proposes that failed states should be “decertified,” meaning that states failing to exercise sovereign control should no longer be considered sovereign. However, proposals for the derecognition of failed states are problematic because they incorporate a neoliberal logic of performance and efficiency into international law, thereby strengthening global hierarchies and perpetuating Eurocentric standards of what constitutes a normal and genuine state.

The debate over the permissibility of derecognition cannot be settled through legal reasoning alone because the concepts of statehood, recognition, and sovereignty are shaped by geopolitical struggles. While legal scholars emphasise the permanence and inviolability of recognition, state practice continues to show its strategic nature. Recognition is not merely a reflection of legal status but a contingent declaration of geopolitical utility. The ongoing tension between normative legal frameworks and diplomatic realities reflects a broader contradiction at the core of the international system: the existing international order and stability maintained through allowing a degree of disorder and rule-breaking practices, and the existence of the rule-based international order and is often subordinate to the and political expediency. Derecognition, though seen as legally problematic or destabilising, is actually a sign of deeper instability - the instability of a global system that claims to be rule-bound but functions through discretionary, uneven, and often exclusionary mechanisms of recognition. Rather than trying to regulate derecognition through abstract legal standards, a more productive approach is to situate it within the wider geopolitics of international legitimacy. Who has the authority to recognise or derecognise? On what basis? And whose interests are advanced by these decisions? Answering these questions requires moving beyond legal formalism to challenge the ideological and imperial foundations of the state system itself. In this context, recognition and derecognition are not mere legal acts to be perfected but geopolitical performances to be exposed. Only by deconstructing their discursive and historical roots can we begin to envision alternative frameworks for political community and legitimacy, ones not solely dictated by the calculations of dominant states.

## **Beyond Legal Formalism: A Critical Geopolitics Perspective on State Derecognition**

The current understanding of state derecognition primarily relies on traditional and doctrinal concepts of statehood, territoriality, sovereignty, and international law. It is shaped by a level of political realism, which emphasises power politics and hierarchical status in international relations. Most existing views on state derecognition are outdated, reflecting old historical, normative, and legal perspectives, and do not align with current state practices. They also depend on idealised notions of statehood, recognition, and derecognition, often considering hypothetical scenarios. Viewing state derecognition through a traditional geopolitical lens sustains binary debates about whether sovereignty can be reversed. This binary approach restricts the exploration of other intermediate forms of diplomatic interaction or withdrawal, especially grey zone diplomacy (see Copeland, 2009), which falls outside the mainstream legal-political categories set by international law and diplomatic theory. It also tends to essentialise the role of powerful states and overlooks the influence of postcolonial states in shaping diplomatic norms, often by trading their capacity to recognise other states for economic, political, or military advantages.

Crucially, the legal infrastructure of recognition and derecognition has never operated on neutral terms. The legal framing discussed in the previous section downplays the role of recognition as a geopolitical tool wielded by powerful states to control the boundaries of international legitimacy. Jens Bartelson (2013: 111) contends, “the struggle for recognition takes place between unequal parties, in which the stronger party is in a position to grant or withhold recognition to the weaker one, and in which the stronger party is likely to perceive demands for recognition as challenges to its standing.” Historical precedents indicate that recognition has been applied selectively, often mirroring the strategic calculations of powerful states and discriminatory practices (see Ringmar, 2014; Anghie, 2004). The selective application of recognition and derecognition illustrates the political nature of international statehood. States may derecognise others as part of diplomatic pressure campaigns, coercion, or alignment with broader foreign policy objectives. Despite the absence of clear legal frameworks governing derecognition, the practice remains an area of contention in international relations. While legal scholars emphasise the permanence of recognition, political realities demonstrate that states persist in using derecognition as a diplomatic tool (Visoka 2024). The debate surrounding derecognition underscores broader tensions between legal norms and political pragmatism in international affairs. Moving forward, examination of contemporary state practice is essential to comprehend how derecognition is employed in diplomatic intercourse and its broader implications for the international order.

The remainder of this article employs the analytical framework of critical geopolitics to problematise the phenomenon of state derecognition by analysing not just the political and legal considerations but emphasising the diplomatic intertextuality and situational and transactional considerations that play a role in the rewriting and remaking of the meaning of diplomatic recognition in world politics. In this context, diplomatic intertextuality refers to the practice where derecognising states adopt, often verbatim, the arguments and texts drafted by the former base state to justify derecognition, masking politically driven decisions in normative and legal rationales to protect their international reputation. For this reason, critical geopolitics is an adequate approach to investigate how political and state-centric actors use political and normative arguments and spatialize international politics, representing the world as composed of particular places with distinct geopolitical and normative significances (O Tuathail, 1996; Kuus, 2010). As Sami Moisio (2013: 232) notes, “The state has remained one of the key constitutive concepts and intellectual problems in contemporary critical political geography and, thus, in critical geopolitics.” And one of the relevant contributions of critical geopolitics,

as manifested in the work of Fiona McConnell (2009), is to “destabilize the conventional understandings of the state as a spatial entity” (Moisio, 2013: 237). Rather than viewing geography as a fixed determinant of political actions, the critical geopolitics approach interrogates how political actors actively construct temporal, fluid, and geographical knowledge to advance specific strategic objectives (Visoka, 2018: 24-40). Compared to the traditional geopolitics or legal realism, critical geopolitics is better suited to explain “the ambiguity, contingency and uncertainty of the world we live in” (Dodds, 2005: 30).

Drawing from this perspective, the study refrains from treating diplomatic recognition and derecognition as neutral, objective processes governed solely by legal norms. Instead, it views state derecognition as a process shaped by diplomatic performance and lobbying efforts, accompanied by legal and political justifications that aim to mitigate international contestation of such decisions. This aligns with critical geopolitics, which considers discourses and practices as crucial for understanding “the social construction of worlds and the role of geographical knowledge in that social construction” (O Tuathail and Agnew, 1992: 191). As contemporary conflicts increasingly blur the lines between diplomacy and coercion, analysing state derecognition as a performative tactic is essential to understanding the reversal of politics and practices of statehood and sovereignty (Constantinou et al., 2025). Thus, it is crucial to approach both the recognition and derecognition of states as open-ended and polymorphic diplomatic practices comprising multiple actors, stages, strategies, discourses, and effects. As such, a critical-geopolitical analysis of state derecognition requires the examination of agential, structural, institutional, and relational features that underline the formulation of specific policies, as well as the decision-making process and procedures behind the withdrawal of diplomatic recognition.

