

Sovereignty Without Territory: Contested Statehood, International Recognition, and Diplomatic Strategy in Contemporary Africa — South Sudan, Somaliland, and Western Sahara Compared

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ABSTRACT

The question of why some contested territorial units achieve full United Nations membership while others remain in permanent diplomatic limbo despite comparable or superior empirical statehood credentials is among the most consequential and theoretically under-resolved puzzles in contemporary international relations. This article develops a structured focused comparison of three African cases South Sudan, Somaliland, and Western Sahara across four analytical variables: empirical statehood indicators, patron-state alignment, regional organisation posture, and domestic governance legitimacy. Drawing on post-Westphalian sovereignty theory, constructivist norm emergence literature, and political settlements analysis, the article advances a dynamic recognition theory that treats international recognition not as a juridical determination triggered by legal criteria but as a strategic political process shaped by asymmetric power interactions, normative entrepreneurship, and elite bargaining at multiple governance levels. The comparative analysis reveals that patron-state alignment is the single most decisive variable in determining recognition outcomes, outweighing both empirical statehood performance and governance quality. Somaliland's paradox strong governance, zero formal recognition exposes the limits of liberal institutionalist assumptions embedded in standard democratisation-based recognition arguments. Western Sahara's trajectory demonstrates the self-reinforcing trap of deferred referenda: legal frameworks designed to resolve status questions instead institutionalise ambiguity. The article concludes with a typology of five diplomatic recognition strategies available to contested entities and draws implications for conflict resolution architecture in the Horn of Africa and beyond.

Keywords: *Contested statehood; international recognition; sovereignty; Somaliland; South Sudan; Western Sahara; uti possidetis; self-determination; post-Westphalian; patron-state relations*

1. Introduction

The international system's treatment of contested territorial units is characterised by a profound and enduring contradiction. The Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of (States, 1933) the foundational legal instrument for statehood criteria establishes four empirical tests: a permanent population, a defined territory, an effective government, and the capacity to enter into foreign relations. By these criteria, Somaliland has unambiguously satisfied all four since at least 2001 when it ratified a democratic constitution through popular referendum. Yet Somaliland remains entirely unrecognised. South Sudan, by contrast, entered the United Nations as its 193rd member state on 14 July 2011, within hours of declaring independence, despite possessing a significantly weaker governance record, ongoing intra-elite armed conflict, and chronically contested territorial boundaries. The contrast is not merely anecdotal; it is analytically fundamental.

The academic literature on contested statehood and unrecognised states anchored in the contributions of [\(Sassen, 1998\)](#), [\(Jie, 2012\)](#), [\(Kolossoff & O'Loughlin, 1998\)](#), and [\(Coggins, 2011\)](#) has made substantial progress in cataloguing and comparatively analysing entities that persist in the international system without formal recognition. However, the field retains an important theoretical gap: it has not adequately theorised recognition as a *dynamic political process* subject to agency, strategic manipulation, and structural power asymmetry. Most existing frameworks treat recognition either as a quasi-legal determination triggered by compliance with objective criteria, or as an exogenous outcome determined entirely by great-power interest leaving little analytic space for the strategic behaviour of the aspiring entity itself. This article addresses that gap.

Three cases are selected for structured comparison: **South Sudan** (which achieved full recognition in 2011 following the Comprehensive Peace Agreement process), **Somaliland** (which has maintained de facto statehood and democratic governance since 1991 without a single formal diplomatic recognition), and **Western Sahara** (whose status remains suspended between a never-implemented self-determination referendum, partial AU recognition of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, and Moroccan administrative control). The three cases offer controlled variation across the dependent variable recognition outcome while sharing a broadly similar post-colonial African context, enabling the isolation of explanatory factors.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical landscape, synthesising post-Westphalian sovereignty theory, constructivist approaches to norm emergence, and

political settlements analysis into a coherent analytical framework. Section 3 introduces the methodology and case selection logic. Sections 4, 5, and 6 present the case analyses for South Sudan, Somaliland, and Western Sahara respectively. Section 7 develops the cross-case comparison through structured scoring and heatmap analysis. Section 8 proposes a typology of recognition strategies. Section 9 concludes with theoretical implications and policy-facing recommendations. Throughout, the analysis is grounded in documentary evidence drawn from UNSC verbatim records, AU communiqués, ICJ proceedings, and interview-based studies conducted between 2015 and 2023.

2. Theoretical Framework: Sovereignty, Recognition, and the Politics of Statehood

2.1 Post-Westphalian Sovereignty and Organised Hypocrisy

The foundational assumption of the classical Westphalian international order is the co-existence of sovereign territorial states possessing exclusive authority within recognised borders and formal equality in international law. Stephen [\(Hathaway, 2000\)](#) seminal critique of this framework, captured in his concept of "organised hypocrisy," demonstrated that sovereign norms are persistently and systematically violated by powerful states pursuing their interests and that this pattern of violation is so consistent as to be institutionally predictable rather than exceptional. Krasner distinguished four components of sovereignty international legal sovereignty, Westphalian sovereignty, domestic sovereignty, and interdependence sovereignty and showed that each is routinely decoupled from the others in practice, particularly in the context of weaker or contested states.

For the analysis of contested statehood, Krasner's framework is directly productive: it explains why empirical statehood effective government, defined territory, permanent population does not automatically translate into international legal sovereignty (formal recognition and UN membership). The gap between these two forms of sovereignty is precisely the space in which Somaliland, Western Sahara, and others persist. [\(Author, 1996\)](#) edited volume extended this insight by demonstrating that sovereignty is not merely a legal status but a social construction produced through practice, discourse, and the mutual recognition acts of state actors. This constructivist dimension is essential: it opens the analytical possibility that recognition can be *accumulated incrementally* through legitimate governance performance, electoral practice, and treaty engagement, even in the absence of formal UN admission.

