TOWARDS A MEASURABLE AND INCLUSIVE THEORY OF STATE FRAGILITY: CROSS-REGIONAL INSIGHTS FROM CHINA, PORTUGAL, BRAZIL, AND BOTSWANA

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Abstract

This study advances a more contextually grounded understanding of state fragility by integrating a wide range of institutional indicators within a neoclassical realist framework, while deliberately moving beyond the narrow epistemic assumptions that have traditionally guided dominant assessments of state performance. Rather than drawing on uniform models derived primarily from Euro-Atlantic institutional experiences, the analysis adopts a cross-regional comparative approach that is sensitive to diverse political cultures, historical trajectories, and governance practices. The selected cases - China, Portugal, Brazil, and Botswana - constitute a deliberately heterogeneous set of political regimes and developmental trajectories. Methodologically, the study conceptualizes, operationalizes, and measures state fragility through a multidimensional indicator framework that captures variations in institutional capacity, societal resilience, and policy adaptability. The analysis specifies the scoring rules, weighting schemes, and aggregation procedures applied to each indicator, and addresses issues of construct validity and cross-case comparability in the context of cross-regional analysis. By reframing state fragility as a condition that cannot be meaningfully assessed through universalized or externally imposed benchmarks, this study contributes to a more inclusive and context-sensitive theoretical framework. It advances scholarly debates on state performance and international relations while also offering policy-relevant insights for decision-making processes that require attentiveness to regional specificities, historical trajectories, and locally articulated governance priorities within a changing global order. The

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study nonetheless acknowledges important methodological limitations. Meaningful comparison across the selected cases remains challenging due to their fundamentally different historical contexts and developmental starting points. In addition, several indicators are necessarily calibrated based on analytical judgment in order to capture variation across dimensions, which introduces a degree of subjectivity into the evaluative process. Within this framework, a strong state is defined as one characterized by institutional robustness and a demonstrated capacity to respond effectively to domestic challenges. Conversely, a weak state is conceptualized as a political system marked by systemic failure and institutional incapacity across multiple dimensions of the analytical framework.

Keywords

State Fragility, Brazil, Portugal, China and Botswana.

Resumo

Este estudo promove uma compreensão da fragilidade do Estado, integrando um conjunto de indicadores institucionais num enquadramento neo-realista, ao mesmo tempo que se afasta deliberadamente das pressuposições epistemológicas que tradicionalmente orientam as avaliações dominantes sobre o desempenho do Estado. Em vez de recorrer a modelos uniformes derivados sobretudo de experiências institucionais euro-atlânticas, a análise adota uma abordagem comparativa trans-regional sensível a diferentes culturas políticas, trajetórias históricas e práticas de governação. Os casos selecionados - China, Portugal, Brasil e Botswana - constituem um conjunto heterogéneo de regimes políticos e trajetórias de desenvolvimento. Metodologicamente, o estudo conceptualiza, operacionaliza e mede a fragilidade do Estado através de um quadro multidimensional de indicadores que capta variações na capacidade institucional, resiliência da sociedade e adaptabilidade das políticas públicas. A análise especifica as regras de pontuação, os esquemas de ponderação e os procedimentos de agregação aplicados a cada indicador, abordando igualmente questões de validade de construto e de comparabilidade entre casos no contexto de uma análise trans-regional. Ao redefinir a fragilidade estatal como uma condição que não pode ser avaliada de forma significativa por intermédio de padrões universalizados ou de referenciais externos impostos, este estudo contribui para um quadro teórico mais inclusivo e sensível ao contexto. Avança o debate académico sobre desempenho estatal, oferecendo simultaneamente contributos relevantes para políticas públicas, particularmente em processos de decisão que exigem atenção às especificidades regionais, às trajetórias históricas e às prioridades de governação articuladas localmente num sistema internacional em transformação. O estudo reconhece, no entanto, limitações metodológicas importantes. A comparação substantiva entre os casos permanece desafiante devido às diferenças profundas nos seus contextos históricos e pontos de partida de desenvolvimento. Além disso, vários indicadores necessitam de ser calibrados com base em juízo analítico para captar variações entre dimensões, o que introduz um grau de subjetividade no processo avaliativo. Neste enquadramento, um Estado forte é definido como aquele que apresenta robustez institucional e capacidade demonstrada de responder de forma eficaz a desafios internos. Em contrapartida, um Estado fraco é conceptualizado como um sistema político marcado por falhas sistémicas e incapacidade institucional em múltiplas dimensões do quadro analítico.

Palavras-chave

Fragilidade do Estado, Brasil, Portugal, China, Botswana.

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Introduction

Among the key challenges in global governance, fragile states emerge as a critical concern worldwide, as Kofi Annan stated in his speech on peacebuilding, one of the significant difficulties today is the problem of unstable nations. Later as he emphasised more for the shared duty to reinforce and restore this broken fabric for global peace and stability (Annan, 2009). This concern is also echoed in media and policy discourse. For instance, Xinhua News highlights the importance of understanding fragile states by citing real-world examples, such as the large-scale instability in South Africa and ethnic clashes in Ethiopia. These incidents have repeatedly highlighted the vulnerability of certain nations, rendering them fragile and inadequate in their ability to address and mitigate geopolitical risks. This can often lead to a state prone to political and economic disruption in severe cases and chaos (Xinhua News, 2021).

In scholarly literature, the concept of state fragility is widely used but remains contested and multidimensional (Ferreira, 2016). Currently, scholarly discourse frequently engages with concepts such as state collapse, stagnation, regression, and the fragility of political-administrative structures (Ficek, 2022). Despite its presentence of the term in academic articles, there is still no universally accepted definition of it. Some approaches focus on the inability of the state to maintain territorial control and deliver basic services from the government, while others put more emphasis on the deeper institutional weaknesses, such as poor governance and a lack of legitimacy (Ferreira, 2016). Moreover, fragility can be quantified by numbers using different models that are conducted by organisations. The most commonly used empirical tools, like the Fragile States Index (FSI), attempt to quantify fragility through comprehensive indicators such as the security apparatus, economic decline and state legitimacy (THE FUND FOR PEACE, 2025). To further highlight the ongoing debate is the measurement of the fragile state, scholars such as Baliamoune-

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Lutz and McGillivray critiqued the existing measurement frameworks for lacking theoretical coherence, normative biases and geopolitical interest, and they proposed the fuzzy set theory to improve the evaluation of the fragility (Baliamoune-Lutz, 2008). Ferreira also uses the articles to compare with different evaluation systems to conclude the lack of solid theoretical foundations, which provides a gap that leads to the widespread confusion between causes, symptoms and the quantitative outcome. Meanwhile, the international organisations such as the IMF also contribute to the categories of fragility with the need for a policy response, with the emphasis on the lack of a theoretical approach for this concept (Cebotari et al., 2025). Recent scholarship proposes a rethinking of fragility not only as a developmental issue but as a relational and dynamic consideration which can be shaped by global power structures, historical legacies, and transnational pressures (Ficek, 2022). This broader understanding calls for a more refined analytical approach with a diverse portfolio of case studies that can capture the institutional dimensions of fragility, beyond conventional metrics of territorial control or service delivery.

This research conducts a comparative analysis of four countries, which include China, Portugal, Brazil, and Botswana. In the field of international relations, the scholarship widely recognises China as the 21st century's most transformative development, solidifying its status as a defining rising power (Jalil, 2019). Its rapid economic development and global interactions have drawn attention not only to its external influence but also to the internal governance challenges, including issues of policy coherence and institutional legitimacy. Another rising power in the global south group or the regional power is Brazil, and its global positioning blends foreign policy ambition with domestic tension. However, this external engagement also reveals Brazil's internal conflicting conditions, such as the nation selling high-value goods like advanced aircraft. Meanwhile, tens of millions struggle in poverty (Burges, 2013). In contrast, Portugal is a democratic state within the European Union, and it offers a case of institutional fragility shaped by economic dependency, bureaucratic inertia, and the constraints of supranational governance (Magalhães, 2005 & De Sousa, 2001). Most importantly, as McNamara states, the Eurozone crisis stripped policy autonomy from governments across the state, and the lack of a unified European solution, Portugal faced intense pressure to adopt investor and agency to ensure debt repayment (Matthijs & McNamara, 2015). Finally, Botswana is often described as an African success story because it demonstrates relative institutional resilience despite structural vulnerabilities from the government, and it also achieves a relatively high ranking for the stable state among different indices from organisations (Good, 1999). However, this internal governmental system tends to have deeper structural vulnerabilities rooted in governance practices and economic dependency. The 2024 general election, in which the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) lost power for the first time in nearly six decades. It revealed underlying fragilities in public dissatisfaction with corruption, nepotism, and inequality, as well as the economic stagnation linked to the declining diamond sector (Bello et al., 2024). This political shift challenges the conventional narrative of Botswana's stability, which guides us to bring this state together with other cases to conceptualise and reconsider the term state fragility.

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Our study proposes the research question of how state fragility can be defined and evaluated? As each state embodies distinct governance systems, development pathways are displayed with the display of internal fragility. By systematically examining how these states confront challenges related to policy coherence, institutional legitimacy, and resilience, this study seeks to illuminate the differentiated expressions of state fragility across varied sovereignty to form a common applicable model. The significance of this research lies in the theoretical innovation and empirical breadth. Early studies often relied on institutionalist frameworks, emphasising the erosion of state capacity, authority, and legitimacy (Carment et al., 2009). By building on this theoretical foundation, political legitimacy theory also added to the research on the fragility of the state to highlight the role of citizen trust and regime credibility in sustaining state resilience (Rosvadoski-Da-Silva et al., 2021). Meanwhile, Ware also argues that the trajectories of colonial legacies and global inequalities should also be considered in the institutional weakness in the long-term development patterns (Ware & Ware, 2014). Moreover, discourse analysis and critical theories have been used in analysing the term of state fragility on international intervention and governance reforms for a specific region (Grimm et al., 2014). We believe that the neoclassical realism offers a compelling theoretical framework for analysing state fragility. Unlike classical realism, which puts more emphasis on the power and structural politics, it focuses on the systemic and domestic variables, which can help us to evaluate the resilience and fragility of the state. Empirically, this study challenges the conventional assumptions of the case selection. The selection of China, Portugal, Brazil and Botswana enables a comparative analysis across region-specific or performance-based studies. A case study approach is particularly appropriate for this research, as it facilitates an in-depth examination of the institutional configurations, policy dynamics, and legitimacy mechanisms in each state within the context. These cases, selected for their contrasting political systems, developmental trajectories, and unstable geopolitical environment, can uncover patterns and divergences that challenge dominant narratives and contribute to a more differentiated understanding of fragility.

