

Buffer state

A **buffer state** is a [country](#) lying between two rival or potentially hostile [greater powers](#). Its existence can sometimes be thought to prevent conflict between them. A buffer state is sometimes a mutually agreed upon area lying between two greater powers, which is demilitarized in the sense of not hosting the military of either power (though it will usually have its own military forces). The invasion of a buffer state by one of the powers surrounding it will often result in war between the powers.

Research shows that buffer states are significantly more likely to be conquered and occupied than are nonbuffer states. This is because "states that great powers have an interest in preserving—buffer states—are in fact in a high-risk group for death. [Regional](#) or great powers surrounding buffer states face a strategic imperative to take over buffer states: if these powers fail to act against the buffer, they fear that their opponent will take it over in their stead. By contrast, these concerns do not apply to nonbuffer states, where powers face no competition for influence or control.

Buffer states, when authentically independent, typically pursue a [neutralist](#) foreign policy, which distinguishes them from [satellite states](#).

The concept of buffer states is part of a theory of the [balance of power](#) that entered European strategic and [diplomatic](#) thinking in the 17th century.

Buffer States

A buffer state is a relatively weak state lying between two or more antagonistic powers of comparable potential.

Conditions for Buffer State Status

The geographical condition seems paramount. The buffer state must be in contact with the territory of the other powers and must separate them. However, this separation may not be complete. Thus, for example, the fact that [France](#) and [Germany](#) had a common boundary did not cancel the role of Belgium as a buffer state before 1914 and between the two world wars.

Buffer states do not have as unique function to constitute a cushion between rival states. Very often they include in their territories essential strategic resources, especially in the form of major circulation corridors and crossroads. In such a case, their role is to neutralize them by depriving both rival states from their military use. It is obvious that for this role it suffices to cover only the portion of the in between space in which the important crossroads or axes are situated.

In addition to contiguity, conditions of foreign policy orientation must be met. The powers surrounding the buffer state are usually two, however, in rare cases they can be more, like in the case of [Poland](#) before its partition at the end of the eighteenth century ([Austria](#), Prussia, Russia). Those surrounding states must be in rivalry. If antagonism ceases, the buffer state loses its *raison d'être*. However, if the rivalry becomes too acute, it can also lead to the disappearance of the buffer status. At the beginning of the [Cold War](#), the tension between the US and the Soviet Union was such that many preexisting or potential buffer states were exposed to efforts for unilateral control, that often ended in solutions in the form of partition. Stalin managed to take control of all of Eastern Europe, a possible [buffer zone](#). Korea and then [Vietnam](#) have been divided into two and became areas of East–West confrontation. Before them, Germany, also a potential buffer state, shared the same fate. Thus, the Cold War, by diminishing the

antagonisms inside each alliance through the discipline imposed by Washington and [Moscow](#), by accentuating ideological rivalry around the international [frontier](#) dividing the two worlds, and also because of the balance of nuclear terror that made territorial arrangements more or less irrelevant, reduced the role of buffer states. Belgium and Korea, two historical buffer states ceased thus to function as such. Later, the Vietnam conflict led to the disappearance of two more buffer states: [Laos](#) and [Cambodia](#).

Therefore, the foreign policy orientation condition cannot be reduced to the rivalry of the surrounding states. A certain balance in the intensity of the antagonism is necessary. The paradigmatic case of [Afghanistan](#) perfectly illustrates this situation. In fact, it is only in 1907, when Russia and England felt that they needed to water down their rivalry in Asia in order to cope with the new geopolitical challenges arising in Central Europe, that a compromise was found which consolidated the buffer state role of Afghanistan. Before that, and in spite of the use of the term buffer state for Afghanistan already in 1883, both powers were trying to monopolize the whole area.

The third condition for buffer state status has to do with capability distribution. The buffer state must be considerably weaker than the surrounding states. Thus, for example, Prussia in post Napoleonic Europe could hardly be considered as a buffer state between Russia and Austria, in spite of the fact that its location satisfied the geographical condition and that the two other powers did develop rivalries.