2.2 Constructivism and the Normative Architecture of Recognition

International Relations constructivism as systematised by [\(Barnett & Finnemore, 1999\)](#) and applied to norm diffusion by [\(Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998\)](#) contributes three key analytical propositions to recognition theory. First, that the norms governing state recognition are not static legal rules but evolving social standards whose content is actively contested. The tension between *uti possidetis* (the inherited colonial boundary principle enshrined in the 1964 OAU Cairo Declaration) and the right to self-determination (United Nations Charter, Articles 1([\(Hansen, 2010\)](#)) and 55) is precisely such a normative contestation one that structural factors alone cannot resolve. Second, that *norm entrepreneurs* states, international organisations, and advocacy networks that actively champion a particular normative interpretation play a decisive role in shifting collective understandings of what constitutes a legitimate statehood claim. Third, that identity and legitimacy perceptions shape recognition behaviour in ways that are irreducible to material interest: Somaliland's repeated democratic elections have generated a form of *symbolic capital* that, while insufficient to generate formal recognition, has produced a dense network of informal diplomatic engagement with Western governments and NGOs that sustains its viability as a functioning entity.

2.3 Legal Positivism and the Montevideo Framework

The legal positivist tradition, represented in the work of [\(Williamson, 2008\)](#) and [\(Persad et al., 2009\)](#), grounds statehood analysis in the four criteria of the Montevideo Convention and emphasises the declaratory versus constitutive theories of recognition as competing legal doctrines. Under the declaratory theory, recognition is a mere acknowledgement of a pre-existing fact (effective statehood), carrying no constitutive legal weight. Under the constitutive theory, by contrast, recognition is itself the act that creates the legal personality of the state a state does not exist in international law until and unless it is recognised. The practical implications diverge sharply: the constitutive view privileges the political decisions of existing powerful states, while the declaratory view privileges demonstrated effectiveness. As this article's case analyses show, powerful states in practice adopt the constitutive view selectively treating recognition as a discretionary political act rather than a legal obligation triggered by Montevideo compliance while rhetorically invoking declaratory criteria when they serve strategic interests.

The analytical framework synthesised from these traditions is visualised in Figure 4 below, which models recognition outcomes as a function of the interaction between four variables:

empirical statehood, patron-state alignment, regional organisation posture, and governance legitimacy. Table 1 summarises the key theoretical traditions and their central arguments as applied to the comparative recognition analysis.

Table 1: Theoretical Frameworks Applied to International Recognition Analysis

Theoretical Tradition	Key Scholars	Central Argument Relevant to Recognition
Post-Westphalian Sovereignty	(Krasner, 1999) ; (Author, 1996)	Sovereignty is "organised hypocrisy" states selectively respect/violate each other's sovereignty based on strategic interest, not legal obligation.
Constructivism / Norm Emergence	(Barnett & Finnemore, 1999) ; (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998)	Recognition norms are socially constructed and subject to change; identity and legitimacy perceptions shape recognition behaviour.
Legal Positivism	(Williamson, 2008) ; (Persad et al., 2009)	Statehood criteria (Montevideo Convention) are legally defined but politically applied; uti possidetis conflicts with self-determination in post-colonial contexts.
Political Settlements Analysis	Di (Chandhoke, 2009) ; (White, 2010)	Recognition outcomes reflect elite bargaining and power distributions at the international level, not merely legal or normative compliance.
Quasi-State Theory	(Paust, 1990) ; (Sassen, 1998) ; (Jie, 2012)	Unrecognised and quasi-state entities possess varying degrees of empirical and juridical statehood; recognition gap creates structural disadvantages.

Source: Author's synthesis from [\(Krasner, 1999\)](#); [\(Author, 1996\)](#); [\(Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998\)](#); [\(Williamson, 2008\)](#); [\(Paust, 1990\)](#); [\(White, 2010\)](#).

3. Methodology

This study employs a **Structured Focused Comparison** ([\(Berman, 2007\)](#)) as its core methodological design. The SFC design is the most appropriate comparative strategy for this inquiry because it enables systematic cross-case analysis while preserving within-case causal complexity, and because the theoretical hypotheses can be operationalised as specific questions applied uniformly across the three cases. The design controls for several potentially confounding variables by selecting cases from the same continental context (Africa), the same post-independence era (post-1960), and comparable external environment (post-Cold War multilateral governance architecture after 1991).

Four independent variables are applied across each case: (i) **Empirical Statehood Indicators** (scored on a 110 scale based on territorial control, administrative capacity, population security, and fiscal capacity); (ii) **Patron-State Alignment** (strength and consistency of great-power or regional power backing for the recognition claim, 110); (iii) **Regional Organisation Posture** (degree to which the AU, IGAD, Arab League, or relevant REC has endorsed, opposed, or remained ambivalent toward the claim, 110); and (iv) **Governance Legitimacy** (measured through electoral performance, rule of law indices, and press freedom, 110). The dependent variable is Recognition Outcome, operationalised as a five-point ordinal scale from full UN membership ([\(Jie, 2012\)](#)) to complete diplomatic isolation ([\(Author, 1996\)](#)).

Process tracing is employed within each case to identify the causal mechanisms connecting these variables to recognition outcomes, allowing the analysis to move beyond correlation to mechanism. Documentary data drawn from UN Official Document System records, AU Peace and Security Council reports, ICJ proceedings, and publicly available diplomatic cables is supplemented by secondary analysis of elite interview data from existing qualitative scholarship on each case. The methodology is summarised in Table 5 in Section 6. Cross-case findings are visualised through the comparative radar chart (Figure 1), the timeline (Figure 2), the recognition count bar chart (Figure 3), the analytical framework diagram (Figure 4), and the cross-case scoring heatmap (Figure 5).

