Problems of Defining States

There is some disagreement about the actual number of sovereign states. Among places that test the definition of a state are Korea, China, and Western Sahara (Sahrawi Republic).

Korea: One State or Two?

A colony of Japan for many years, Korea was divided into two occupation zones by the United States and former Soviet Union after they defeated Japan in World War II. The country was divided into northern and southern sections along 38 degrees north latitude. This division of these zones became permanent in the late 1940’s.

The new government of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) then invaded the Republic of Korea (South Korea) in 1950, touching off a three-year war that ended with a cease-fire line near the 38th parallel. Although this is the case we see that these two Korean governments are committed to reunited the country into one sovereign state. One step to this was to allow visit of families separated for a half century by the division, and for increased economic cooperation.

However, progress toward reconciliation was halted by North Korea’s decision to build nuclear weapons even though the country lacked the ability to provide its citizens with food, electricity, and other basic needs. Meanwhile, in 1992, North Korea and South Korea were admitted to the United Nations as separate countries.

China and Taiwan: One State or Two?

According to China’s government officials, Taiwan is not a separate sovereign state but is a part of China. Until 1999 the government of Taiwan agreed.

This confusing situation arose from a civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists in China during the late 1940’s. After losing, the nationalist leaders fled to the island of Taiwan and proclaimed that they were still the legitimate rulers of the entire country of China. At the end the Nationalist argued that at least they could continue to govern one island of the country.

Taiwan’s president announced in 1999 that Taiwan would also regard itself as a sovereign independent state, but the government of China viewed that announcement as a dangerous departure from the long-standing arrangement between the two. This was a problem for the United States officials back then because they wanted to know who constituted the legitimate government of China. The United States supported the Nationalist during the civil war and the United States continued to regard the Nationalists as the official government of China until 1971, when the U.S. policy finally changed, and the United Nations voted to transfer China’s seat from the Nationalists to the Communists.

In conclusion Taiwan is now the most populous state not in the United Nations.

Western Sahara (Sahrawi Republic)

The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, also known as Western Sahara, is considered by most African countries as a sovereign state on the continent’s west coast between Morocco and Mauritania. Morocco, however, claims the territory, and to prove it has built a 3,000-kilometer wall around the territory to keep out rebels.
Spain controlled the territory until withdrawing in 1976. An independent Sahrawi Republic was declared by the Polisario Front and recognized by most African countries, but Morocco and Mauritania annexed the northern and southern portions, respectively. Three years later Mauritania withdrew and Morocco claimed the entire territory.

Overall Morocco controls most of the populated areas, but the Polisario Front operates in the vast sparsely inhabited deserts, especially the one-fifth of the territory that lies east of Morocco’s wall. Morocco and Polisario Front signed a cease-fire in 1991, which is supervised by United Nations peacekeeping forces. The UN has also tried to hold a referendum for the residents of Western Sahara to decide whether they want independence or want to continue to be part of Morocco, but it has been repeatedly postponed.

Meanwhile, two cities in Morocco-Ceuta and Melilla- are controlled by Spain. 70,000 residents in Ceuta and 60,000 residents of Melilla were given limited autonomy, in 1994 but they still favor Spain in most cases.