If the buffer state must be weak, the stronger states must have a comparable potential. The buffer system power field thus defined creates the possibility for buffer state neutrality through a series of strategic calculations from the part of the major actors, the surrounding antagonistic powers. According to this reasoning, the power differential between each of the surrounding powers and the buffer state creates a favorable situation for the absorption of the buffer state in the zone of influence of either, as a result of diplomatic pressure or invasion. However, any effort in that direction would provoke the intervention of the other strong state for which such an evolution would constitute a threat. The alliance of the second strong state with the smaller, buffer state, would tip the balance of power again and make the operation of the takeover risky or even condemned to failure. This triangular situation puts the power challenging the buffer state at a disadvantage, creating thus the necessary dissuasion and securing the buffer state's independence.

The Stability of the Buffer State

However, this situation is inherently instable, since the balance between the surrounding powers can fluctuate, creating windows of opportunity for the one or the other powers to intervene and abolish the state's sovereignty. During the late 1970s, when the US influence in Asia was at its lowest after the Vietnam debacle and the [Iranian](#) Revolution, the Soviet Union has had the opportunity to turn Afghanistan from a buffer state to a Soviet satellite.

Ideally for a buffer state, the antagonism of the surrounding states would vanish and therefore the danger of becoming an arena of confrontation disappear. The European construction has thus saved the West European buffer states that had suffered during the previous centuries from the French–English and then the French–German rivalries. However, when this optimal situation is unattainable, the preservation of a buffer state status is preferable to its collapse which can lead to wars, civil wars, partition, foreign domination, etc. Thus, in addition to the role of the international environment, the capacity of the buffer state to preserve its status by mobilizing its own resources is also to be taken in consideration.

The geographical factor comes again in the foreground. Although, by definition, a buffer state cannot be as strong as the surrounding states, the more it is capable of resisting challenges to its sovereignty, the more it can contribute in stabilizing the power equation. Thus when one of the surrounding states weakens, a relatively strong buffer state might be able to compensate the disequilibrium by mobilizing its own forces. This capacity is related to the geographical conditions often encountered in buffer states territories. Many buffer states developed in difficult natural environments, very often in mountainous areas. Those areas were of little interest for human establishment and therefore remained for long periods on the margins of state formation. With the gradual expansion of the surrounding states however, their peripheries met, creating buffer conditions at their intersection. Such areas are very often crossroads of important axes of circulation and, because of their intermediary geographical location, are inhabited by mixed populations whose [cultural geography](#) expresses the transition from one realm to another.

It is difficult to say if and when those conditions favor resistance to outside intervention. The mountainous character offers undoubtedly a critical advantage to defense. However, the cultural mix and the crossroads function can constitute elements of weakness by facilitating external influences and by promoting centrifugal forces. The difficulties of [Lebanon](#) to survive as a buffer state between [Syria](#) and [Israel](#), largely because of the internal divisions of its population, illustrate the geographical handicap of many buffer state territories. On the other hand, in spite of cultural and geographical fragmentation, the Afghans united again and again against external challenges, making thus efficient use of the defensive character of their terrain. Thus, geographical conditions that can be encountered in many buffer state situations do not determine in a predefined way the capacity of their population to defend their state. Leadership and diplomatic experience are also important factors. The city state of Dubrovnik/Ragusa not only survived the tensions between the [Ottoman Empire](#) and its Latin enemies, but also founded its prosperity and its culture on its role as a hinge between the two Mediterranean realms because of the extraordinary diplomatic skills of its leaders. However, at certain historical moments, the geopolitical stresses are so intense that no diplomatic talent can avert disaster. Sihanouk, the charismatic Cambodian leader, had realized that many years before the US and the South Vietnamese troops invaded his country and put an end to a history of buffer state status going back whole centuries.

Buffer states are spaces in between, that have thus to cope with the instability of their geopolitical environment in order to survive as sovereign states. Sometimes their buffer state status is determined from the outside, as a result of a power field that favors neutralization. Those situations, however, last as long as the conditions that created them. On the other hand, there are cases where a combination of geographical conditions and human factors lead to the emergence of buffer state iconographies that can stabilize the influence of the external power fields and thus extend the life span of the buffer state. The extraordinary stability of [Switzerland](#) as a European buffer state is based on a strong Swiss iconography that has been able to overcome the geographical and cultural diversity of this country and to create a determination to defend it that has gained the respect of all European powers.

As situations of geographical in between, buffer states can be the 'loci' of extraordinary material and cultural wealth, but at the same time of terrible suffering and destruction. The fate of Lebanon, an [Eastern Mediterranean](#) success story that turned into a nightmare, is the perfect illustration of the contradictory nature of many buffer states.