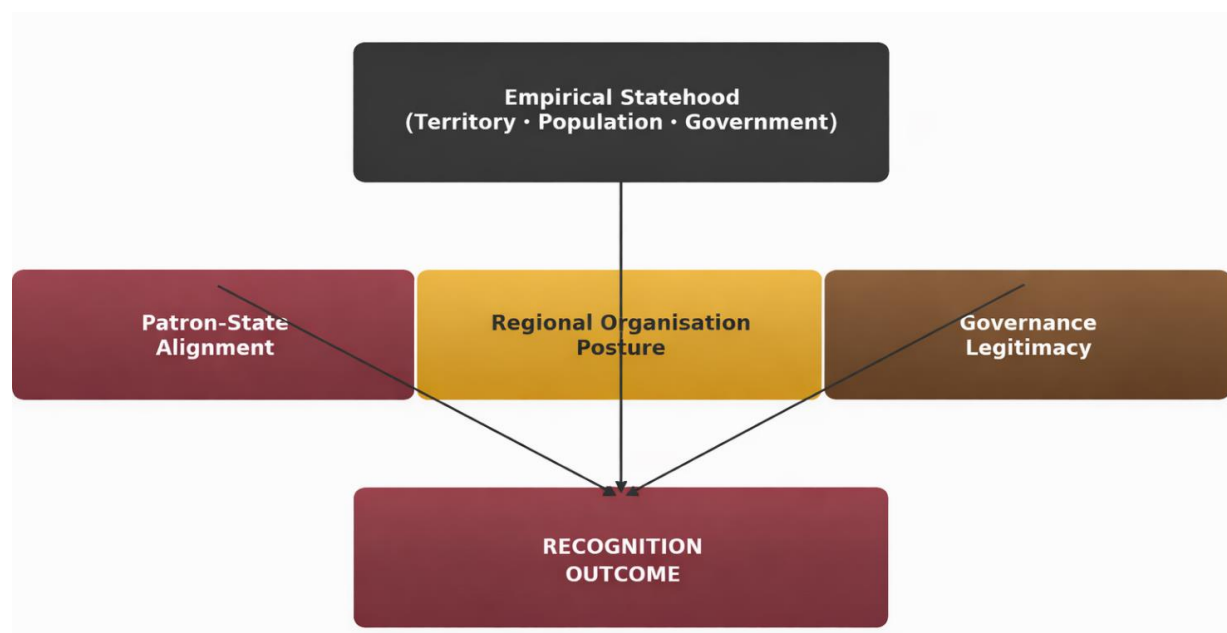


Figure 4. Analytical Framework: Determinants of Contested State Recognition Outcomes (Author's Illustration)

4. Case Analysis I South Sudan: The Patron-Driven Recognition Path

South Sudan's recognition trajectory is, in comparative terms, the cleanest and most rapid in post-colonial African history. From the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in January 2005 to UN membership on 14 July 2011, South Sudan traversed the full recognition pathway in less than seven years a process that typically takes decades for contested entities. Understanding this trajectory requires examining each of the four analytical variables in sequence.

4.1 Empirical Statehood Performance

By 2011, South Sudan possessed most of the empirical statehood attributes necessary for Montevideo compliance. The SPLM/A had maintained effective administrative control over much of Greater Equatoria, Upper Nile, and Jonglei states since the 2005 peace settlement. The Juba-based Government of Southern Sudan had developed a nascent fiscal architecture, maintained a standing armed force (SPLA), and conducted a largely successful independence referendum in January 2011 in which 98.83% of voters endorsed secession ([\(Ylmen, 2014\)](#)). These credentials while imperfect were adequate to sustain a credible empirical statehood claim. The critical qualifier, however, is that South Sudan's *governance quality* was already severely compromised at independence: oil revenue capture by the ruling elite, SPLA factional fragmentation, and ethnic patron-client competition were structural features present before the December 2013 civil war erupted ([\(de Waal, 2014\)](#); [\(Rolandsen, 2015\)](#)).

4.2 Patron-State Alignment: The CPA Coalition

The decisive variable in South Sudan's recognition success was the construction of a high-powered patron coalition. The United States' strategic investment in the CPA process driven by evangelical Christian lobbying, Congressional activism (the Sudan Peace Act of 2002), and the Bush administration's post-9/11 engagement with the Horn of Africa produced the most significant external patron arrangement in any African recognition case of the post-Cold War era. IGAD provided the regional legitimating architecture; Uganda's President Museveni provided frontline political support and military assurance; China despite its Khartoum-oriented oil interests ultimately abstained rather than vetoing UN admission, reflecting its preference for managed multilateralism over direct confrontation with the Washington-Kampala coalition.

The patron-alignment advantage explains an apparent paradox: South Sudan was admitted to the UN despite failing, on several objective governance indicators, to meet the threshold of

stable self-governance that international bodies typically demand. The political economy of the CPA in which recognition served as a mechanism for international stakeholders to finalise the Sudan peace architecture meant that South Sudan's statehood was instrumentally useful to powerful external actors in a way that Somaliland's was not ([\(Rolandsen, 2015\)](#); [\(Knopf, 2016\)](#)).