Literature Review

The term of great power competition firstly used as description on the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union (Brands, 2022), and the great power politics are fundamentally determined by relative power (Gilpin, 1981). While power is typically conceptualized as a state's ability to shape global politics in accordance with its interests, systematic measurement. However, there is a lack of unified method of quantifying it as this comprehensive assessment would entail delineating a country's specific interests and its exact influence across a virtually infinite number of international occurrences (Nye, 1990). However, this research would like to shift the focus from the understanding and evaluation of the traditional power of the influential outside to the power inside of the state for the concept of state fragility.

This is a core concept in the study of state governance and international development, the concept of State Fragility has undergone dynamic evolution in its definition and scope throughout these past decades. The late 20th century marked a critical foundational

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period for related concepts. In 1982, Robert Jackson and Carl Rosberg took the lead in focusing on the phenomenon of weak states in Africa. They argue that such states only possessed a legal status as sovereign entities but lacked the capacity to effectively exercise territorial control and governance functions (Jackson & Rosberg, 1982). This diverged sharply from Max Weber's definition of a modern state as an actor with a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence (Weber, 1948). This also leads to the current research on state fragility from the perspective of governance capacity deficiency. Aligned with the critique, Brock also argues that it overly equates fragility with a breakdown in the state's capacity to enforce control. Instead, it can be contended that the core issue is systemic weakness in policy planning and implementation. It is rooted in factors such as insufficient political will, bureaucratic inefficiency, weak institutions, or conflict (Brock et al., 2013). In 1992, Gerald Helman and Steven Ratner further proposed the concept of the failed nation-state, which is a phrase that defines a state that can no longer exist as a member of the international community, such as Somalia and Bosnia. Furthermore, they also argue to advocate such states to be placed under UN trusteeship (Helman & Ratner, 1992). Later, scholars like Robert Rotberg refined this framework, and he argued that a nation-state fails when it is plagued by internal violence and ceases to provide positive political goods to its citizens as a vacuum authority (Rotberg, 2002). However, the connotation of fragile states itself was fragile in different contexts, and it was subject to shifting interpretations across academic and policy contexts (Wang & Chen, 2025). Nevertheless, the issue of state fragility gradually became a key focus of foreign policy for developed countries and emerged as a critical topic in academic and policy research (Kaplan, 2014). Scholars have sought to delineate the core traits of failed states to clarify this contested concept, with Rotberg, Zartman, and other scholars together summarising key characteristics of the loss of control of the state. It means the state can no longer effectively assert authority over its geographic political boundaries. Besides, the erosion of collective decision-making authority lacks the capacity to formulate and implement comprehensive policies for the state. In addition, the state is unable to provide basic public services such as healthcare, education, infrastructure and security, and these elements are essential to sustain citizens' livelihoods and well-being. Crucially, it also represents a failure to fully participate in international affairs, which includes an inability to uphold international obligations and acts as a recognised member of the international community (Rotberg, 2002 & Zartman, 1995; Milliken & Krause, 2002). However, the failed state concept has been discussed in different opinions. As Terry Call noted, it is overly broad and difficult to define precisely the failed state, which can lead to a Conceptual muddle of different criteria in research and policy discourse (Call, 2008). This conceptual ambiguity also leads to different evaluation systems. Current researchers and institutions have developed a wide range of fragmented frameworks to measure state fragility, and there is also a lack of standardisation, resulting in significant discrepancies in empirical findings and frequent inaccuracies in predictions (Zhu & Hao, 2017). As a result, the consensus on defining state fragility remained elusive, with the term often used interchangeably with expressions like weak performers, failing states, or failed states (Ferreira, 2016). Later, the concept of fragile states gained international recognition in 2005, when the OECD Development Aid Committee convened two high-level meetings, and it stated that the definition of a fragile

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state is a lack of political commitment and insufficient capacity to develop and implement policies (PPAIF, 2007).

Table 1 – What is state fragility?							
	← Factors influencing state fragility as an internal and dynamic condition →						
	Internal					**External**	
	Political Decision Making		**Identity and Participation**		**Needs (Public Service)**		
Failed State	Ability to exercise political control and commitment Level of internal securitization	Efficiency of the institutional decision-making process Ability to exercise the monopoly of the use of force	Conflictual social and political identities	Instable social and political elites Openness to societal participation	Level of human security Ability to address the evolution of societal needs	Ability to implement a line of political and economic evolution Ability to provide essential public services	Ability to fully participate in foreign affairs and to be perceived as a security threat Diaspora's identification and national engagement

State is Non-Existent (Score=0)

Minimum Fragility (Score =240)

Source: Authors, based on Appendix 1

After defining the fragile state, contemporary scholarship mainly focuses on identifying the key correlates and drivers of fragility and finding a suitable measurement of the fragile states. Carment and Samy argue that there is no direct association between fragility and worse outcomes in conflict, human rights, democracy, or aid levels. Instead, they assert that their analysis identified low human development through the UNDP's Human Development Index as the strongest correlate of fragility (Carment & Samy, 2009). This conclusion is also agreed by Patrick, who emphasised that the most severe negative impacts of fragile contexts ultimately befall the states' own populations (Patrick, 2006). Other scholars' work has explored the structural and institutional drivers of fragility. Migdal framed that the power of the state has to be concentrated in social control. Capable states emerge as societies need to become relatively dependent on state-provided services (Migdal, 1989). Building on this, Robinson and Acemoglu highlighted elite capture as a critical driver. When power and wealth are dominant among the elite, they neglect investments in basic public services. This can trigger a cycle of civil war that erodes state capacity (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). By contrast, Dutta and Roy identified a mitigating factor for the fragile states. The higher transparency reduces fragility by enabling free information flow. This empowers citizens to build trust in government and political participation, which can address the legitimacy deficits that often underpin vulnerability (Dutta & Roy, 2016). Chauvet and Collier anchored fragility in the economic function system. They classify fragile or failed states as low-income countries where poor economic policies, weak institutions, and deficient governance make growth nearly impossible. The combination of poverty and stagnation significantly

increases a country's propensity for civil war, and this can be an influential factor in the state's fragility (Chauvet & Collier, 2004). Despite the drivers of fragile state, scholars also find particularity across regional scholarly traditions. Through the North American literature, it has relied on the terms state failure and state collapse to describe severe political crises in 1990s contexts like Somalia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Liberia, and Afghanistan (Christensen, 2007). For the European and institutional literature, by contrast, it eschews the failed state label, and it favours more nuanced terminology that can avoid implying collapse. Sørensen argued that the term disrupted states refers to entities that emphasise fragility as a dynamic, rather than a static condition. This terminological shift also reflects deeper differences in how scholars conceptualise state vulnerability. North American frameworks often focus on crisis severity, while European and institutional work prioritises the potential for recovery and incremental improvement (Sørensen, 1999). With the increasing importance of the multidimensional nature of fragility, regional differences in how fragility is conceptualised further reflect the broader scholarship to move beyond static, one-dimensional definitions. Currently, it has a shift driven by growing recognition of fragility's multidimensional nature, including drivers that often lie beyond a state's internal boundaries or control (Ware & Ware, 2014).

Meanwhile, fragile states are frequently framed as among the world's security threats, and this foundational assumption is highly contentious, as it lacks robust empirical support (Brock et al., 2012; Carment & Samy, 2009; Nay, 2013; Patrick, 2006). The challenge of this is the absence of a universal framework for measuring state fragility. Scholars and international organisations have relied on a diverse array of assessment tools, and each of them emphasises distinct dimensions of vulnerability. To address this variability, this study draws on the combination of global and regional institutions' measurement that balances comprehensiveness of the state's portfolio. These include the Fragile States Index (FSI), which was developed by the Fund for Peace, which evaluates 178 countries across 12 social, economic, and political indicators (Fragile States Index | the Fund for Peace, 2025). The Global Peace Index (GPI), which is published annually by the Institute for Economics and Peace, quantifies peacefulness based on measures of violence and militarisation (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025). Moreover, the World Bank's Country Policy and Institutional Assessment (CPIA) as a tool focused on low and middle-income countries that rates policy effectiveness and institutional quality across 16 criteria (Country Policy and Institutional Assessment | DataBank, 2025). In the context of African states, we also consider the African Governance Index (AGI). As it is the regional indicator that assesses various aspects of governance in Africa, it can provide a comprehensive evaluation of the state's governance capabilities. We consider this to have great significance for measuring state fragility at the regional level based on the regional context. Overall, by grouping analysis in these widely recognised frameworks, our study seeks to mitigate the biases of a single measurement tool and reflect the diverse dimensions of state fragility.