Compared to transitional diplomatic studies or traditional geopolitics, the approach of critical geopolitics offers a more nuanced explanation for how economic dependence and personal interests influence foreign policy decisions (Dodds, 2005: 34). It also helps deconstruct the intersubjective and political expediencies that underpin narratives of national interest. As such, a critical-geopolitical analysis of state derecognition aids in unpacking the interplay between geopolitical and normative rationales with economic, electoral, and personal interests that shape the politics of state derecognition. Although it helps analyse the discursive aspects of foreign policy conduct (speeches, statements), it needs to be supplemented with analysis of diplomatic performances (such as meetings and events), and the entangled techniques (such as third-party patrons, regional blocs) that coalesce to remove recognition. It needs to be supplemented with analysis that identifies moments of liminality, namely phases of partial, informal, or implicit engagement that presage or follow formal derecognition, and the actors (career diplomats, diaspora lobbies, NGOs) who keep channels open or push for complete isolation. Despite limitations, critical geopolitics is a significant and relevant approach for examining the discourses and practices of state derecognition because it emphasises the globalisation, internationalisation, and interconnectedness of politics, economics, norms, and diplomatic cultures emerging from different parts of the world. Practices of state derecognition are influenced by transnational learning and lobbying cultures as well as alliance-building among those who propagate and oppose such practices.

State derecognition is understood differently by protagonist states. For the former base state and its allies, derecognition is viewed as a cancellation or reduction of the claimant state's statehood and sovereignty. In contrast, the claimant state and its allies consider acts of derecognition as insignificant to their statehood. Therefore, state derecognition serves as a tool of severe example of diplomatic contestation (see Barakawi, 2015). Given the wide disagreement on whether recognition can be reversed, the paper examines and compares the consistency and validity of arguments and rationales for derecognition against the original grounds for recognition and the reality on the grounds. The research method involves

interpretative analysis of state communications, policy documents, and diplomatic statements to uncover how states justify derecognition through geo-legal narratives and spatial classifications. Consistent with critical geopolitics, the analysis aims to “contextualise geopolitical figures and unravel the textual strategies they employ in their writings” (Ó Tuathail, 1999: 111). In other words, the study incorporates the critical geopolitical concept of the ‘intellectuals of statecraft,’ focusing on those who construct discourses and justify derecognition practices to examine how these intellectual agents influence policy outcomes. By analysing how geopolitical arguments are used to legitimise derecognition and territorial claims, this approach clarifies the power dynamics involved in shaping and challenging the norm of diplomatic derecognition in global politics.

The derecognition of states involves distinct categories of states, each playing a specific role. In each instance of state derecognition, at least four categories of actors are implicated: claimant states, former base states, third countries that withdraw recognition, and regional/global powers that either support or oppose these actions. Thus, critical geopolitics is an appropriate framework for studying state derecognition because it implicates certain territorial entities unequally in world politics. In other words, the diplomatic practice of derecognition doesn’t affect all states equally. The 193 UN member states (as of 2025) are shielded from this practice as they are assumed to enjoy universal recognition. Thus, the target of derecognition are specific territorial entities, namely contested states and territories that have declared or inherited independence, but remain partially recognised by other states, and don’t have full UN membership. The empirical analysis focuses on three prominent cases of derecognition: Taiwan, Western Sahara, and Kosovo (see Table 1). While state derecognition has been an exceptional diplomatic practice, it has become more prevalent since the 1970s, when over 30 states, including the United States of America, switched recognition from the Republic of China (Taiwan) to the People’s Republic of China. As of 2025, only 12 states recognise Taiwan. The second case study included in this article is Western Sahara (or Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic), which at some point has been recognised by over 80 UN member states. However, over the past four decades, it has lost more than half of its diplomatic allies. Kosovo is one of the most recent cases to be exposed to derecognition, where it is estimated that fewer than 20 states out of 119 have suspended, frozen, or withdrawn recognition. The cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which are breakaway regions of the Republic of Georgia, are documented here but not analysed thoroughly, as they are less prevalent. These states were initially recognised by seven UN member states and subsequently derecognised by two (Vanuatu and Tuvalu).

**Table 1: Total Number of Derecognitions Per Case Study (as of 2025)**

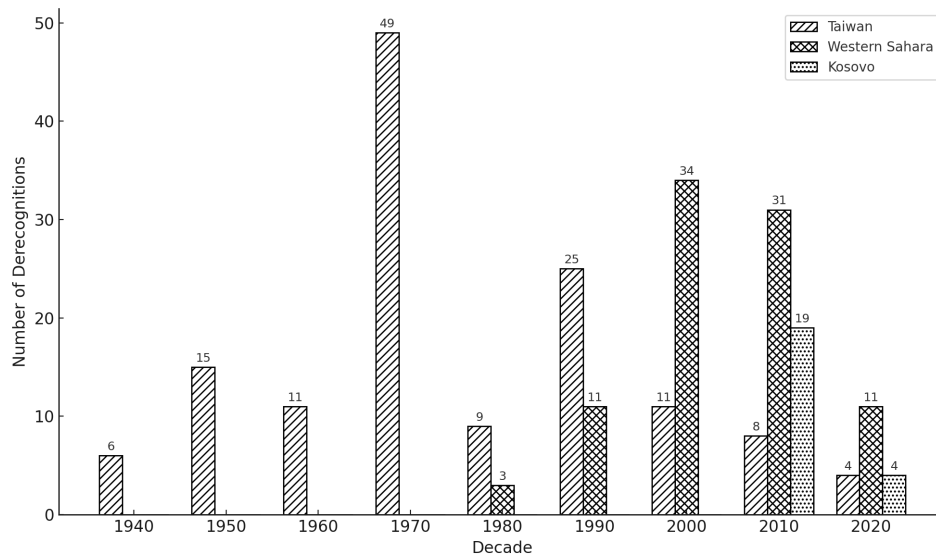
<b>Case Study</b>	<b>Total derecognitions</b>
Taiwan	129
Western Sahara	84
Kosovo	18
Abkhazia	2
South Ossetia	2