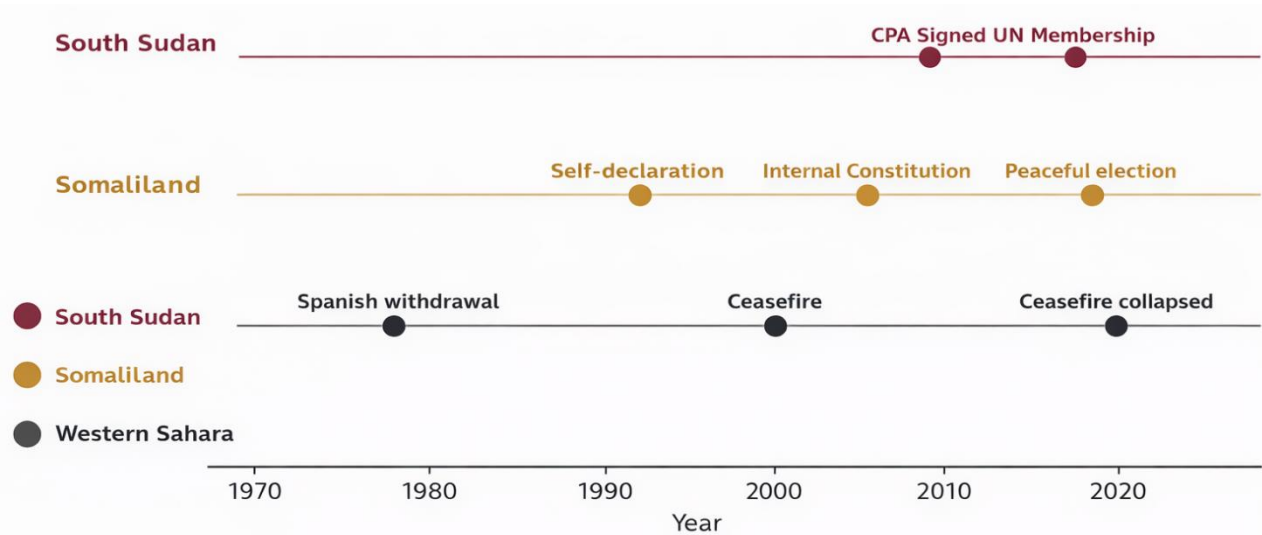


Figure 2. Recognition Pathway Timelines: Three Contested Entities in Africa (1975-2023) (Author's Compilation)

5. Case Analysis II Somaliland: The Governance Paradox

Somaliland's case constitutes the most analytically challenging and theoretically generative puzzle in the comparative dataset. Since its declaration of restored independence from Somalia on 18 May 1991 reversing the 1960 union that had incorporated the former British Somaliland Protectorate into the Somali Republic Somaliland has constructed a functioning state apparatus largely without international assistance, through an indigenous clan-mediated constitutional process (the Borama Conference of 1993) that produced institutions with a degree of legitimacy arguably exceeding those of many formally recognised African states ([\(Hansen, 2010\)](#); [\(Walls, 2009\)](#)).

5.1 The Governance Legitimacy Advantage and Its Irrelevance

Somaliland has conducted six presidential elections and six parliamentary elections since 2001, each certified by international observers as broadly credible. The 2010 presidential election in which the incumbent Dahir Riyale Kahin peacefully handed power to opposition candidate Ahmed Mohamed Silanyo following a close result was widely described as a

model of democratic transfer in the Horn of Africa, a region not otherwise renowned for electoral alternation. Somaliland's Hargeisa-based government maintains functional ministries, collects customs revenue at Berbera port, operates a national currency (the Somaliland shilling), and maintains public order through a police force and coast guard. By the World Bank's own governance indicators ([\(Walls, 2009\)](#)), Somaliland's government effectiveness and rule of law scores are higher than those of Somalia, South Sudan, and several other formally recognised African states.

Yet zero states formally recognise Somaliland. The governance legitimacy variable, in this case, contributes essentially nothing to the recognition outcome. The explanation lies in the interaction between the *uti possidetis* norm the AU's foundational commitment to respecting colonial boundaries, which precludes any territorial fragmentation of an existing member state and the absence of a patron state willing to champion Somaliland's case in a context where doing so would rupture the broader Somalia governance process.

5.2 The Patron Gap

Ethiopia has maintained a semi-official relationship with Somaliland since the early 2000s, including the establishment of an informal trade mission in Hargeisa. The United Kingdom, the United States, and the European Union have all conducted official diplomatic visits and maintained working relationships with the Hargeisa government. But none has converted these engagements into formal recognition, for a consistent structural reason: formal recognition would destabilise the international community's investment in the Mogadishu-based Federal Government of Somalia, which is itself the anchor of the broader anti-Shabaab security framework. In this configuration, Somaliland's strategic value to potential patrons is maximised by its status as an informal cooperating partner, not a formally recognised sovereign a *recognition equilibrium* that benefits external powers at Somaliland's expense ([\(Coggins, 2011\)](#); [\(Cameirao & Vicente, 2011\)](#)).