With the focus on empirical study, we complement realism's analytical lens with insights from widely recognised fragility measurement tools, each designed to quantify different facets of state vulnerability. In this paper, we used neoclassical realism as the theoretical framework with clear relevance to study state fragility. Neoclassical Realism (NCR)

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emerged in the mid-1990s to address post-Cold War gaps in structural realism with the strict focus on power distribution to integrate domestic factors (Dyson, 2008; Wivel, 2005). This theoretical adjustment makes NCR uniquely suited to studying state fragility. Unlike frameworks that attribute fragility to either focusing purely on systemic pressures or isolated domestic failures. NCR captures the interplay between these two spheres, and we believe this lies at the core of fragility. As Gideon Rose first framed it over two decades ago, NCR posits that systemic power shifts set the stage for strategic change, which depends on the domestic situation (Rose, 1998). As scholars further elaborated, the state behaviour is shaped not solely by the anarchic nature of the international order, but also by factors such as a state's domestic institutional capacity, the perceptions of its leaders, and its strategic culture (Lobell et al., 2009). This contextual focus avoids reducing fragile states to simply labelling failed states, and instead takes into consideration their vulnerability in unique historical, regional, and domestic dynamics. Take the NCR as our research framework; it can fill a fragility research gap because it avoids overemphasising systemic determinism and reducing fragility to domestic failures. Meanwhile, it can provide theoretical tools to explain the different vulnerabilities exhibited by different countries in the face of international pressure and internal political factors. This model asserts more on vulnerability to the interplay of global structures, domestic institutions, and contextual history consideration (Kitchen, 2010; Lobell et al., 2009).

As Acharya and Buzan argue, mainstream international relations theory remains largely an abstraction derived from Western historical experience and political thought (Acharya & Buzan, 2019). This Western-centric orientation has important implications for research on state fragility, which has traditionally relied on analytical frameworks, case studies, and measurement tools grounded in Western models of state-building, governance, and security. Such approaches often understate the significance of factors central to many Global South contexts, including colonial legacies, post-independence economic structures, and external intervention in domestic governance.

By moving beyond Western-derived abstractions, this study addresses key limitations in the existing literature. First, it demonstrates how state fragility manifests differently across diverse historical and institutional contexts, including African, Asian, Latin American, and European states. Second, through comparative analysis, it develops a more comprehensive evaluative model that integrates multiple indicators across different types of states. In doing so, the study contributes to a more inclusive and globally grounded approach to theorising state fragility.

The remainder of the study is organised as follows. The methodology section outlines the research design, including the construction of the evaluative framework, indicator selection, data sources, and comparative techniques. The case analysis section examines state fragility in China, Portugal, Brazil, and Botswana across the dimensions of the proposed model. The conclusion synthesises the theoretical and empirical findings and reflects on their broader implications for the conceptualisation of state fragility.

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Methodology

Comparative research methodology is a pivotal methodological approach for interrogating the dynamics of state fragility. By systematically examining the institutional indicators across a diverse set of states, we argue that the mechanisms through institutional configurations can shape a state model's fragility. Notably, as the cases that we study have distinct political regimes, levels of economic development, and geopolitical positions, we can form a more balanced model to consider the variation between states. For instance, as a member state of the European Union, Portugal's institutional development has been subject to the EU frameworks, and thereby it can demonstrate a relatively high degree of institutional resilience. By contrast, Botswana, despite its resource-dependent economic structure, has sustained a comparatively low level of fragility through the establishment of institutionalised fiscal governance mechanisms. China, alternatively, has fostered institutional concentration via its political system. It confronts challenges about regime legitimacy and administrative transparency. As Ferreira states in the article, comparative studies should be built on the foundation of a theoretical framework in order to avoid just comparing different indicators from the index (Ferreira, 2016). We also argue against the idea of considering the state's history and the process of institutional evolution rather than static analysis (Ware & Ware, 2014). By analysing multiple cases with diverse indices, we can validate findings across different contexts to minimise the risk of overinterpreting data from a single case.

Our evaluation model is structured around six dimensions of state internal management, with the evaluation criteria detailed in Appendixes 1 and 2. Drawing on neoclassical realist theory, six indicators are used to assess state performance: the external regional and global environment; economic resilience and vulnerability; social control and legitimacy; monopoly of violence and territorial control; governance and institutional strength; and foreign policy and international agency.

The external regional and global environment refers to the state's capacity to respond to potential risks arising both domestically and externally. Economic resilience and vulnerability capture the degree of economic diversification, which is critical for mitigating risks associated with dependence on a single market. Social control and legitimacy relate to the state's ability to ensure everyday public safety and reflect the capacity of public service provision. The dimension of monopoly of violence and territorial control assesses the extent of governmental authority over coercive instruments, such as military and security forces, and is closely linked to governance and institutional strength. Finally, foreign policy and international agency evaluate the state's external engagement and its capacity to influence international norms and values.

This study employs a comparative framework to assess state resilience and institutional capacity across six equally weighted dimensions: (1) the external regional and global environment; (2) economic resilience and vulnerability; (3) social control and legitimacy; (4) monopoly of violence and territorial control; (5) governance and institutional strength; and (6) foreign policy and international agency. Each dimension is operationalized through specific indicators (Appendixes 1 and 2) evaluated on a standardized 1–10 scale. Scores of 0–2 indicate critical weakness and instability; 2–5

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reflect below-average performance; 5–7 denote average performance relative to other states; 7–9 signify strong state resilience; and 9–10 represent excellent institutional capacity and stability.

The scoring process follows a relative, context-oriented approach tailored to cross-state comparison among the selected cases. While the framework aims to ensure analytical rigor and transparency, it acknowledges inherent limitations, including the partial subjectivity associated with qualitative indicators. The primary objective of this methodology is therefore not to generate definitive rankings, but to facilitate systematic comparison by highlighting relative strengths and vulnerabilities across diverse states.

Case Analysis
External Regional and Global Environment (ERGE)
Geopolitical Pressures

From our perspective, a state's stability is determined by the resilience of its domestic institutions for converting the external pressures into cohesion rather than fragmentation. Based on our perception, we give the score of 9 to Portugal as its organisational embeddedness within the EU and NATO framework. These institutions guarantee Portugal's external security for ensuring the internal stability. China (6.5) is positioned in the relatively stable range, which shows the pressures from territorial disputes and the strategic rivalry of major powers, such as the United States. We argue that China has substantial state capacity, especially for naval power and strategic infrastructure investments such as the Belt and Road Initiative, which can manage well in the competition and territorial disputes. Botswana (6) achieves a score in the relatively stable section. Its domestic politics are quite stable, with the recent movement for changing the ruling regime. This rating reflects the resistance to the uncertainties in the near future in its regional environment. Brazil (5.5), as the regional power, receives its score due to the non-traditional security issues and fluctuating regional influence. For instance, Brazil's policy shifts on the Amazon conservation issue fluctuated with the resources and priorities. It has fundamentally undermined the state's credibility and efficacy in geopolitics.

Trade Barriers

It is derived from the International Trade Barrier Index (TBI) from THOLOS Foundation (ITBI, 2025). Within this dimension, Singapore (2.79) represents the benchmark of lowest and Indonesia (5.84) the highest. In order to standardise the comparison across different dimensions within the framework, the original scores are linearly converted to a 0-10 scale which is presented by the lower trade barrier with the high score on this dimension. Portugal (7.4) is rated as a stable category of stable, which is the beneficiary of the EU's highly open and commercial policy. Botswana (6.5) remains within a relatively stable band, and it reflects its overall openness as a customs union member. However, it also faces developmental constraints such as digital trade facilitation and services trade. Both Brazil (2.8) and China (2.2) are categorised as less stable in our evaluation,

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and the reasons are distinct. Brazil's score is primarily influenced by its high tariff protections, such as the Mercosur common external tariff framework. Brazil imposes a 35% high tariff on imported vehicles (Blenkinsop, 2025). Conversely, China's primary constraints are not on the traditional tariffs but in market access barriers within service sectors. For financial services, foreign ownership in securities and insurance companies was capped at 51% in 2017 and 100% in 2020 (Qu, 2020). Although China has gradually reduced its limitations in this area, significant barriers persist across other key service industries, such as the value-added services that require operating under a joint venture with a Chinese partner for telecommunication.

Regional Integration

The original data from the Asia-Pacific Regional Integration Index was linearly transformed to our evaluation model by using the highest performer (Poland, 0.728) and weakest performer (Sudan, 0.218) as benchmarks (Huh & Park, 2018). The results are: Portugal 9.51, China 5.20, Botswana 3.10, and Brazil 2.43. However, we find significant limitations as the index primarily measures the degree of socio-economic integration, such as trade, investment, and infrastructure. In contrast, the scoring criteria of this study emphasise access to the market, security mechanisms and decision-making for the regionality. Consequently, we have calibrated the data by integrating with our perception. China (6.5) is constructing its substantive capture to shape the influence. This influence is demonstrated through its role in shaping regional trade rules via RCEP and financial connectivity, the Belt and Road Initiative and the AIIB. Most importantly, it also participates in security coordination like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Secondly, Brazil (5.5) and Botswana (6.0) achieve relatively stable progress in their regional integration action. As the dominant power in Mercosur, Brazil possesses institutional privilege to core market access and decision-making power. However, it also faces immense challenges of internal issues with policy volatility and implementation failures. Conversely, Botswana primarily derives stable leading positions in African states. It shares benefits from goods market access within the Southern African Customs Union (SACU). Compared to Portugal's deep and institutionalised integration and China's strategic, shaping engagement, both Botswana and Brazil have a limited profile in this dimension.
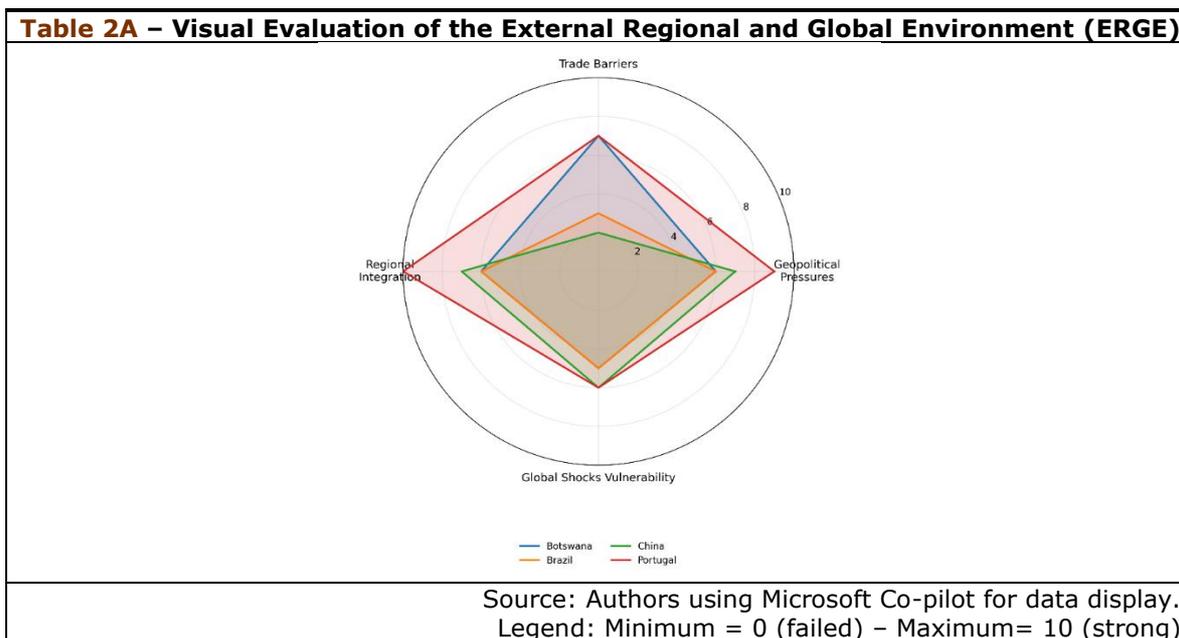
Global Shocks Vulnerability