The dynamics and timing of derecognition differ across cases. As Chart 1 shows, derecognition tends to peak when the former base state or its rival gains the upper hand both domestically and internationally. Claimant states are most likely to be recognised when they enjoy broad collective support outside the UN system, but they lose recognition as their sovereignty and statehood attributes weaken. Critical turning points often stem from sustained lobbying by the



former base state and broader geopolitical shifts that encourage third countries to reconsider their stance. The process is further shaped by cycles of recognition, derecognition, and re-recognition by the same states, usually driven by domestic political changes and the transactional use of recognition for economic or strategic advantage.

**Chart 1: Derecognition of Taiwan, Western Sahara, and Kosovo By Decade**



Moreover, there is a geographical prevalence of state derecognition, performed primarily by postcolonial states that are economically weak, compensating for their economic vulnerabilities by selling, renting, or trading recognition and derecognition of contested states. Postcolonial states, particularly those in the Global South (small Caribbean, Pacific, and African states), have emerged as the main actors involved in the derecognition and re-recognition of other states. Countries such as Liberia, Guinea-Bissau, Malawi, Peru, Sierra Leone, Vanuatu, the Central African Republic, Nicaragua, and the Solomon Islands have recognised, derecognised, and re-recognised Taiwan four to five times, Western Sahara at least twice, and Kosovo, Abkhazia and South Ossetia at least once. These states often gained independence through decolonisation and continue to grapple with persistent poverty, geopolitical vulnerabilities, or are governed by semi-authoritarian regimes. Paradoxically, by using derecognition to undermine a claimant state's right to independent statehood, these postcolonial states are seen to be reproducing colonialist practices that were historically used by colonial and powerful states to subjugate other peoples' right to self-determination.

Thus, a critical geopolitics perspective enables us to reconceptualise state derecognition as a spatial, performative, and contingent practice. It challenges the binary logic of legal sovereignty and opens space for analysing how recognition is produced, circulated, and contested through diplomatic discourse. Derecognition is not merely the legal reversal of recognition - it is an active tool of geopolitical struggle, deeply embedded in the evolving architecture of global diplomacy.

## How Do States Lose Diplomatic Recognition?

While the international system is structured around the recognition of states, it offers no binding rules for how, or under what conditions, such recognition can be withdrawn (see Besson, 2020). Dominant international norms treat recognition as a largely irreversible act, one that affirms sovereignty and guarantees diplomatic legitimacy. However, a growing body of state practice suggests otherwise. The derecognition of states - once exceptional - is now increasingly employed as a geopolitical strategy to undermine sovereignty, isolate adversaries, and reorder diplomatic alignments. This section examines the political logics, phases, and actors involved in this process, arguing that derecognition is not an anomalous breakdown of diplomatic norms but a calculated instrument of foreign policy and statecraft (see Ó Tuathail, 1999: 111). Contrary to legalist assumptions of permanence, diplomatic recognition is contingent, revocable, and deeply politicised act, shaped by geopolitical rivalries, economic inducements, and strategic realignments (Visoka, 2024: 69-70). Derecognition rarely unfolds spontaneously. It is typically initiated through diplomatic offensives by powerful states - often former sovereigns or rival claimants - who seek to destabilise or reverse the international standing of a contested entity. This includes a broad spectrum of practices: from lobbying and economic coercion to symbolic isolation and institutional marginalisation. As such, derecognition can be seen as a spatialised form of statecraft, one that recasts diplomatic networks through processes of exclusion rather than inclusion. Despite case-specific variations, the process of derecognition generally follows a patterned sequence, as outlined in Table 2.

**Table 2: Phases of State Derecognition**

<b>Phases of state derecognition</b>	<b>Description</b>
1. Sovereignty contestation	The former base state actively challenges the legitimacy of the claimant state's sovereignty.
2. Persuasive campaigning	Diplomatic and economic efforts are directed at third-party states to induce them to reconsider their recognition.
3. Intermediary suspension	States adopt a 'neutral' or 'frozen' stance, halting diplomatic engagement without fully withdrawing recognition.
4. Formal derecognition	Official statements are issued to annul prior recognition, often couched in strategic or pragmatic language.

This process is often accompanied by a broader narrative strategy - one that reframes derecognition as a correction of past political error or a necessary step toward stability. However, beneath the diplomatic framing lies a material calculus: most derecognition decisions are not rooted in new legal assessments, but in geoeconomic incentives and power politics. In practice, derecognition is operationalised through multi-scalar campaigns. Domestically, former base states deploy legal, administrative, and security instruments to disrupt the functioning of the claimant state, ranging from selective enforcement and territorial encroachment to the manipulation of ethnic and political divisions (Ker-Lindsay, 2012; Berg and Pegg, 2020). Internationally, diplomatic offensives target multilateral forums, bilateral partnerships, and transnational networks to shift recognition norms. These campaigns often use development projects, investment pledges, and access to global markets as leverage, transforming diplomacy into a transactional domain of strategic bargains. China's campaign against Taiwan exemplifies this geopolitical logic. Since the 1970s, Taiwan's diplomatic allies have dwindled—from over 60 to just 12 in 2025, mainly due to Beijing's coercive diplomacy

and economic inducements (Easton, 2022; The Economist, 2025). Morocco's efforts to delegitimise the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) follow a similar script: using trade deals, investment promises, and lobbying within regional blocs, such as the African Union, to gradually erode the SADR's international standing (Hecht, 2024). These strategies reflect what might be termed 'sovereignty rollback diplomacy', wherein state actors instrumentalise recognition not to uphold international norms but to undermine rival claims and expand their geopolitical influence.