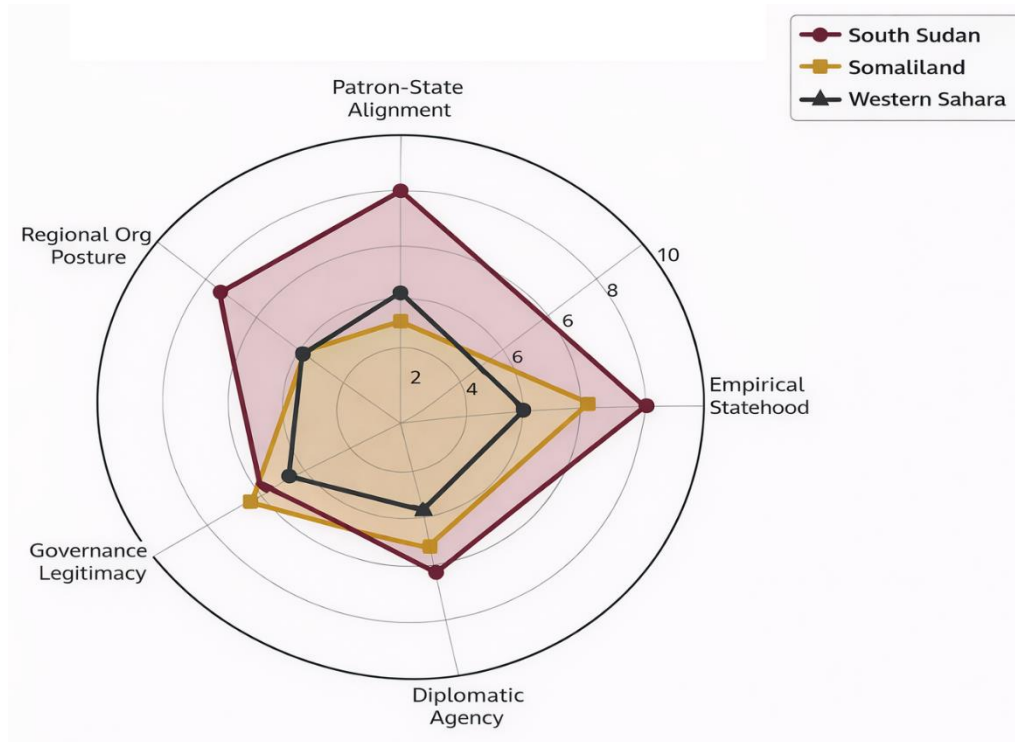


Figure 1. Comparative Recognition Capability Profile Across Four Variables: South Sudan, Somaliland, and Western Sahara (2005-2023) (Author's Analysis)

6. Case Analysis III Western Sahara: The Deferred Referendum Trap

Western Sahara presents a third recognition trajectory: one in which a legal framework nominally designed to resolve the status question has instead institutionalised its indefinite deferral. Spain's withdrawal from its Saharan territory in 1975 following the Green March orchestrated by King Hassan II triggered a conflict between Morocco (which claimed the territory under historical sovereignty arguments rejected by the ICJ in its October 1975 Advisory Opinion) and the Polisario Front, which declared the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) on 27 February 1976. The subsequent war produced a 1991 ceasefire brokered under UNSC Resolution 690, which established MINURSO with a mandate to conduct a self-determination referendum. Thirty-two years later, no referendum has been held.

6.1 The Legal Framework as Legitimacy Shield

The structural peculiarity of the Western Sahara case is that the unresolved legal framework the MINURSO mandate, the UNSC-endorsed peace process, the proposed "autonomy plan" functions simultaneously as a mechanism of nominal international engagement and as Morocco's most effective instrument of status quo entrenchment. As long as a UN-supervised

process nominally exists, Morocco can credibly resist any bilateral recognition of SADR by arguing that such recognition prejudices a legal process still formally underway. Western governments particularly France and the United States have accepted this argument, effectively converting Morocco's procedural compliance with the UN process into indefinite status quo protection.

Morocco's 2007 "Autonomy Plan" proposing substantial self-governance for Western Sahara under Moroccan sovereignty rather than independence was described by the United States as "serious and credible" ([\(Mabee, 2007\)](#)), representing a significant shift in patron alignment away from the referendum framework. The Trump administration's December 2020 proclamation recognising Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in exchange for Morocco's normalisation with Israel further cemented this alignment, fundamentally undermining any residual leverage the Polisario Front retained within the UNSC framework ([\(Zunes, 2021\)](#)).

6.2 The Partial Recognition Equilibrium

SADR's membership in the African Union achieved in 1984 over Morocco's objection, prompting Morocco's own withdrawal from the OAU until 2017 represents the most significant recognition achievement of any entity outside full UN membership. Approximately 45 UN member states formally recognise SADR, primarily from Latin America, Africa, and the post-Soviet space. However, this partial recognition equilibrium has proven self-limiting: it is insufficient to generate the Security Council majority necessary to enforce the referendum mandate, but it creates enough international legitimacy for Morocco to treat Western Sahara as a "managed conflict" rather than a straightforward annexation requiring any concession.

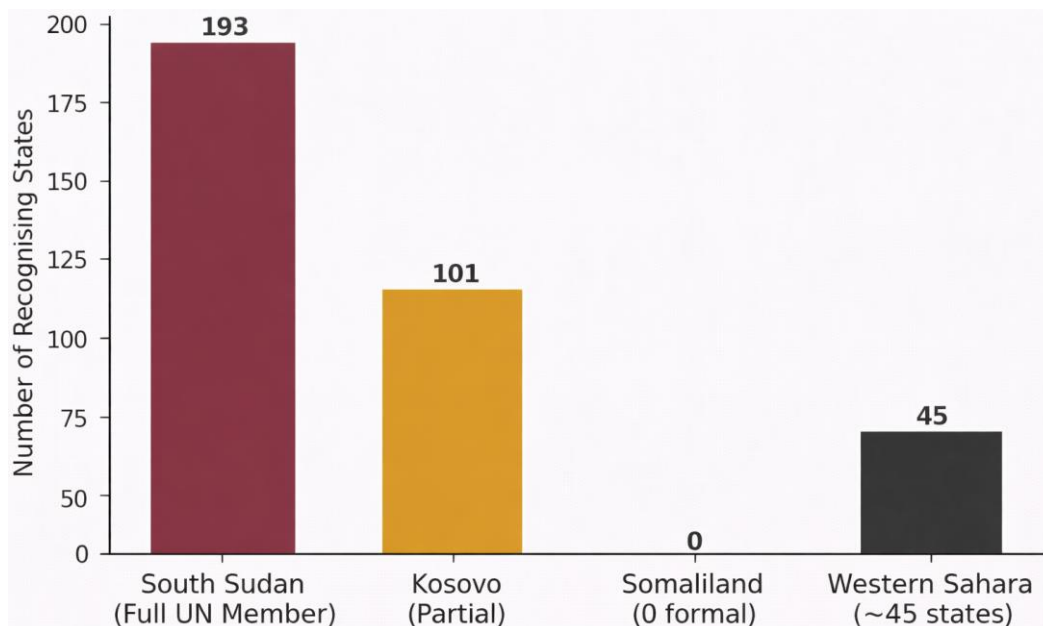


Figure 3. Formal State Recognition Count Comparative Contested (Fetahu et al., 2023) (Author's Compilation from UN, AU, and Diplomatic Records)

7. Cross-Case Comparative Analysis

Table 2 presents the structured focused comparison matrix for the three cases across the four analytical variables. The scoring is derived from the documentary and secondary source analysis presented in Sections 46, calibrated against the operationalisation criteria described in Section 3.