Our data comes from the ND-GAIN Index, which quantifies states' vulnerability to global shocks with readiness and resilience (ND-GAIN Index, 2025). Portugal (6.2) demonstrates the highest readiness and lowest vulnerability among the selection states. It is consistent with its developed economy and membership in the EU's support mechanisms. China (5.8) reflects the significant adaptive capacity due to its economic size and institutional strength. Especially for COVID-19, it also faces the challenges of both initial disruptions and subsequent external demand shocks. Brazil (4.7) and Botswana (4.9) score within the "Less Stable" range, and they reveal higher vulnerability due to factors such as economic structure and developmental constraints.

Based on the complete scoring data (Tables 2 and 2A), Portugal emerges as the strongest performer in managing the external regional and global environment, achieving the highest total score (32). Botswana (24) and China (22) demonstrate moderate resilience, while Brazil (20) appears relatively more vulnerable in this dimension. The scores indicate significant variation in national capacities to navigate external pressures, with Portugal showing notable strength in regional integration (10) and managing geopolitical pressures (9).

Table 2 – Numerical Evaluation of the External Regional and Global Environment				
States	**Botswana**	**Brazil**	**China**	**Portugal**
Geopolitical Pressures	06	06	07	09
Trade Barriers	07	03	02	07
Regional Integration	06	06	07	10
Global Shocks Vulnerability	05	05	06	06
Total Score	24	20	22	32
				Source: Authors

Table 2A – Visual Evaluation of the External Regional and Global Environment (ERGE)
Source: Authors using Microsoft Co-pilot for data display.
Legend: Minimum = 0 (failed) – Maximum= 10 (strong)

Economic Resilience and Vulnerability (ERV)

Economic Diversification

The next indicator of economic diversification is an important factor in the sustainable development for state's economy. Meanwhile, it is also important for analysing the stability of the state performance. Diversification of the markets and industries can minimise the strategic dependence on a single industry and foreign markets. The raw data we use is from the Global Economic Diversification Index as follows: China 8.6,

Portugal 3.6, Brazil 3.2, and Botswana 1.8 (Global Economic Diversification Index, 2025). We convert it according to our criteria. However, we think that Portugal's economy is specialised in interconnected, value-added services and manufacturing niches, which are deeply embedded in complex European supply chains. This structure provides inherent buffers of diversification to mitigate the vulnerability of economic crisis more than Brazil or Botswana. Therefore, we adjust its score to 5.0 for its performance. China receives a score of 8.6 because of its strategic industrial plan from the government and sustained upgrading within global value chains. However, Botswana's low score (1.8) shows the structural vulnerability due to its persistent dependence on diamond extraction.

Debt Sustainability

The following indicator is the Debt sustainability, and we agree that it can reflect a state's capacity to deal with the balance between the public debt and fiscal flexibility. We choose the index of debt-to-GDP ratios from the World Population Review (World Population Review, 2025), and we use the Brunei (2.3%) and Sudan (272%) represent the extreme numbers to convert our selection state's performance from the scale of 0-10. Botswana's (9.1) score signifies its good fiscal management. Brazil and Portugal have a similar ratio of 76.5% with a score of 7.3. These governments consider fiscal flexibility relatively less. Specifically, Portugal is a member of the Eurozone, which can operate within a common monetary framework. This system can further limit its own independent currency and interest rate policies. Brazil also has the issue of high borrowing costs and economic volatility. China has a high ratio of 88.3% (6.8), which shows the role as a major global economy, where such debt levels could have broader systemic implications, with the opportunities to respond to market demand.

Informal Economy Size

Informal economy size is an indicator of illegal economic activity within the control of governance. If the government cannot control well, then it has the possibility of leading to the fragility of the state due to poor management skills. Based on the raw data we find on the Informal Economy Sizes from World Economics, we convert the score from 0-10 for our framework (World Economics, 2025). China has the lowest level among the four states at (12.1%, 9.1). It reveals a formalised economic system with relatively strict rules from the government. It is related to the stronger institutional capacity. Especially for the extensive digital governance systems in China, to ensure a high rate of compliance. Portugal follows at (17.6%, 8), and this indicates a developed formal economy. As it has a mature regulatory framework within the EU economy framework. However, Botswana (28.7%, 6.6) and Brazil (33.4%, 5.8) reveal the large informal sectors, which have problems in areas such as tax collection and labour market regulation.

Unemployment Rate

The next indicator is the unemployment rate from the World Population Review (World Population Review, 2025). Within the selected mid-range economies of these four states, there are significant structural divergences. Botswana's exceptionally high rate of (23.1%, 3.3) contrasts with the other three states, and it has profound structural challenges within its labour market, which can be linked to the economic diversification efforts and demographic pressures. Brazil (7.6%, 7.8) and Portugal (6.4%, 8.2) exhibit moderately elevated rates. Brazil currently has a labour market that reflects prevailing economic slack. This consistency can indicate challenges rooted in structural factors, such as a large informal sector. This informality creates a dual labour market, with the formal sector having insufficient job creation, and a large, low-productivity informal sector that acts as a buffer but does not generate good employment and social security. However, following the Eurozone debt crisis and COVID-19, Portugal implemented a series of labour market policies aimed at enhancing flexibility and job creation, especially for tourism and services. By contrast, China's notably lower rate of 4.6% (8.7) demonstrates relative labour market resilience. The Chinese labour market benefits from a large manufacturing industry with a dynamic service sector, which can gather a significant portion of the workforce. Additionally, state-led initiatives, such as vocational training programs to support the key employment groups.

Based on the complete data (Tables 3 and 3A), China demonstrates the strongest overall economic resilience with a total score of 34, excelling particularly in economic diversification (9) and maintaining a low unemployment rate (9). Portugal follows with a total score of 28, showing balanced performance across debt sustainability (7), informal economy size (8), and unemployment (8), though it reflects moderate diversification (5). Brazil ranks third with a score of 24, which performs well in unemployment (8) but exhibiting limited economic diversification (3). Botswana scores lowest (21), and it reveals a high reliance on narrow economic sectors (2) despite strong debt sustainability (9). The results highlight varied structural economic profiles, and China showing the most diversified and stable labour market. However, Botswana's economy appears most vulnerable due to its lack of diversification.
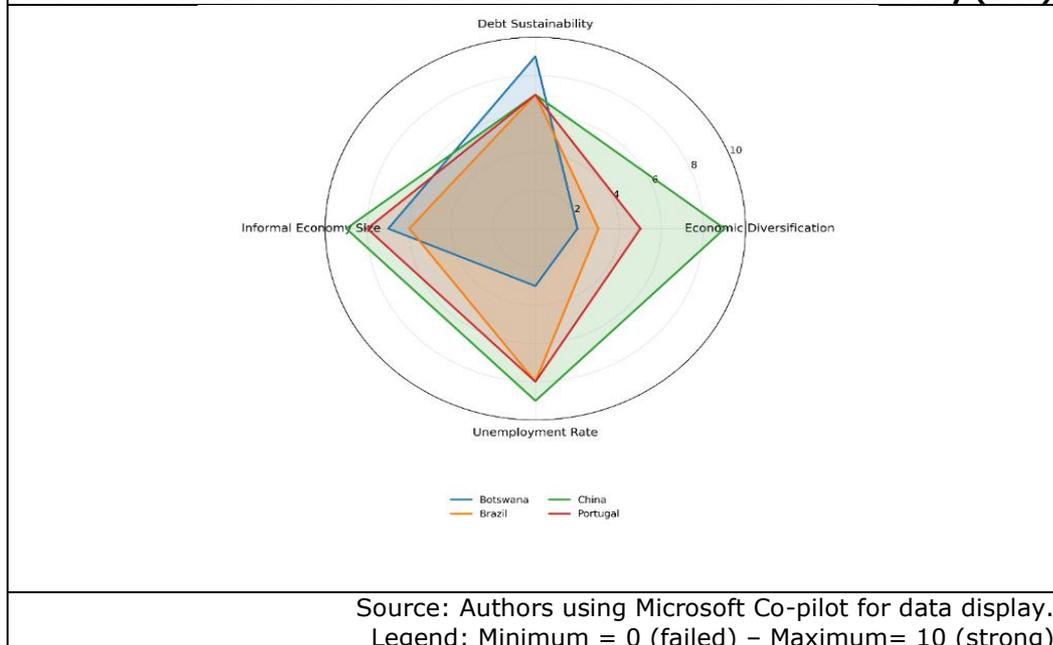
Table 3 – Numerical Evaluation of Economic Resilience and Vulnerability				
States	**Botswana**	**Brazil**	**China**	**Portugal**
Economic Diversification	02	03	09	05
Debt Sustainability	09	07	07	07
Informal Economy Size	07	06	09	08
Unemployment Rate	03	08	09	08
Total Score	21	24	34	28
				Source: Authors