While derecognition remains relatively rare among major powers due to reputational and normative concerns, smaller states, particularly in the Global South, are disproportionately involved in such reversals. Many operate within contexts of economic precarity, limited diplomatic autonomy, or semi-authoritarian governance structures. For these states, diplomatic recognition becomes a bargaining chip, exchanged for development aid, infrastructure, or security guarantees (Taylor, 2002; Stringer, 2006). Cases such as Burkina Faso, the Dominican Republic, and Tuvalu illustrate how derecognition is frequently incentivised through direct investment promises, trade access, or diplomatic alignment with powerful states. In 2018 and 2019, countries including El Salvador, the Solomon Islands, and Kiribati severed ties with Taiwan after receiving pledges of substantial infrastructure investment from China (Government of Solomon Islands 2019; MFA of China 2019). Similarly, Morocco has utilised preferential trade and investment packages to encourage the derecognition of the SADR among African and Latin American countries (Besenyő et al., 2023). This pattern suggests that recognition is less a matter of legal principle than of material calculus, mediated by global inequalities and dependencies.

Between formal recognition and complete withdrawal lies a zone of ambiguity. Several states adopt intermediary positions that suspend recognition without formally reversing it. These cases often frame derecognition as 'pending' or conditional on future developments - most commonly, progress in negotiations or multilateral frameworks (Visoka, 2025). Egypt's stance toward Kosovo, Liberia's suspension of recognition, and Papua New Guinea's neutrality all represent forms of 'recognition without engagement' - a diplomatic holding pattern that enables flexibility while avoiding overt political alignment (RTS, 2018; MFA Liberia, 2018). In the case of SADR, countries like Malawi and Kenya initially suspended recognition pending UN resolutions, later transitioning to full derecognition as regional alliances shifted. Such intermediary strategies serve as a form of soft derecognition, allowing states to reduce engagement while avoiding direct rupture. However, in practice, neutrality often consolidates the status quo, which benefits dominant powers and further marginalises targeted states.

The final phase of derecognition is marked by formal announcements, usually accompanied by carefully crafted justifications. States often cite shifting geopolitical realities, the desire for stronger bilateral relations, or new diplomatic priorities. These narratives obscure the material motivations behind derecognition, presenting it as a reasoned and apolitical policy adjustment. Burkina Faso's 2018 derecognition of Taiwan cited "evolving socio-economic challenges," while Suriname and the Solomon Islands described their withdrawals from Kosovo as moves toward "diplomatic neutrality" and "regional consensus" (New York Times, 2018; Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2019). In many cases, however, such decisions follow intense lobbying and financial inducements, often from powerful allies such as China, Russia, or Serbia. Claimant states typically have limited means to respond. Most derecognised states either reciprocate by severing bilateral ties, as Taiwan has consistently done; or contest the legitimacy of the derecognition, as seen in Kosovo, SADR, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. These responses reflect different strategic logics: the former emphasises diplomatic self-respect, the latter a refusal to concede the political meaning of derecognition.

State derecognition reveals the fragility of sovereignty and the uneven distribution of international legitimacy. Far from being a stable legal condition, statehood is continually

reconstituted through geopolitical struggle, economic negotiation, and diplomatic recognition. The process of derecognition challenges the declarative view of sovereignty (based on internal attributes) and reasserts a constitutive model, in which legitimacy is granted, withdrawn, and contested through relational politics. Ultimately, derecognition highlights the hierarchical nature of international order, where weaker states are more susceptible to diplomatic reversals, and sovereign legitimacy is contingent on the interests of dominant actors. Recognition, then, is not a neutral act of diplomacy; it is a geopolitical technology of inclusion and exclusion, through which the architecture of global sovereignty is both reproduced and reconfigured.

## **The Strategic Discourses of State Derecognition**

Unlike the relatively routinised process of state recognition, derecognition remains a discretionary, ad hoc manoeuvre, deployed by third states on a case-by-case basis and justified through a shifting blend of legal, political, and normative rationales. This section surveys the justificatory framework for state derecognition, which operates as a two-level discursive game in which derecognising states address distinct audiences with tailored arguments. Internally, they appeal to domestic constituencies - economic stakeholders, ideological factions, or security establishments - while externally they deploy universalist language to placate international critics. The experiences of Taiwan, Western Sahara, and Kosovo, demonstrate that derecognition is more about diplomatic opportunism and strategic recalibration than adherence to international norms. The derecognition of states is primarily driven by three interrelated factors: 1) economic bargaining, 2) changes in domestic political leadership, and 3) shifting geopolitical alignments and security imperatives. By interrogating these rationales, we can observe how derecognition often inverts or ignores the very criteria that once underwrote recognition, exposing the practice as a polymorphous instrument of statecraft rather than a principled upholding of international law. Practices of state derecognition are marked by profound inconsistencies: the reasons initially used to grant recognition often diverge sharply from those cited to revoke it; states apply derecognition unevenly across cases; official justifications frequently conceal ulterior motives; and the intended outcomes rarely align with reality. Ultimately, derecognition is what the protagonist decides to make of it.

One of the most compelling drivers of state derecognition appears to be economic bargaining. In many instances, governments withdraw recognition in exchange for financial aid, trade agreements, or investment deals provided by powerful states with a vested interest in isolating the derecognised entity (Visoka 2024: 117-123). This practice is particularly evident in the case of Taiwan, which has faced relentless efforts by China to erode its diplomatic standing. For decades, Taiwan engaged in what has been termed “checkbook diplomacy,” using financial aid and development projects to secure and maintain recognition among small, economically vulnerable states (Lin, Wu, and Yeh, 2022). However, as China’s economic power has expanded, Beijing has outcompeted Taiwan by offering significantly larger financial packages to states willing to sever ties with Taipei. In 2018, the Dominican Republic withdrew its recognition of Taiwan after securing a \$3.1 billion infrastructure and investment deal with China (CNN, 2018). Similarly, the Solomon Islands and Kiribati switched their recognition from Taiwan to China in 2019, citing promises of extensive development assistance (Government of Solomon Islands 2019). Burkina Faso’s 2018 decision to sever ties with Taiwan was also closely linked to China’s growing role in financing security initiatives in the Sahel region (The New York Times, 2018).