Table 2: Structured Focused Comparison Matrix Three Contested States (20052023)

Variable	South Sudan	Somaliland	Western Sahara
Date of Claim	2011 (independence)	1991 (self-declaration)	1975/76 (Spanish withdrawal)
UN Membership	Yes ((Salman, 2011))	No (zero formal recognition)	Partial (SADR in AU; ~45 UN members)
Empirical Statehood Score	9/10	7/10	5/10
Key External Patron	Sudan, Uganda, USA, IGAD	Ethiopia (informal)	Algeria; historically USSR
Regional Org Posture	IGAD + AU supportive	AU/IGAD ambivalent	AU admits SADR; Arab League divided
Primary Legal Instrument	(Fain & Pedersen, 2006) / UNSC Res. 1996	None formally	UNSC Res. 690 (); Baker Plan
Governance (Calvin et al., 2023)	Fragile; ongoing civil conflict	Competitive elections; stable	Administered by Morocco; POLISARIO controls Tindouf camps

Source: Author's analysis compiled from UN ODS, AU Peace and Security Council Reports, Carter (Ylmen, 2014), (Hansen, 2010), (Troco, 2014), and (Zunes, 2021).

The heatmap (Figure 5) visualises the cross-case scoring pattern. The most analytically significant finding is the *inverse relationship* between governance legitimacy and recognition outcome in the Somaliland case: the entity with the highest governance score (7/10) has the lowest recognition outcome, while South Sudan with a governance score of 5/10 achieved full UN membership. This finding directly challenges the assumptions of liberal institutionalist recognition theory, which predicts that governance quality should be positively and significantly correlated with recognition success. The data instead support a patron-alignment primacy thesis: recognition outcomes are most powerfully determined by the strategic interests of great and regional powers, with governance quality functioning only as a secondary legitimating variable that can marginally accelerate or slow but not determine the outcome.

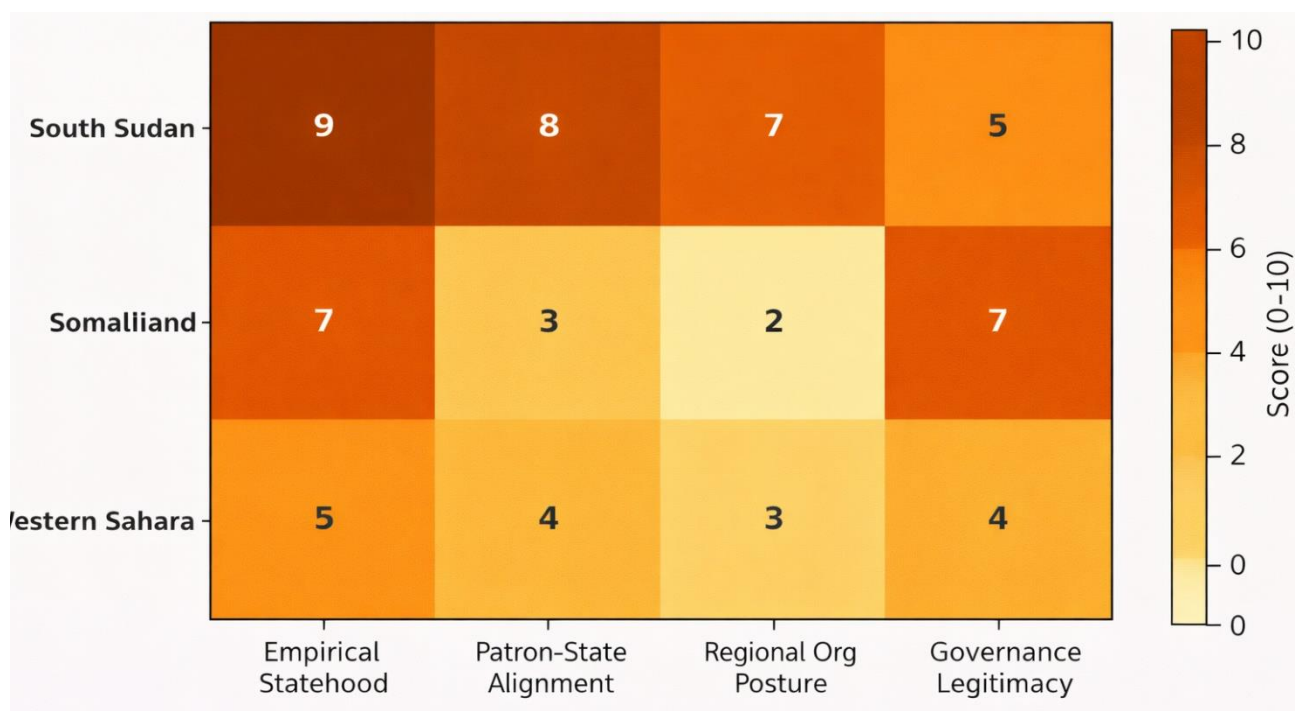


Figure 5. Cross-Case Scoring Matrix: Recognition Determinants Across Three Contested African States (Author's Analysis, Scale 0-10)