Table 3A – Visual Evaluation of Economic Resilience and Vulnerability (ERV)

Source: Authors using Microsoft Co-pilot for data display.
Legend: Minimum = 0 (failed) – Maximum= 10 (strong)

Social Control and Legitimacy (SCL)

Trust in Institutions

The indicator of trust in institutions, it demonstrates the level of trust from the public in the governmental sectors. However, there is no unified standard measurement to evaluate the state's performance. Thus, we employ a combination of several measurements with our perception. The data mainly from the Edelman Trust Barometer for China (77%, score 7.7) and Brazil (51%, score 5.1) (2025 Edelman Trust Barometer, 2025), and OECD data for Portugal (51.8%, score 5.2). (Trust in Government, 2025) Botswana is currently absent from the major indexes and surveys. Therefore, according to our evaluation, we give a score of 4.0 for this state. As the state is in a conditional trust paradigm for sustained democratic stability, with a strong anti-corruption policy. However, this indicator is closely related to the corruption and unemployment index, as this can lose the trust of the public. China (7.7) receives many trusts from the public, and it is because of the stable governance. Brazil (5.1) shows moderate but fragile trust, and it is constrained by informality and polarisation. Portugal (5.2) reflects cautious trust from the citizens, especially due to the distrust from the post-Eurozone crisis within the EU framework.

Social Progress

The next indicator within this dimension is the social progress, and we put it here as it demonstrates the development of the society, which is crucial for citizens. We argue that the failure of the state is based on the perceptions of people. AlTi Global Social Progress

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Index (SPI) focuses on the non-economic aspects of society's well-being (Global Social Progress Index, 2025). We convert the raw scores to a 0-10 scale by using Sweden (90.75) and South Sudan (26.5) as the upper and lower benchmarks. Portugal has the highest score among the four states of 9.1 (SPI 84.63), and this aligns with the top-tier society atmosphere. Meanwhile, it also provides high-quality education, medical care and access to information. The other three states of Brazil (7.2), China (6.7), and Botswana (5.7) together to generate the cluster for their similar scores. All of them have met with the basic needs, but there is still room for improvement. Specifically, we assert that Brazil's score reflects the huge inequity in opportunity, such as educational accessibility and formal employment across different regions. China's position indicates considerable success in meeting material basics like food and shelter. However, it has shortcomings in environmental quality and aspects of personal freedom. Botswana's lower score highlights the gaps between the social status, particularly in advanced education and health management.

Civil Society Vibrancy

The next indicator for our evaluation is the index of Civil Society Participation. Then we convert the raw data, the highest score of Norway and the lowest score of North Korea as benchmarks (Civil Society Participation Index, 2025). We transform the results of the group for Brazil (9.1), Botswana (8.9), and Portugal (8.2). We argue that their scores align with the vibrant civil society atmosphere. This high-level performance is ensured by the comprehensive legal protections. It can lead these organisations to act as a critical agency between the state and the citizens. However, China's score (2.1) places it in a different category compared with other states. This score is related to China's single-party system. Under the framework of the Communist Party's comprehensive leadership, it is constrained by the system of institutional guidance and legal regulation.

Freedom of Speech

Upon the last indicator that we have just analysed, the next indicator we measure is the freedom of expression. (The Global Expression Report, 2025). We use North Korea (0) and Denmark (94) as the lower and upper benchmarks to give the score of our selection portfolio. Both Brazil (9.36) and Portugal (9.04) achieve nearly maximum scores out of 10 on the scale, and this indicates relatively complete legal protections in the public sphere. We found out that Brazil's high score benefits from the federal structure and political polarisation of the system of autonomy. Portugal's position aligns with the EU norms, which give attention to human rights and freedom. Botswana (8.19) also achieved the high score, and it reflects its relatively free media environment within the African context. This performance is consistent with its reputation for democratic stability. However, China's score (0.21) is exceptionally low. This is closely related to the geopolitical system, where there are some restrictions on the media and public discourse.
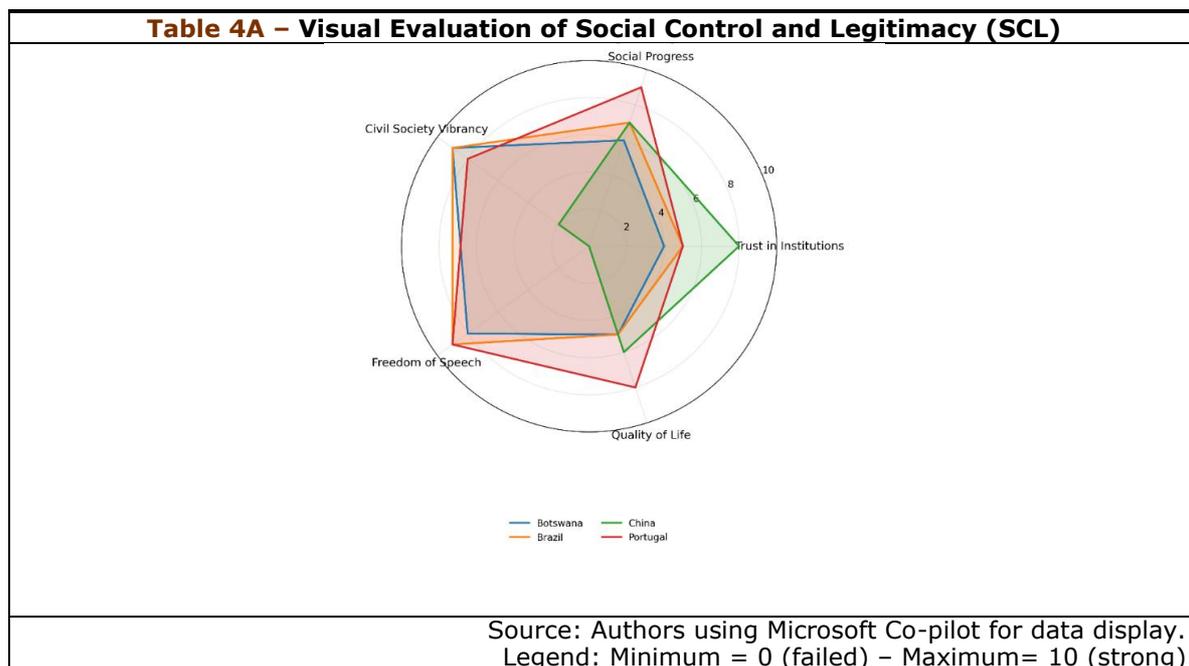
Quality of Life

In order to draw a comprehensive analysis picture for the social development progress to link with the state fragility, we identify the original data from the quality-of-life index (NUMBEO, 2025). We later quantify the original figure framework from 0 to 10, and the number from Luxembourg serves as the top and Nigeria's score at the bottom of our grading. Portugal (7.6) stands in the upper position of the selection of states due to its location and membership in the EU. It shows that this state has a well-established system for welfare, which can further demonstrate the strong causal relationship between institutional development and system stability with the well-being. Then, China (5.5) is placed at the average position among all the states, and the score reveals its substantial progress in poverty, basic education, and healthcare access issues through the effort of the governmental strategic plan for each year. Although Botswana (5.1) and Brazil (5.0) have similar scores, they do not share similar regional contexts. We identify that the performance of Botswana is relatively good, especially in the Sub-Saharan African region, due to its effective management of diamond revenues and political stability. However, Brazil encounters the social issue of the middle-income trap. This is where inequality and institutional weakness constrain the improvements in living standards.

Table 4 – Numerical Evaluation of Social Control and Legitimacy				
States	Botswana	Brazil	China	Portugal
Trust in Institutions	04	05	08	05
Social Progress	06	07	07	09
Civil Society Vibrancy	09	09	02	08
Freedom of Speech	08	09	00	09
Quality of Life	05	05	06	08
Total Score	32	35	23	39

Source: Authors

Table 4A – Visual Evaluation of Social Control and Legitimacy (SCL)

Source: Authors using Microsoft Co-pilot for data display.
Legend: Minimum = 0 (failed) – Maximum= 10 (strong)

Monopoly of Violence and Territorial Control (MVTC)

Presence of Non-State Armed Actors

We argue that the presence of non-state armed actors serves as a critical indicator of internal security and state monopoly of violence, but there is no index to present the result. Regarding this indicator, we create our own evaluation based on the non-state armed groups and legitimacy from the state. Portugal (9) falls within the highest stability section. The state maintains an unchallenged monopoly on the legitimate use of force. The law enforcement and military institutions are robust, professional, and fully capable of maintaining internal order without contestation. China (9) is also positioned in the most stable category as the central government retains the power to control over territory through a comprehensive and unified security system, so the state demonstrates a high capacity to encounter any emergent armed challenges swiftly. Botswana (8) ranks within the stable range. It demonstrates good performance, especially in the African context of stability and controlling the territory with the state security forces. It faces the challenges of conventional crime rather than these organised armed actors. Brazil (5) is categorised as relatively stable, as there are several regions, particularly in remote areas, that have experienced significant influence from powerful drug cartels and organised crime factions. This shows a partial erosion of the state's monopoly on violence, and it positions Brazil in a distinctively more vulnerable position compared to the other three states.