A similar pattern is observed in the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, whose handful number of recognitions have been a subject of diplomatic contestation. Russia has used financial incentives to secure recognition for these entities, with reports indicating that Nauru

received \$50 million from Moscow in 2009 in exchange for recognising both regions (New Republic 2014). However, when Russia failed to deliver sustained financial support, some states, such as Vanuatu and Tuvalu, reversed their recognition. The transactional nature of these diplomatic manoeuvres highlights how recognition and derecognition are often dictated by financial incentives rather than legal assessments of statehood. Morocco's campaign to delegitimise the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) further underscores the role of economic leverage in derecognition decisions. Over the years, Morocco has used its economic ties to persuade several African and Latin American countries to withdraw their recognition of SADR. India's derecognition of SADR coincided with a formalised industrial trade agreement with Morocco, while El Salvador's withdrawal of recognition in 2019 followed deepened economic cooperation between the two states (Article 19, 2019). By leveraging its vast phosphate resources and strategic economic partnerships, Morocco has effectively reduced the number of states recognising SADR, demonstrating how economic diplomacy shapes the politics of recognition and derecognition. Crucially, these economic bargains often produce tight cycles of recognition and derecognition: once the funds or promises dry up, recipient states swiftly re-evaluate their allegiances. The instrumentalisation of diplomatic recognition in this rent-seeking fashion thus reveals the hollowing out of formal sovereignty, reducing the act of derecognition to a transactional commodity.

While economic considerations are paramount, domestic political shifts also play a critical role in shaping recognition and derecognition decisions. Changes in government frequently result in reversals of foreign policy, particularly in small states where diplomatic alignments are closely tied to the political preferences of ruling elites (Visoka, 2024: 124-130). For instance, Saint Lucia recognised Taiwan in 1984, derecognised it in 1997, and then re-recognised it in 2007 - all corresponding with changes in government (Alexander, 2014). Similarly, Peru reversed its recognition of SADR in 2022, a decision that aligned with the foreign policy priorities of its newly elected administration (Al Mayadeen, 2022). Domestic political pressures can also incentivise governments to withdraw recognition as a means to strengthen their legitimacy or consolidate power. Serbia's campaign to secure the derecognition of Kosovo provides a salient example. Serbian political leaders have actively promoted Kosovo derecognition as evidence of their diplomatic strength, utilising it as a tool to rally nationalist support. By presenting Kosovo's loss of recognition as a victory for Serbian sovereignty, government officials have reinforced their domestic legitimacy and bolstered their standing among nationalist constituencies. In some cases, derecognition decisions are influenced by internal ideological rivalries. Opposition parties and nationalist movements frequently pressure governments to align foreign policy with their political agendas, resulting in shifts in recognition status. São Tomé and Príncipe's withdrawal from Kosovo's recognition in 2013 was driven in part by a political rivalry between the country's president and prime minister, illustrating how domestic political conflicts can shape international diplomatic decisions (Balkan Insight 2013). Through these examples, we see derecognition deployed as a domestic political tool: parties court electoral blocs by aligning with one patron state or another, and policy whiplash ensues whenever the regime changes. In such contexts, recognition becomes less about legal attributes of statehood and more a barometer of internal power dynamics.

Finally, derecognition is often rationalised as a prudent response to shifting geopolitical alignments or security imperatives. States under pressure from regional hegemony may rescind recognition of contested polities to curry favour or avert economic and diplomatic reprisals. Costa Rica's decision to withdraw its recognition of Taiwan in 2007 was partly driven by China's growing role in the UN Security Council and its expanding economic footprint in Latin America (Casas-Zamora, 2009). Serbia's strategy against Kosovo also illustrates the geopolitical dimensions of derecognition. Belgrade has successfully lobbied states facing their

own separatist movements to withdraw recognition of Kosovo, arguing that recognising Kosovo's independence could set a dangerous precedent for their own territorial disputes. Comoros, for instance, withdrew recognition of Kosovo partly due to its own territorial dispute with France over Mayotte (MFA of Russia, 2018). This case underscores how recognition decisions are often shaped by states' concerns regarding their domestic territorial integrity. Security considerations also play a crucial role in derecognition decisions. Nauru's 2014 withdrawal of recognition from Abkhazia and South Ossetia was reportedly influenced by fears of losing military assistance from Western states (Wyeth, 2017). Similarly, the Solomon Islands and Kiribati justified their diplomatic shift from Taiwan to China by citing security concerns and the need for stronger strategic partnerships. These cases suggest that states perceive recognition and derecognition as part of their broader security calculations, aligning their diplomatic stances with the interests of major geopolitical players at the cost of sacrificing formal recognition of contested states.

Despite the primacy of inward-looking motives, derecognising states frequently cloak their decisions in appeals to conflict resolution or the enforcement of international norms (Visoka, 2024: 148-158). These outward-looking justifications serve two main discursive functions: they legitimise the derecognition in the eyes of global public opinion, and they signal adherence to universal principles even as *realpolitik* dictates otherwise. A standard narrative holds that withdrawing recognition can break diplomatic deadlocks and impel contested parties to negotiate. Morocco's allies, for example, argue that states withdrawing recognition of the SADR support UN-led efforts to negotiate the status of Western Sahara. Similarly, Serbia has described Kosovo's derecognition as a step towards achieving a peaceful resolution to the Serbia-Kosovo dispute. However, in most cases, derecognition does not result in conflict resolution but, rather, reinforces diplomatic stalemate. Legal justifications are also frequently invoked to legitimise derecognition; some states cite UN Security Council resolutions to support their decisions, even when those resolutions do not explicitly call for derecognition. Burundi, for instance, justified withdrawing its recognition of Kosovo by referencing UN Security Council Resolution 1244, despite the resolution not explicitly prohibiting recognition (MFA of Burundi, 2018). Likewise, Panama and Haiti defended their derecognition of the SADR by pointing to UN mediation efforts, even though economic and political factors likely influenced their decision. While this rationale corresponds with international norms of peaceful dispute resolution, it primarily operates as a diplomatic strategy to undermine the independence of the claimant state. By reducing external opposition to derecognition, this approach enhances the former base state's domestic and international standing, thereby increasing its negotiation leverage. Ultimately, derecognition pressures claimant states into concessions, rendering resistance costly while benefiting the former base state and its allies.