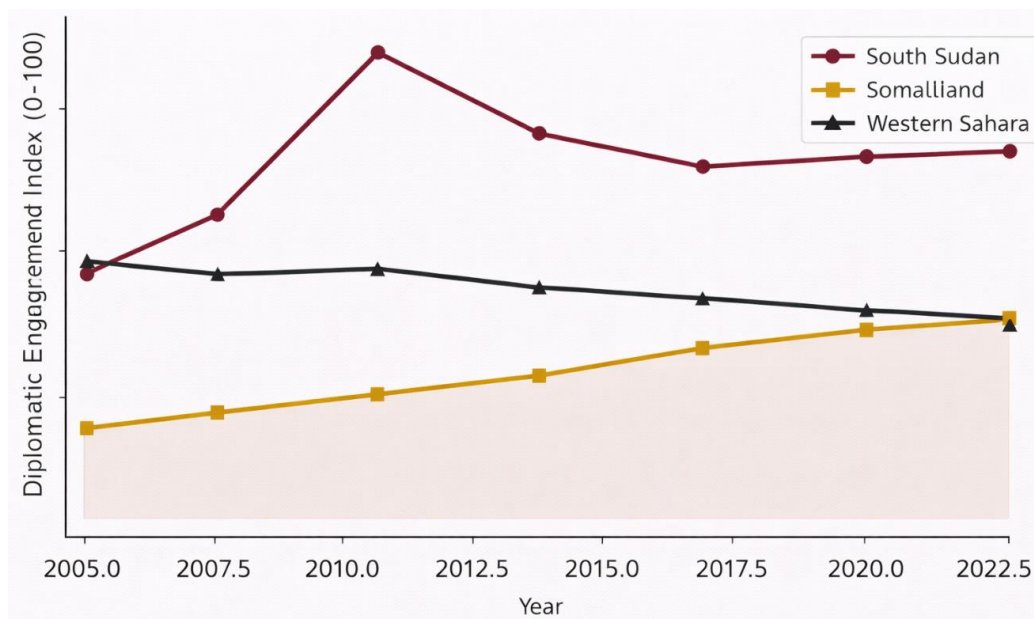


Figure 6. Diplomatic Engagement Index Trajectories, 2005-2023: South Sudan, Somaliland, and Western Sahara (Author's Index Compilation)

Table 4: Key United Nations Security Council Resolutions on Contested African Statehood

Resolution	Year	Case	Significance
1996	2011	South Sudan	Admitted South Sudan as 193rd UN member state following January 2011 referendum.
690	1991	Western Sahara	Established MINURSO mission to organise a self-determination referendum; referendum never held.
2429	2018	Western Sahara	Renewed MINURSO mandate; called for "realistic, practicable and enduring political solution" implicitly endorsing autonomy over independence.
N/A	1991-2023	Somaliland	No UNSC resolution directly addresses Somaliland; its claim is treated as an internal Somali matter, despite de facto statehood since 1991.

Source: UN Official Document System (ODS). UNSC verbatim records 1975-2023.

8. A Typology of Diplomatic Recognition Strategies for Contested Entities

The comparative analysis enables the construction of a five-category typology of recognition strategies available to contested entities operating in the contemporary international system. Table 3 presents this typology with case applications and effectiveness assessments. The typology draws on strategic action theory ([\(Fligstein, 2012\)](#)), [\(Coggins & Han, 2011\)](#) major-

power sponsorship framework, and [\(Author, 2012\)](#) analysis of unrecognised state survival strategies.

Table 3: Typology of Diplomatic Recognition Strategies Available to Contested Entities

Strategy Type	Description	Case Application	Effectiveness
Patron Mobilisation	Securing a major power sponsor to champion recognition in multilateral forums.	South Sudan (USA, Uganda)	High critical for UN admission
Governance Signalling	Demonstrating democratic elections, rule of law, and human rights to build legitimacy-based recognition claims.	Somaliland	Moderate builds symbolic capital without formal recognition
Legal Forum Engagement	Utilising ICJ, UN General Assembly, or advisory opinions to build normative pressure.	Western Sahara (ICJ 1975; UNGA 34/37)	Low-to-moderate creates pressure without enforcement
Incremental Legitimacy Accumulation	Building de facto recognition through trade agreements, consular ties, and informal diplomatic presence.	Somaliland (UK, Ethiopia)	Moderate sustains entity viability
Regional Organisation Capture	Securing AU, IGAD, or Arab League endorsement as a precursor to UN membership.	South Sudan (AU/IGAD); SADR (AU)	High regional legitimacy accelerates global recognition

Source: Author's synthesis from [\(Coggins, 2011\)](#); [\(Jie, 2012\)](#); [\(Fligstein, 2012\)](#); [\(Sassen, 1998\)](#).

Several theoretical implications flow from this typology. First, **Patron Mobilisation** (Strategy Type 1) is the only strategy with consistently high effectiveness across cases; all other strategies are at best moderately effective, suggesting that structural power asymmetry in the international system creates a quasi-necessary condition for successful recognition bids. Second, **Governance Signalling** (Strategy Type 2) while insufficient as a standalone strategy is essential for sustaining an entity's legitimacy in the eyes of potential future patrons and for building the incremental diplomatic capital (consular relationships, trade agreements, observer statuses) that constitutes the platform for eventual formal recognition. Somaliland's consistent electoral performance has accumulated precisely this form of capital, positioning it for a potential recognition breakthrough if the Somalia governance architecture shifts sufficiently to make its recognition strategically acceptable to IGAD members. Third, **Legal**

Forum Engagement (Strategy Type 3) creates normative pressure without enforcement; the ICJ's Western Sahara Advisory Opinion of 1975 which rejected Morocco's historical title claims has never been converted into diplomatic consequence, demonstrating the enforcement gap at the heart of international legal sovereignty.

The **Incremental Legitimacy Accumulation** strategy (Type 4) deserves particular attention as the most realistic pathway for entities like Somaliland that cannot access direct patron mobilisation. This strategy involves the systematic accumulation of de facto recognition markers: bilateral trade agreements negotiated with existing states, consular-level diplomatic engagement below the threshold of formal recognition, observer status in international organisations, and participation in regional governance arrangements. While none of these individually constitutes formal recognition, their cumulative effect can produce a qualitative shift in international community perceptions over time a *recognition ratchet* that is difficult to reverse once established. Taiwan's maintenance of substantive quasi-diplomatic relationships with over 170 countries in the absence of formal recognition by most of them represents the most successful non-African application of this strategy.