Crime Rate

If we look inside the society, it is important to evaluate the safety of the environment. The safety of the environment includes two parts: one is the crime rate, and the other is the police effectiveness rate, which we will demonstrate later. This crime rate analysis reveals a significant divergence among the four states for their internal governance efficiency and social cohesion (Crime Index by Country, 2025). China's (8.7) and Portugal's (7.3) scores are situated within the stable category, and it shows the relatively high living standards and the effective system for police to prevent people commit the crime. Especially for China, the high score is linked with its comprehensive and technological system to record and prevent the occurrence of crime. Conversely, Botswana (4.6) and Brazil (2.5) fall into the less stable category within our table. Botswana's score presents its high daily conventional crime that can damage the quality of living for people. Brazil's low score highlights systemic failure, especially for the state's fundamental inability to address violence with the ineffective rule of law in rural territories. In such regions, organised crime not only dominates security but also infiltrates local governance and economic activities.

Border Control and Mobility

Based on our perceptual assessment with the fragility grading framework, the Openness Score (Openness Index, 2025) reveals the management efficacy among the four states. Portugal (9) is perceived as the most stable, as its effective control within a trusted

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regional bloc within the EU, where borders facilitate safe movement. For instance, its borders benefit from the EU's integrated border management system, and it includes the coordinated operations under the Schengen framework. Besides, China (9) is also assigned a high score due to its demonstrated capacity for stringent sovereign control. This is evidenced by extensive technological surveillance infrastructure and highly regulated ports of entry. We argue that this score captures strong physical control for its visa policy, and meanwhile, we should also separate the score from the view of diplomatic openness. Botswana achieves a score of 6.5, as we think the official borders are managed effectively with standardised procedures and authority, which is a model for other states in Southern Africa. However, the 6.5 score critically accounts for persistent vulnerabilities such as the country's long border monitoring issue, and it leads to challenges such as informal cross-border trade, small-scale smuggling, and illegal migration. Brazil (4) highlights the significant gap between policy and actual border control. The vast Amazonian borders are notoriously permeable, and it provides opportunities for organised crime. State authority is selectively applied, with remote regions effectively outside full governmental control.

Military and Law Enforcers Effectiveness

The military and law enforcement capacity scores for China, Portugal, Brazil, and Botswana are based on a normalized evaluation aligned with global defence rankings for 2026, such as the Global Firepower Index (GFP, 2026). We use the United States as the upper benchmark (10 points) and Bhutan as the lower baseline (0 points), and then we convert the score to the selection state. China (10) demonstrates a leading global military posture, and it characterized by substantial defence expenditure, advanced technological modernization, and extensive strategic resources to ensure the significant power projection and territorial defence capabilities. Brazil (9) reflects a strong regional military presence in South America, with considerable personnel and conventional assets though its overall capacity. Portugal (8) represents a capable and professional defence force integrated within NATO structures. Although its relatively small in scale, its military benefits from high training standards, interoperability with allies. Botswana (4) illustrates a limited but functional military framework designed primarily for border security and domestic stability and it is constrained by its resource priorities.
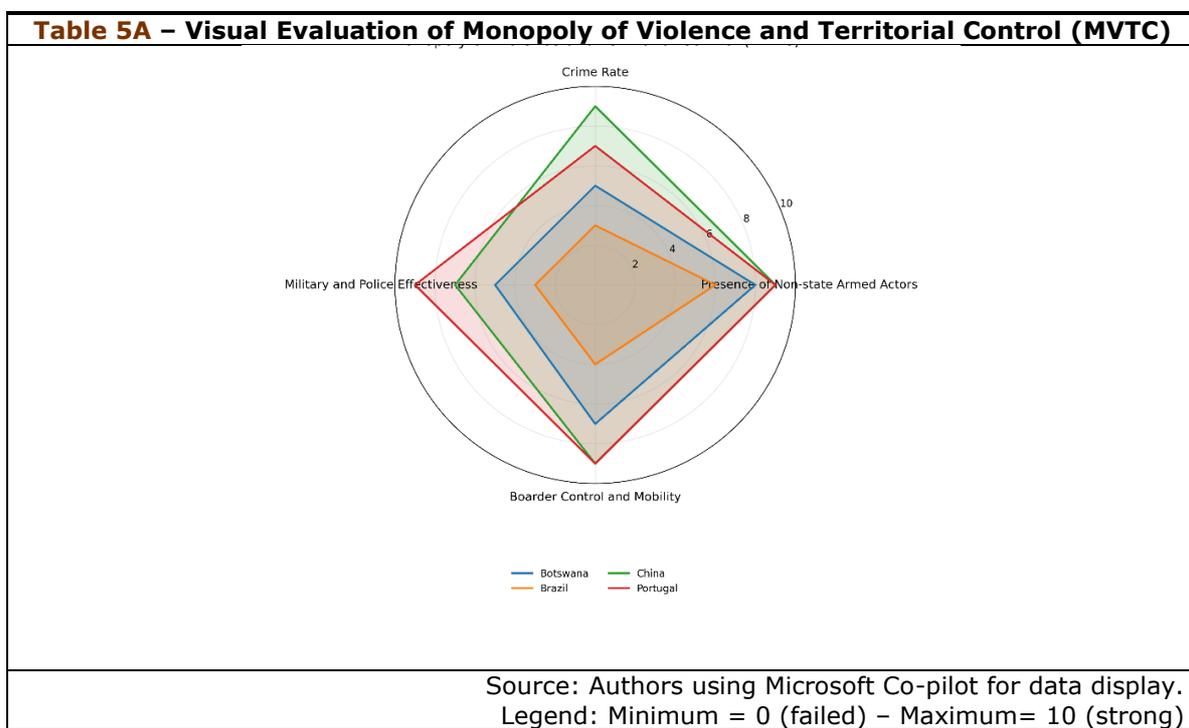
Based on the comparative evaluation (Tables 5 and 5A), China exhibits the strongest overall monopoly of violence and territorial control, reflected in uniformly high scores across all indicators, particularly in suppressing non-state armed actors and maintaining secure borders. Portugal also demonstrates a robust and effective system, characterized by strong law enforcement and border management. Botswana shows a moderate level of state authority but faces challenges in reducing crime and enhancing police effectiveness. In contrast, Brazil presents the most significant vulnerabilities, with notably low scores in crime rate and border control, indicating substantial challenges to its territorial authority and internal security despite a relatively higher institutional capacity score.

Table 5 – Numerical Evaluation of Monopoly of Violence and Territorial Control				
States	Botswana	Brazil	China	Portugal
Presence of Non-state Armed Actors	08	05	09	09
Crime Rate	05	03	09	07
Boarder Control and Mobility	07	04	09	09
Military and Police Effectiveness	04	09	10	08
Boarder Control and Mobility	07	04	09	09
				Source: Authors

Table 5A – Visual Evaluation of Monopoly of Violence and Territorial Control (MVTC)

Source: Authors using Microsoft Co-pilot for data display.
Legend: Minimum = 0 (failed) – Maximum= 10 (strong)

Governance and Institutional Strength (GIS)

Public Service Delivery

Service delivery is an important form of action from the government to the citizens, and the service includes many kinds of them, such as the administrative registration, law enforcement and so on. Based on the Public Service Index data by the organisation of the Global Economy, we convert their data with the best score from Iceland (0.6) to 10, while the Central African Republic's 10 represents 0 in our evaluation grading (The Global Economy, 2025). Portugal's high score (8.1) reflects that the system is widely accessible, and it generally meets the requests from the citizens. China (5.5) in the band of relatively stable indicates the gap of the system between service quality and accessibility. Especially in the urban and coastal regions, they benefit from the relatively developed infrastructure and system. However, the rural areas experience gaps which make the system more complicated. Botswana's score (4) points to poor quality in basic service infrastructure and quality, despite its relative political stability. We argue that the public

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dissatisfaction here is very obvious with services such as healthcare, water, and education's limitations. Brazil's score (3.3) draws our attention to the severe territorial and social inequalities, especially in public service access. In a major urban centre, it provides adequate services. However, in the rural regions with poor infrastructure, it cannot meet the basic needs of people.

Bureaucratic Capacity

The next indicator is the Bureaucratic capacity, and we assert that it is a critical factor when evaluating the state's performance and resilience. However, there is a lack of a unified existing framework to evaluate the states' performance. Therefore, we create this grading based on our understanding of professionalism, procedural efficiency and the civil service system from the state. Portugal (8.5) shows a relatively strong system in the civil service in terms of competence and effective operations. This can be exemplified by its efficient platforms, such as the *"Empresa na Hora" [speedy corporation]* system, which enables company registration to be completed within a short period. China (7.0) 's bureaucratic capacity presents the top-down policy implementation process with the ability to execute the national projects efficiently. However, it has challenges with complex administrative procedures that depend on regions in terms of local governance. As Botswana's score of 5.5 indicates a system that its civil service maintains with basic operations, but it is struggled by procedural complexities such as the slow implementation and transparency. Moreover, Brazil's score of 4.5 reveals a gap that is affected by corruption and complex functionality. This systemic corruption frequently happens, and it cannot be managed well by civil servants.

Corruption Levels

The assessment of corruption's impact on the state economy must address its political dimensions (Philp, 1997) because we believe that corruption in the governmental system can affect the state's stability. According to the corruption perceptions index from the transparency international (Corruption Perceptions Index, 2025), we conclude the scoring as Denmark's 90, with the maximum score of 10, and South Sudan's 8 as 0 in our framework. Portugal and Botswana achieve the same corruption index of 57, which corresponds to the score of 6 in our analysis. This score positions both states in the relatively stable category. It indicates that corruption is perceived as a common phenomenon in society. Although anti-corruption institutions and policies exist, their effectiveness is limited and insufficient. China achieves a corruption index of 43, and it converts the score of 4.3. It is positioned in the less stable section. This signifies that corruption has become a pervasive phenomenon and may act as a required approach to accessing public services. The score reflects that despite ongoing anti-corruption promotion from the government, the possibility of corruption persists across multiple sectors. Brazil receives the index of 34 with a score of 3.2 out of 10, which represents the lowest score among the four states. It clearly points to a deeper, institutionalised corruption. This indicates not only that corruption permeates all levels but also that public

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resources are often used as instruments for corruption. From a historical perspective, there were several political corruption scandals makes the low trust from the public.