Third countries often justify the derecognition of claimant states by citing noncompliance with international norms regarding statehood. They typically invoke two arguments: the claimant state's failure to meet the Montevideo criteria under customary international law, and its violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the former base state. While references to international law are important and must be taken seriously, the inconsistency of such legal framing with the facts on the ground remains problematic. part from SADR, all derecognised states examined in this study continue to enjoy the attributes of statehood at the time the original recognition was granted. Morocco's diplomatic campaign to derecognise the SADR is based on claims that it lacks essential elements of statehood, operating as a government-in-exile with no effective control over a defined territory or population. Morocco argues that without territorial sovereignty, SADR is merely a "ghostly entity" (Arabic News, 2000). However, pro-SADR voices counter that its lack of control is due to Morocco's occupation and annexation of Western Sahara. They also argue that state recognition is not contingent on controlling the "main part" of a territory, as demonstrated by

SADR's admission to the Organisation of African Unity in 1982. While these references help explain derecognition, they only partially address the legal and normative merits of each case. Moreover, these arguments mirror those of former base states and their allies, revealing a lack of independent assessment. Additionally, emphasising compliance with international norms often overlooks other key factors in recognition decisions, such as the right to external self-determination, democratic legitimacy, and protection of human rights. The result is a patchwork of selective norm enforcement, driven not by principled consistency but by the prevailing tide of diplomatic utility.

State derecognition, as this section has shown, is neither a mechanical reversal of recognition nor a principled defence of international norms. Instead, it is a two-level discursive manoeuvre through which third states satisfy domestic constituencies and economic interests while projecting an image of normative steadfastness to the international community. Clearly, a significant disconnect exists between the initial grounds for recognition and the arguments employed to revoke it. In turn, these contradictions render derecognition normatively unstable and ultimately contingent on shifting agential interests rather than firm legal principles. As demonstrated so far, economic and political bargains, often underwritten by competing great powers, have rendered recognition a transactional commodity - one that may be granted or rescinded according to the ebb and flow of patronage and regime turnover. Geopolitical imperatives further compound this dynamic, as states align or realign in response to both regional pressures and the lure of investment or security guarantees. Although derecognition is routinely cloaked in rhetoric of conflict resolution and respect for territorial integrity, these outward-looking justifications frequently mask opportunistic calculations.

### **The Far-Reaching Consequences of State Derecognition**

Perhaps the most striking aspect of state derecognition is the invisible diplomatic harm it has on both the derecognised and those who withdraw recognition. While claimant states often interpret state derecognition as an act of diplomatic aggression that undermines their sovereignty and international legitimacy, former base states regard it as a victory, symbolising the reclamation of lost territory and reinforcing their political claims. Third-party states, particularly small postcolonial states, view it as a transactional tool for securing economic and political advantages (Corbett, 2023). Yet its reach extends beyond specific cases, unsettling global norms, exacerbating conflicts, and reshaping the very foundations of statehood (Visoka, 2025).

Across the three cases examined here, derecognition tends to serve as a precursor to war or deepen hostilities between conflicting parties. While recognition is often viewed as a constitutive act that confers legitimacy and sovereignty upon a state, derecognition functions as a mechanism of diplomatic subversion, with profound implications. The withdrawal of recognition can destabilise the claimant state, intensify disputes with the former base state, weaken third-party states involved in transactional diplomatic relations, and exacerbate great power rivalries. State derecognition introduces diplomatic, legal, and geopolitical uncertainties that can destabilise regions, erode diplomatic norms, and undermine international cooperation. The impact of derecognition varies depending on the circumstances in which it occurs. In some instances, it leads to diplomatic isolation and economic decline for the affected state, exemplified by Taiwan's diminishing number of allies. China perceives the withdrawal of recognition of Taiwan as an affirmation of its right to regain control of the island by any means, including the use of force (The Economist, 2025). It is also part of a broader strategy of global dominance where recognition of China's sovereign statehood is a critical precondition (see Wilde and Xing, 2021). In other circumstances, it creates regional instability and

prolonged political disputes, particularly when derecognition is weaponised as part of broader geopolitical rivalries, as demonstrated by Kosovo's contested status. Furthermore, derecognition challenges the perceived permanence of recognition in international law, raising questions about whether statehood itself can be reversed through diplomatic manoeuvring.

Another consequence of derecognition is the erosion of the sovereignty and legitimacy of the claimant state. The withdrawal of recognition directly impacts the state's ability to function in the international arena by reducing its access to multilateral institutions, limiting its diplomatic partnerships, and impairing its capacity to negotiate trade and security agreements. Without recognition, a state struggles to consolidate its international legal sovereignty and is deprived of the institutional benefits that accompany full diplomatic standing. For instance, Kosovo has faced a systematic campaign of derecognition orchestrated by Serbia, which has pressured several states to revoke their recognition of Kosovo's independence. This campaign has significantly reduced Kosovo's chances of securing membership in international organisations such as the United Nations and INTERPOL (MFA of Kosovo, 2018). The consequences extend beyond diplomacy, affecting Kosovo's economic and security standing. Kosovo is exposed to difficulties of attracting foreign investment, negotiating international agreements, and asserting its independence in multilateral forums without broad international recognition. The process of derecognition redefines Kosovo's identity, reduces its citizens' everyday mobility, redefines territorial imaginaries, and results in the reproduction of exclusionary and discriminatory practices in the region. The absence of an entity on the world map becomes a geopolitical signifier: if a state is not represented diplomatically, it is rendered peripheral or illegitimate.