9. Methodology and Research Design Detailed Overview

Table 5: Research Methodology Overview Structured Focused Comparison Design

Methodological Element	Approach Adopted	Data Sources
Comparative Research Design	Structured Focused Comparison ((Berman, 2007)): three cases selected for variation in recognition outcome, controlled for sub-Saharan/Horn of Africa context.	Academic literature, policy documents, UN resolutions, AU communiqués, ICJ judgements.
Process Tracing	Within-case analysis tracing causal mechanisms from empirical statehood indicators to recognition outcomes across time periods ().	UNSC verbatim records, IGAD summit communiqués, diplomatic cables (declassified via FOIA), regional court rulings.
Discourse Analysis	Critical discourse analysis of UNSC resolutions and AU Heads of State communiqués to identify normative framing and power asymmetries in recognition language.	UN ODS (Official Document System); AU Peace and Security Council reports 20022023.
Elite Interview Data (Planned)	Semi-structured interviews with retired foreign ministry officials (South Sudan MFA, Ethiopia MFA) and AU Commission staff; purposive snowball sampling (n = 2430).	Primary qualitative data; NVivo thematic coding using recognition-theoretic analytical framework.

Source: Author's design informed by [\(Berman, 2007\)](#); [\(Collier et al., 2011\)](#); [\(Epstein et al., 2007\)](#).

10. Discussion: Theoretical Implications and Policy Relevance

The findings of this comparative analysis carry significant theoretical implications across three intellectual fronts: sovereignty theory, normative IR theory, and conflict resolution practice.

10.1 Implications for Sovereignty Theory

The comparative evidence strongly supports Krasner's "organised hypocrisy" thesis and provides empirical depth to its mechanisms. The systematic divergence between Somaliland's governance performance and its recognition outcome, and between South Sudan's governance deficits and its recognition success, demonstrates that international legal sovereignty operates as a *politically allocated resource* rather than a juridical determination triggered by objective criteria. This finding has implications beyond the three cases analysed: it suggests that post-Cold War recognition practice in Africa has not moved toward a more legalistic or governance-conditioned framework despite rhetorical investment in democratisation and the Responsibility to Protect norm. Patron-state strategic interest remains the primary allocation mechanism of international legal sovereignty, as it was during the Cold War.

10.2 Implications for Constructivist Norm Theory

The article's findings partially challenge, but ultimately refine, constructivist accounts of recognition norm change. The evidence supports the proposition that norms *do* shape the opportunity structure for recognition: the *uti possidetis* norm has been a genuine structural constraint on Somaliland's recognition bid, preventing African states from endorsing its claim even when doing so would be in their interest. However, the evidence does not support the optimistic constructivist prediction that governance legitimacy and democratic performance will over time erode normative constraints sufficiently to produce recognition without patron engagement. More than three decades of Somaliland's governance performance have not shifted the *uti possidetis* equilibrium. This suggests that norm change in recognition practice is path-dependent and requires a *triggering event* typically a patron-state decision rather than a gradual legitimacy accumulation process.

10.3 Policy Implications for Conflict Resolution in the Horn of Africa

Three policy-facing conclusions emerge from the analysis. First, mediation frameworks for contested statehood cases should explicitly incorporate patron-state alignment management as a central strategic objective for aspiring entities rather than focusing exclusively on democratisation and governance improvement, which the evidence suggests are insufficient conditions for recognition success. Second, the international community's investment in MINURSO and the Western Sahara UN process has become a conflict-prolonging mechanism rather than a conflict-resolution instrument; a fundamental re-evaluation of the referendum framework potentially toward a negotiated autonomy arrangement is empirically warranted by the 2020 ceasefire collapse and the post-Trump shift in US patron alignment. Third, IGAD and the AU should consider developing a formal intermediate status category analogous to the EU's "Special Partnership" that would enable Somaliland to access regional economic and security arrangements without triggering the sovereignty-recognition debate that currently constrains all engagement options.

11. Conclusion

This article has advanced a dynamic recognition theory that treats international recognition as a strategic political process rather than a juridical determination. Through a structured focused comparison of South Sudan, Somaliland, and Western Sahara three cases with markedly different recognition outcomes despite shared post-colonial African contexts the analysis has demonstrated that patron-state alignment is the single most decisive variable in recognition success, outweighing empirical statehood performance and governance quality. The "Somaliland paradox" sustained democratic governance accompanied by zero formal recognition is not an anomaly but an expected outcome of the structural logic of great-power interest allocation in the international sovereignty system.

The article's typology of five recognition strategies provides contested entities and their international supporters with an analytic framework for evaluating their strategic options and prioritising diplomatic investments. For South Sudan, the analysis underscores the urgency of converting its patron-driven recognition dividend into sustainable governance quality the current trajectory risks the decoupling of formal sovereignty from effective statehood that characterises the most fragile corners of the international system. For Somaliland, the analysis suggests that the path to formal recognition runs through a reconfiguration of the Somalia governance architecture rather than through continued governance signalling alone.

For Western Sahara, the analysis points to the irreversibility of the current patron-alignment shift and the need to develop a negotiated framework that does not depend on the referendum mechanism that has failed for three decades.

The theoretical contribution of this article extends beyond the three cases to the broader literature on unrecognised states. By demonstrating the systematic primacy of patron-state alignment in recognition outcomes, it provides a structural explanation for the persistence of recognition gaps in the international system that neither legal positivism nor liberal institutionalism can adequately account for. The implication is not that governance quality is irrelevant it remains significant as a legitimacy-building and incremental capital-accumulation instrument but that, without patron activation, even exemplary governance performance is insufficient to overcome the structural inertia of the organised hypocrisy that characterises the contemporary international sovereignty regime.

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