Decentralisation and Local Governance

Decentralisation presents the potential to strengthen the state's cohesion to further enhance the state's stability. However, it also has the possibility of disintegration. We find this indicator is based on the figure from the rule of law and judicial independence of the World Justice Project (WJP Rule of Law Index, 2025). We convert the score with Denmark (0.9) sets as 10 and Venezuela (0.26) as the minimum number of 0. Portugal (6.4) represents the category of relatively stable states. This indicates the effective rule within the law framework of the judicial institutions. However, the score also suggests the difficulties, such as procedural delays and the gap between different places in the state. Botswana receives the score of 5.3, which represents a quite significant state in the Sub-Saharan African region. It reflects a basic legal system that maintains some degree of judicial independence. The limitations are in the judicial capacity, accessibility, and consistency in terms of service quality across regions. Brazil has a score of 3.8, and it highlights the widespread problems such as judicial inefficiency and corruption in the legal institutions, which can affect institutional trust. Although China (3.4) gets a similar score to Brazil, it reflects another issue with the central authority of the limited judicial independence among cities. Legal institutions in China are effective, but it does not have full autonomy at the regional level.

Based on the comparative assessment of governance and institutional strength (Tables 6 and 6A), Portugal demonstrates the strongest overall performance with a total score of 29, which reflects high-capacity public service delivery and bureaucratic effectiveness. China follows with a score of 20, characterized by substantial bureaucratic competence yet constrained by lower decentralization and corruption control. Botswana achieves a balanced profile with a score of 21, performing adequately in corruption control but showing limitations in service delivery. In contrast, Brazil records the lowest score of 15, indicating systemic institutional weaknesses, particularly in public service provision and integrity mechanisms. These results highlight distinct governance models, ranging from Portugal's service-oriented and institutionally robust system to Brazil's more vulnerable and uneven administrative framework.

Table 6 – Numerical Evaluation of Governance and Institutional Strength				
States	Botswana	Brazil	China	Portugal
Public Service Delivery	04	03	06	08
Bureaucratic Capacity	06	05	07	09
Corruption Levels	06	03	04	06
Decentralisation and Local Governance	05	04	03	06
Total Score	21	15	20	29
				Source: Authors

Table 6A – Visual Evaluation of Governance and Institutional Strength (GIS)
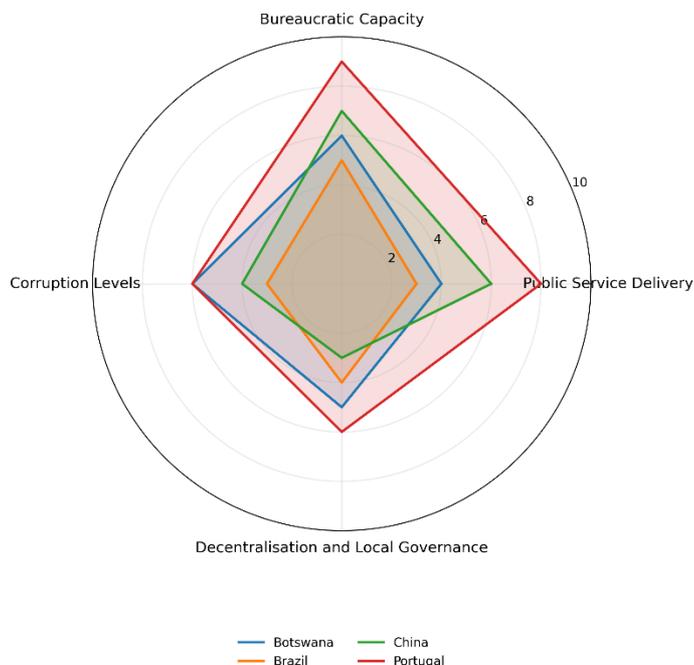
Source: Authors using Microsoft Co-pilot for data display.
Legend: Minimum = 0 (failed) – Maximum= 10 (strong)

Foreign Policy and International Agency (FPIA)

Diplomatic Presence and Alliances

The combination of analysis on diplomatic presence and alliance is an indicator to show the linkage between the state and the world to ensure political legitimacy. This indicator is based on two quantifiable data from diplomatic networks and the multilateral engagement. The raw figure is from global diplomacy index from Lowy Institute (Lowy Institute Global Diplomacy Index, 2024). Based on the data, China receives a score of 10 out of the full score, which indicates a stable diplomatic network with a well-connected network in each region globally. In key arenas like climate change and global development agendas, it actively engages in comprehensive cooperation partnerships for its national interests and governance models. Although we argue that Portugal has the original score of 4.4, we have adjusted it to 9 in the most stable category. However, the European Union membership influences geopolitics. As Portugal's foreign policy is deeply embedded within the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, and it uses this rotating presidency and NATO membership to prioritise its critical influence, such as the EU-Africa strategic partnership. Both Brazil (7.5) and Botswana (2.5) have relatively less influence compared with China and Portugal, but it has demonstrated quite different patterns for the differences in the scores. As a regional leader, Brazil maintains a diplomatic network with a focus on Latin America and major global powers. Although it is a leading power

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within Mercosur and BRICS, it lacks influence on other parts of the world, such as Asian and European states. Botswana concentrates on the key neighbouring states, such as South Africa, for resource allocation.

Soft Power and Diaspora Engagement

Based on the definition of the soft power is defined as the cultivation of good relationships and attention between states through favourable policies, qualities, and actions (Gallarotti, 2011). We argue that soft power can play an important role in the stability of states, as soft power helps to secure a peaceful external environment for domestic development. Our evaluation of the score is based on the data from global soft power index of Brand Finance in 2025 (Global Soft Power Index, 2025). Portugal (5.3) shows its limitation on global influence, but it has influence in the European region because of its presidency of the European Union. Meanwhile, it gives a good example of culture and education within the Lusophone area and Southern Europe because of its rich heritage. China (8.9) ranks as the second state in the world for its soft power, and it shows major strengths in the sectors of business, education and cultural influence. Dominant platforms like TikTok that can reshape global media consumption, and companies like BYD in electric vehicles and Shein in fast fashion, demonstrate their competitive advantage in the global consumer market for China. Brazil (4.9) has a distinct and influential cultural influence in the region, especially for its culture. However, it also encounters challenges in governance, such as the issues with political instability, corruption scandals, and urban security problems, and these can also damage its international reputation. Botswana (1.8) has a positive reputation for governance within its region in Africa, which also shows the limitation for the other parts of the world. Basically, due to the limitation of the geopolitical influence, the state does not have major global brands and a large engaged diaspora. This results in a vague international image without the relative soft power leverage.

Ability to Shape and Respond to International Norms

There is tremendous power in a settled norm (Axelrod, 1986), and we believe that norm is crucial for a state to legitimise its authority for stability. Therefore, we create an evaluation criterion for indicating the stability and norm performance. China (9)'s score reflects its position as a global leading player in the contemporary international order. As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, it demonstrates a high capacity in formulating international rules and norms, such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Furthermore, it strategically uses the international forums to protect and expand its own interests, especially in the domains of digital governance, cybersecurity, and climate diplomacy. These engagements make it a stable agenda-setting power globally. Brazil (7) is classified as a proactive and influential participant of the multilateral system. It is good at leveraging the existing institutions to secure its own state interests, such as the agricultural trade in the World Trade Organisation. We argue this score is recognised for the role of the constructive regional leader with limited influence, the norms and regulations in a specific context,

such as the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" in the climate change agenda meeting. Portugal (6) signifies its status as a relatively stable actor within a rules-based order shaped primarily by others, especially the European Union. As a member of the European Union and NATO, Portugal's foreign policy is deeply embedded in its framework, so we usually treat Portugal as an EU member state. We argue that Portugal participates actively in international organisations, but its influence is selective as it possesses limited discourse power compared with the other EU states. Its normative contribution is mainly within the Community of Portuguese Language Countries due to its colonial history. We argue that Botswana (4) is a rule-taker rather than a regional power to shape the rules and norms in the region of Africa. The diplomacy of the state is concentrated on core interests, especially for its resources. Based on the evaluation of foreign policy and international agency (Tables 7 and 7A), China exhibits the most substantial global influence with the highest total score of (28) across all indicators. Portugal and Brazil are tied in total score (20) Portugal demonstrates strong diplomatic alliances (9) but more moderate soft power (5). While Brazil shows a balanced capacity with notable strength in shaping international norms (7). Botswana, with the lowest aggregate score (9), reflects limited international agency, especially in soft power and diaspora engagement (2).