Similarly, Taiwan's derecognition by various states, under Chinese diplomatic and economic pressure, has diminished its influence in global governance structures. Despite having a robust economy and a functioning democratic system, Taiwan remains excluded from the United Nations and several major international organisations due to Beijing's efforts to limit its international space (Rich and Dahmer, 2022). This diplomatic isolation restricts Taiwan's ability to fully engage in global trade networks and international security cooperation, further deepening its contested status. Moreover, derecognition exacerbates internal instability within the claimant state. It often fuels political polarisation and undermines the legitimacy of incumbent governments, as opposition parties exploit the loss of recognition to challenge ruling authorities. In Taiwan, for instance, derecognition has become a contentious electoral issue, with pro-independence and pro-status quo parties leveraging diplomatic setbacks to influence domestic politics. In Kosovo, opposition parties have blamed the government for failing to prevent the loss of diplomatic allies, leading to heightened political instability.

Contrary to the argument that derecognition can facilitate peaceful conflict resolution, evidence suggests it often exacerbates tensions between the claimant state and its former base state (Visoka, 2024: 176-177). It reinforces hegemonic claims and renders claimant states peripheral and illegitimate. The act of derecognition is frequently utilised as a diplomatic weapon to weaken the adversary rather than as a tool for mediation or normalisation. For instance, Serbia's campaign to derecognise Kosovo has stalled the EU-facilitated dialogue aimed at normalising relations between Kosovo and Serbia. By persuading third states to withdraw recognition from Kosovo, Serbia has not only undermined Kosovo's international standing but has also complicated the prospects for a peaceful resolution of their territorial dispute. This campaign has triggered retaliatory measures from Kosovo, such as the imposition of trade barriers against Serbia, which have further escalated tensions rather than fostering dialogue (Evropa e Lirë, 2021). Similarly, China has employed state derecognition as a coercive strategy to pressure Taiwan into accepting Beijing's "One China" policy. By encouraging states to switch recognition from Taiwan to China, Beijing aims to diplomatically isolate Taiwan, thereby reinforcing its claim over the island. However, rather than moving



Taiwan towards reunification, this strategy has increased anti-China sentiment among the Taiwanese population and strengthened calls for full independence. In the case of Western Sahara, Morocco has leveraged derecognition efforts to solidify its control over the disputed territory. Several African and Middle Eastern states have withdrawn recognition of the SADR in response to Moroccan diplomatic efforts, further marginalising the Polisario Front and weakening its claims for self-determination. Instead of fostering a peaceful resolution, derecognition has emboldened Morocco to take more assertive actions, including military interventions, against Sahrawi independence efforts. These cases demonstrate that derecognition does not serve as a neutral diplomatic tool but rather as an extension of geopolitical conflicts. By removing recognition, states reinforce the power asymmetry in favour of the former base state, often escalating rather than resolving disputes.

While derecognition primarily impacts the claimant state, it can also lead to unintended destabilising consequences for the states that opt to withdraw recognition, which are mostly underdeveloped, postcolonial states. The process of derecognition is frequently associated with political corruption, electoral instability, and foreign influence, particularly in small and developing nations. Many countries that engage in state derecognition do so in exchange for economic, political, or security benefits from more powerful nations. For example, both China and Taiwan have utilised “dollar diplomacy,” offering financial incentives to persuade governments to alter their diplomatic recognition. This practice has resulted in significant domestic turmoil in several states that have derecognised. In the Solomon Islands, the shift from Taiwan to China in 2019 triggered mass protests and political instability, as factions within the government and the opposition accused one another of corruption and foreign interference (Cavanough, 2023). Similarly, Nicaragua’s decision to derecognise Taiwan and establish ties with China encountered domestic opposition, as it was seen as part of a broader trend of the government aligning with authoritarian regimes. The transactional nature of diplomatic shifts in such states often fuels domestic discontent, undermines trust in government institutions, and exacerbates political divisions. Furthermore, the reliance on economic incentives for diplomatic decisions exposes derecognising states to external manipulation. When a state bases its foreign policy on financial gains rather than long-term strategic interests, it risks becoming overly dependent on its new diplomatic partner. For instance, several African nations that have shifted recognition from Taiwan to China have found themselves increasingly indebted to Beijing through infrastructure loans and investment agreements that come with restrictive conditions. This raises concerns about the erosion of sovereignty among small states that pursue derecognition for economic motives. In particular, these patron–client ties can generate neo-colonial dependencies, as recipient states become enmeshed in debt diplomacy, where infrastructure loans are conditional upon political compliance, and lose autonomy in domestic and foreign affairs.

State derecognition is not merely a bilateral issue between the claimant and the derecognising states; it is also embedded within broader global power struggles. Great powers frequently utilise derecognition to advance their geopolitical interests and undermine rivals. China’s strategy of encouraging states to derecognise Taiwan forms part of its broader efforts to assert influence in the Indo-Pacific and counter U.S. alliances in the region (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). By isolating Taiwan diplomatically, China aims to weaken U.S. commitments to Taiwan’s security and pave the way for future unification on Beijing’s terms. However, this approach has, in some instances, backfired, as Taiwan has responded by deepening security cooperation with the U.S. and strengthening informal ties with Western democracies. Similarly, Russia has employed the derecognition of Kosovo to assert influence in the Balkans and challenge Western-led integration efforts in the region. By supporting Serbia’s campaign against Kosovo’s recognition, Russia seeks to weaken NATO and EU expansion in Southeast Europe. This has broader implications for regional stability, as it

reinforces divisions and hinders long-term conflict resolution. In Western Sahara, the U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the territory in 2020, in exchange for Morocco normalising relations with Israel, exemplifies how derecognition is often entangled in great power politics (Middle East Eye, 2020). This move not only altered the dynamics of the Western Sahara conflict but also signalled a shift in U.S. strategic priorities in North Africa.

The practice of state derecognition has profound consequences that extend far beyond the immediate diplomatic relations between states. It appears to undermine the sovereignty and stability of claimant states, deepens disputes rather than resolving them, destabilises derecognising states, and fuels global power rivalries. While recognition has traditionally been viewed as a legitimising act in international politics, derecognition operates as a destabilising force, often producing unintended consequences that prolong conflicts and increase geopolitical tensions. Unlike war, which relies on direct confrontation, derecognition is a serious form of diplomatic contestation, utilising legal and political tools to delegitimise an adversary without resorting to military force. In this sense, it challenges the conventional wisdom that diplomacy is inherently peaceful or constructive; instead, it reveals that diplomatic practices can be used as instruments of power, coercion, and contestation.

