

The Difference between a State and a Nation

Often these terms are used interchangeably; however, their meanings are very different. The idea of the modern state began to emerge in Europe in the 15th century and eventually spread around the world.

Pennsylvania State University (Department of Geography,) clarifies the differences between the two terms for students enrolled in their course, *GEOG 128: Geography of International Affairs*:

What is a State?

A State is an independent, sovereign government exercising control over a certain spatially defined and bounded area, whose borders are usually clearly defined and internationally recognized by other states.

1. States are tied to territory

- Sovereign or state as absolute ruler over territory
- Have clear borders
- Defends and controls its territory within those borders
- Is recognized by other countries (diplomatic recognition, passports, treaties, etc.)

2. States have bureaucracies staffed by state's own personnel

- Has a national bureaucracy staffed by government personnel (legal system, educational system, hierarchical governmental units, etc.)

3. States monopolize certain functions within its territory (sovereign)

- Controls legitimate use of force within its territory
- Controls money at national scale (prints currency; collects taxes)
- Makes rules within its territory (law, regulations, taxes, citizenship, etc.)
- Controls much information within its territory

States try to form nations within their borders (through symbols, education, 'national interest,' etc.).



So, what is a Nation?

A nation is a group of people who see themselves as a cohesive and coherent unit based on shared cultural or historical criteria. Nations are socially constructed units, not given by nature. Their existence, definition, and members can change dramatically based on circumstances. Nations in some ways can be thought of as “imagined communities” that are bound together by notions of unity that can pivot around religion, ethnic identity, language, cultural practice and so forth. The concept and practice of a nation work to establish who belongs and who does not (insider vs. outsider). Such conceptions often ignore political boundaries such that a single nation may “spill over” into multiple states. Furthermore, states ≠ nations: not every nation has a state (e.g., Kurds; Roma; Palestine). Some states may contain all or parts of multiple nations.

And what about a Nation-State?

A Nation-State is the idea of a homogenous nation governed by its own sovereign state—where each state contains one nation. This idea is almost never achieved.

Group Question: How would you define Canada and why?