Table 7 – Numerical Evaluation of Foreign Policy and International Agency				
States	**Botswana**	**Brazil**	**China**	**Portugal**
Diplomatic Presence and Alliances	03	08	10	09
Soft Power and Diaspora Engagement	02	05	09	05
Ability to Shape and Respond to International Norms	04	07	09	06
Total Score	09	20	28	20
				Source: Authors

Table 7A – Visual Evaluation of Foreign Policy and International Agency (FPIA)
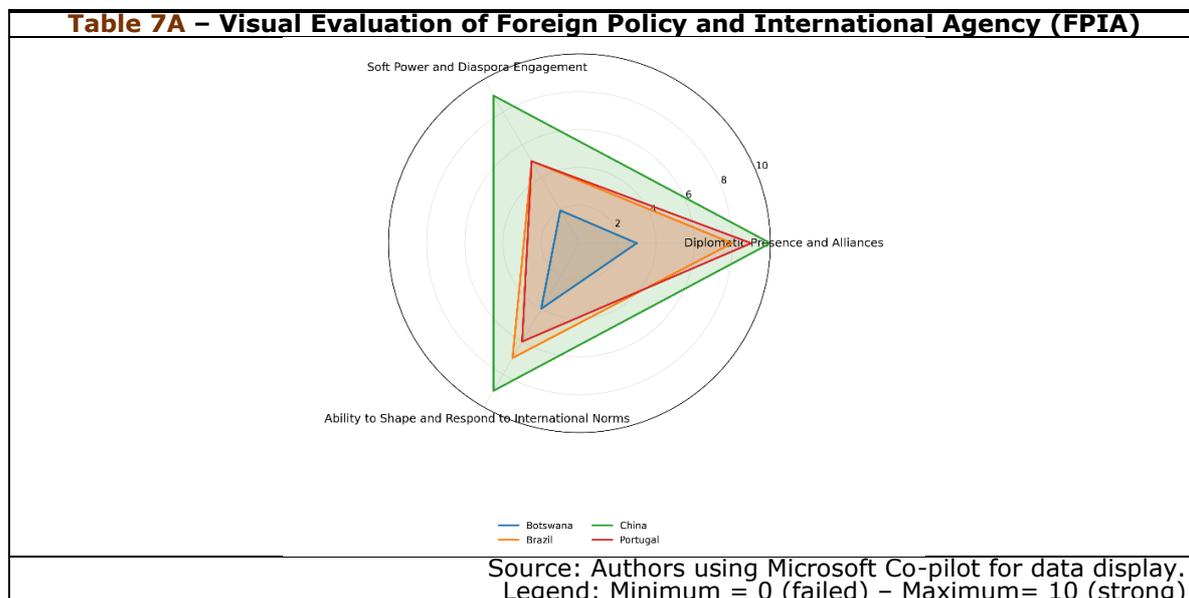
Source: Authors using Microsoft Co-pilot for data display.
Legend: Minimum = 0 (failed) – Maximum= 10 (strong)

Conclusion

This study employs a comparative case analysis using a multidimensional analytical framework to examine and assess the concept of state fragility across four cases: Botswana, Brazil, China, and Portugal. These states were selected due to their distinct political systems and differing geopolitical positions, which together provide a valuable basis for illustrating variations in state stability. By comparing cases with diverse institutional arrangements and international roles, the analysis seeks to demonstrate how fragility and stability manifest across different state contexts.

The framework is constructed around six interrelated dimensions: external adaptability; economic and social resilience; social control and legitimacy; monopoly of violence; governance efficacy; and international agency. Based on this comparative assessment, we define a "strong state" as one that scores the maximum value (10) across all indicators, while a "weak state" is defined as one that scores the minimum value (0). State fragility is conceptualized as a condition situated between these two ideal types, reflecting varying degrees of institutional capacity and vulnerability.

Within this analytical framework, a strong or stable state is characterized by high levels of resilience, adaptability, and effectiveness in the operation of its domestic institutions. In a rapidly changing international environment, states are increasingly exposed to external shocks and pressures. The capacity to anticipate, manage, and respond to such pressures is therefore central to maintaining systemic stability and avoiding institutional breakdown. This adaptive capacity is closely linked to state fragility: the more effectively a state manages internal and external challenges, the lower its level of fragility.

Among the four cases examined, Portugal emerges as the closest approximation to a stable state (Table 9). Its membership in the European Union and NATO provides institutional safeguards against geopolitical shocks, as well as access to broader markets and security guarantees. EU membership has also contributed to a diversified and relatively balanced economy, a sustainable debt profile, high employment levels, and an overall high quality of life. While instances of corruption exist, they do not appear to be systemic within the civil service, indicating relatively effective rule of law and institutional enforcement. In terms of international agency, Portugal maintains an extensive diplomatic network, representing both national interests and those of the European Union. Although its global influence remains limited, Portugal acts as a constructive participant within the international normative framework and plays an active regional role, particularly within the Community of Portuguese Language Countries, especially in areas related to economic cooperation and educational exchange.
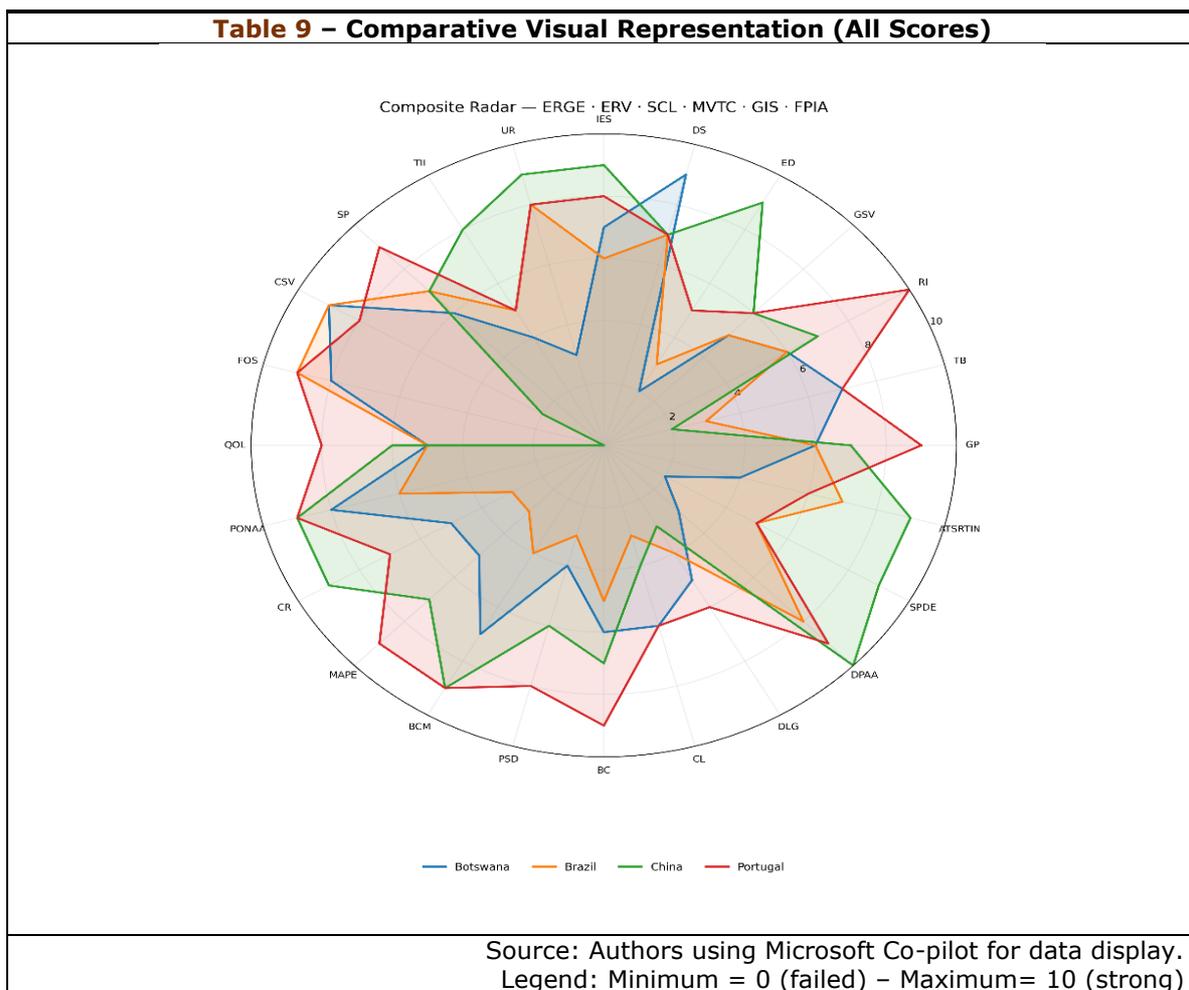
By contrast, the concept of a weak state refers to a political system that experiences severe failure and incapacity across multiple dimensions of the analytical framework. Such states are typically unable to perform basic sovereign functions, often as a result of sustained domestic pressures and loss of territorial control. However, none of the four selected cases fully corresponds to this ideal-type category. In general terms, a weak state is characterized by chronic instability, frequent territorial disputes, and an economy dominated by monopolistic actors closely linked to political elites. Corruption within governmental institutions undermines service provision, leading to dysfunction in basic

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public sectors. Furthermore, the state lacks effective control over violence, with non-state armed actors playing a significant role and international intervention - often through organizations such as the United Nations - becoming necessary. Diplomatic isolation and the absence of stable alliances further reduce international agency, rendering such states largely passive recipients of externally driven negotiations.

Building on these conceptual benchmarks, this study defines state fragility as a condition in which a state lacks the legitimacy and capacity required to function effectively while withstanding both external pressures and internal challenges. Fragility should be understood as an evaluative indicator of potential risk to overall systemic stability rather than as evidence of state failure per se. Importantly, fragility does not imply the imminent collapse of the state; rather, it signals an increased probability of crisis arising from limited institutional capacity to respond effectively to shocks and stresses.

Table 9 – Comparative Visual Representation (All Scores)

Source: Authors using Microsoft Co-pilot for data display.
Legend: Minimum = 0 (failed) – Maximum= 10 (strong)

As this study conceptualizes fragility and stability as phenomena grounded in societal perceptions, we developed an evaluative framework to illustrate variations in state performance across selected dimensions. This framework, however, is subject to

important limitations inherent in multidimensional measurement approaches. In particular, the choice of indicators reflects our analytical understanding of state functionality and may insufficiently capture the historical trajectories through which states have evolved.

Moreover, it is important to emphasize that no state can be classified as either entirely strong or entirely weak. State development is a dynamic and ongoing process, and any assessment of fragility represents a temporally situated snapshot rather than a definitive or permanent outcome. Each state's fragility profile is closely shaped by its specific historical, political, and social context, underscoring the fact that states do not begin from a common baseline nor follow identical developmental paths.

By examining four analytically diverse cases, our objective is not to rank states along a single continuum of fragility, but rather to generate a broader understanding of how fragility manifests across different contexts. The selected dimensions and indicators function as heuristic tools intended to clarify the concept, rather than as exhaustive or deterministic measures. Consequently, underperformance in any single indicator or dimension should not be interpreted as rendering a state wholly fragile, but rather as highlighting specific areas of vulnerability within an otherwise complex and evolving state structure.

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