Moreover, by weaponising derecognition as a tool of statecraft, postcolonial states paradoxically take on the role of oppressors, replicating colonial hierarchies by denying claimant states the legitimacy and sovereign status they are entitled to. This form of diplomatic hypocrisy amounts to symbolic violence: by excluding targeted states from the club of sovereign states, derecognising states not only breach the principles of self-determination but also inflict lasting political and psychological harm. Furthermore, the practice often backfires, undermining the stability of the derecognising states themselves: patronage-driven alliances and foreign aid dependencies foster corruption, undermine democratic accountability, and increase partisan conflict. Such transactional foreign policies limit genuine autonomy, turning formerly liberated nations into “shadow states” beholden to external agendas, and making them vulnerable to sudden withdrawal of diplomatic support, with potentially explosive domestic consequences. When used cynically and against established international norms, derecognition ceases to be mere *realpolitik*. Instead, it becomes a form of international misconduct, isolating these actors as pariahs and fuelling instability within the international order.

## Conclusion

The practice of state derecognition challenges the conventional assumption that sovereignty and international legitimacy are permanent. By analysing how derecognition operates from a critical geopolitics perspective, this article has offered new insights into the fluidity of statehood, the instrumentalisation of diplomacy, and the impact of global power struggles on the recognition and exclusion of political entities. The article has demonstrated that derecognition is not a neutral diplomatic act but a politically charged and highly strategic manoeuvre used by states to achieve various objectives, including territorial consolidation, geopolitical influence, and economic leverage. Unlike recognition, which is often framed as an affirmation of legal sovereignty, derecognition operates in an uncertain and legally unregulated space, making it one of the most contentious instruments of diplomacy today. Through an empirical analysis of Taiwan, Western Sahara, and Kosovo, this study has illustrated that derecognition is rarely driven by changes in legal statehood criteria, but rather by broader political calculations. It is often used as a tool of coercion deployed by powerful states to undermine contested entities and reshape international alignments. Whether through diplomatic pressure, economic incentives, or security threats, derecognition campaigns are designed to weaken the legitimacy of targeted states and limit their international

engagement. The cases examined here highlight that derecognition has far-reaching implications, not only for the affected states but also for the stability of international law, diplomatic norms, and regional security dynamics.

Exploring state derecognition in contemporary world politics challenges the notion that recognition is an irreversible process. The conventional wisdom, which asserts that once a state is recognised, its sovereignty is irrevocable, does not hold in practice. The strategic reversal of recognition demonstrates that sovereignty remains subject to ongoing contestation, political bargaining, and shifting alliances. While traditional legal theories of statehood emphasise the declarative approach, the growing use of derecognition as a diplomatic tool suggests that the constitutive approach, which posits that statehood depends on recognition by others, plays a crucial role in shaping global politics. The findings emphasise that derecognition, like recognition, is not governed by formalised international norms, but rather by regional diplomatic cultures and geopolitical interests. Derecognition is not merely a legal reversal; it constitutes a strategic foreign policy tool. Powerful states actively lobby, incentivise, and pressure other nations to withdraw recognition from contested entities. Whether it be China's campaign against Taiwan, Serbia's offensive against Kosovo, or Morocco's efforts to delegitimise Western Sahara, derecognition is often employed as a means to consolidate territorial claims and advance geopolitical ambitions. In the same vein, the process of derecognition is not based on legal principles or objective assessments of statehood but rather on economic inducements and political calculations. In many cases, checkbook diplomacy plays a decisive role, with major powers offering financial aid, trade agreements, or security assistance to persuade states to switch allegiances. This transactional nature of derecognition raises ethical concerns about the commodification of diplomatic recognition. While for third states implicated in the withdrawal of recognition, this may be a survival strategy, the unpredictable impact on the claimant states undermines trust in diplomatic engagements and contributes to an emerging trend where recognition is weaponised as a geopolitical tool. While derecognition is sometimes justified as a means to resolve sovereignty disputes, the evidence suggests that it often exacerbates regional tensions and diplomatic stalemates. Rather than promoting peaceful settlement, derecognition often serves as a diplomatic weapon that deepens divisions, as seen in the cases of Kosovo and Western Sahara. Instead of fostering compromise, derecognition delegitimises one party in a conflict, making negotiations more difficult.

As geopolitical rivalries intensify, derecognition is likely to become a more frequent and strategic tool in international diplomacy. The cases analysed in this article suggest that states will increasingly leverage derecognition for political and economic gains, leading to further instability in contested regions. From a critical geopolitics perspective, derecognition is not merely a reactive legal act but a discursive and strategic manoeuvre that reflects deeper power relations and narratives about legitimacy, sovereignty, and territoriality. States do not simply recognise or derecognise entities based on legal criteria, but often based on how such actions reinforce their own geopolitical visions and national identities. This selective deployment of recognition reflects and reproduces hierarchies of power in the international system. If states are permitted to withdraw recognition based on fluctuating political alignments, the stability of international law and sovereignty norms is seriously compromised, not only because of the legal ambiguity, but because such practices normalise the instrumentalisation of statehood and territorial legitimacy for geopolitical ends. The rising frequency of derecognition thus exacerbates global instability, especially in regions where the very notion of statehood is contested and shaped by external narratives and interests. In these areas, recognition becomes a tool not just of diplomacy, but of symbolic domination and geopolitical scripting.

Consequently, the weaponisation of recognition poses a profound challenge to the international legal order. The very nature of this challenge, however, makes its regulation exceptionally difficult. As long as recognition, non-recognition, and derecognition remain a discretionary political act subject to the strategic interests of existing recognised states within the UN-based system, any attempt to impose a binding legal framework on derecognition is fraught with difficulty. Moving forward, addressing the destabilising effects of state derecognition requires not just a focus on legal formalisms but a deeper engagement with the underlying power dynamics and geopolitical rivalries that give this practice its currency.

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