State System Membership List
Frequently Asked Questions
Version 2002.1

April 21, 2003

The latest version of the data has shifted to a format that lists just one name for states. What are some important alternative/former names?

State Number	Currently Listed Name	Alternative / Former Name(s)
255	Germany	Prussia
325	Italy	Sardinia
365	Russia	USSR
434	Benin	Dahomey
439	Burkina Faso	Upper Volta
490	Democratic Republic of Congo	Zaire; Congo (Kinshasa)
510	Tanzania	Tanganyika
552	Zimbabwe	Rhodesia
580	Madagascar	Malagasy Republic
630	Iran	Persia
710	China	People's Republic of China
713	Taiwan	Republic of China
731	North Korea	Democratic People's Republic of Korea
732	South Korea	Republic of Korea
775	Myanmar	Burma
780	Sri Lanka	Ceylon
816	Vietnam	North Vietnam; Democratic Republic of Vietnam
817	South Vietnam	Republic of Vietnam
990	Samoa	Western Samoa

Why do names and state abbreviations change in different versions of the system membership data?

There are two main sources of changes and differences between versions of the data. First, states may formally change their names. Second, there are several discrepancies between the official U.S. State Department names for some states and the UN name for the states (e.g. the U.S. State Department uses "Burma" while the UN uses "Myanmar"). These two sources are our primary source of name information.

As state names change, COW generally updates the letter codes to match.

The oldest versions of the data distinguish between dependent and independent states; what happened to the dependent state list?

Dependent states and geopolitical units are now listed in a separate Geopolitical Unit dataset, to be released when complete.

How are the numerical codes designated?

Russet et al (1968) devised the original regional coding system:

"…in order to make more efficient and more accurate the borrowing of data from one research enterprise to another, we propose a simple three-digit coding scheme keyed to the major continental regions, which others might see fit to continue. In short, we offer here what might be called a 'prominent solution'; which it may not represent the very peak of refinement, it nevertheless reflects what we consider to be a reasonable balance among a number of competing requirements; it is convenient for ready reference, and all of the data from both our projects are already stored in accord with this particular scheme." (p.933).

Correlates of War 2 has added new system members according to the original numeric scheme.

Why do start and end dates vary in different versions?

As reassessments reveal that more accurate membership dates are available for some states, we update the list accordingly.

What are the requirements for being a system member?

As laid out in Russett et al (1968) and Small and Singer (1980), the primary requirements are membership in the League of Nations or the United Nations, or a population of at least 500,000 and recognition (through diplomatic missions) by two major powers (see Major Powers). Additionally, any change in the status of a state must last for at least one month to be included in the system membership list (Russett et al 1968). See the main documentation for a full description of the coding rules.

What constitutes a major power?

Small and Singer (1980) offer the best explanation of this classification:

"One last point must be considered in completing our hierarchical scheme. At one end of the status or power spectrum, a political entity may have most of the earmarks of statehood but not qualify for system membership, or it may merit inclusion in the system but remain peripheral enough in activity, power, or importance to fail of inclusion in the central system prior to 1920. At the other end of the spectrum, all students of world politics use, or appreciate the relevance of, the concept of "major power." Sharing that appreciation and recognizing its relevance for establishing a wide range of war data categories, we add this smallest sub-system to our classification scheme.

"Although the criteria for differentiation between major powers and others are not as operational as we might wish, we do achieve a fair degree of reliability on the basis of intercoder

agreement. That is, for the period up to World War II, there is high scholarly consensus on the composition of this oligarchy. As we interpret this consensus, the major powers and the period during which that august status was maintained seem to be as follows: Austria-Hungary from 1816 to defeat and dismemberment in 1918; Prussia from 1816 to 1870, and its successor state of Germany from 1871 to 1918 and 1925 to 1945; Russia from 1816 to 1917 and the USSR from 1922 on; France from 1816 to it defeat and occupation in 1940; England from 1816 on; Italy from its unification in 1860 to its defeat in 1943; Japan from its victory over China in 1895 to its surrender in 1945; and the United States from its victories over Spain in 1898 to the final defeat of the Axis.

"For the post-World War II period, through the mid-1960s, there is somewhat less consensus, but it would seem difficult to disagree with the continuation of major power status for the USSR and the United States, as well as for England, despite the dramatic gap between the possession of limited nuclear capabilities and permanent seats on the UN Security Council, it seems reasonable to include France as of the Allied victory in 1945 and China as of the Communist victory in 1949.

"Since we completed the first version of this study, we have become even less confident of our major power classifications, especially for the period since 1965. In economic terms, West Germany and Japan have indeed become major powers, but we are reluctant to include them as major *military* actors because of several constitutional provisions that preclude them – through the 1970s – from exercising a global military presence. Similarly, one might also argue that the age of the major power is over, that even the mightiest cannot control a handful of poorly organized Iranians in Teheran. Or perhaps we have entered a period dominated by major *regional* powers with, in 1980, for example, India, South Africa, Brazil, and even Cuba exercising the dominant influence in their own bailiwicks. Despite these alternatives, as well as a variety of others that might be suggested, we decided to stay, through 1980, with our "Big Five" as the best of a number of imperfect solutions to this problem."

What about new major powers after the cold war?

In 1991, Germany and Japan were added to the major powers list. For many years, Germany and Japan possessed material capabilities comparable to or in some cases exceeding those of the other major powers. Yet capabilities alone are not sufficient for major power status. Stats must behave as major powers, with global interests and reach, and must be regarded by the other major powers as "members of the club." Germany and Japan evolved into major power status around the end of the Cold War. Both assumed greater independent roles in global affairs. For example, Japan became the leading donor of foreign aid and renewed its claims toward islands disputed with Russia. Germany's recognition of breakaway states of the former Yugoslavia and its reunification make it the key player on the European continent. Germany and Japan's major power status was solidified with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. That collapse had the effect of enhancing the relative status of both states. Furthermore the Soviet collapse signaled a shift in the global salience of issues, to greater emphasis on economic rather than security competition; in this context, Germany and Japan's economic power is perhaps only exceeded by the United States.