Borders: A Geo-historical Analysis of a Human Construct

by Pablo Bravo

While European integration and globalisation led to a gradual loosening of the concept of borders between the 1980s and the early 2000s, since the economic crisis of 2008 this concept has resurfaced in international debates. The return of armed conflict to the European continent, together with the still ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, are two examples of challenges that foreshadow a new era of global polarisation and the weakening of concepts such as multilateralism and international cooperation, elements that also touch on the concept of borders.

The present international environment is generally defined as multipolar, composed of major and medium-sized powers and their allied states; in this context, the importance of borders rises and wanes depending on existing relations between these actors. Today, mirroring the growing polarisation of the international system, questions about the role of borders have increasingly returned to their security domain: can borders protect citizens from global threats or do they rather exacerbate them?

French philosopher Michel Foucault defined the concept of borders as a "dispositif" that regulates the relationship between the internal and external, between inclusion and exclusion.[1] In this sense, borders are not only geopolitical, that is, aimed at delimiting the distinct sovereignties of states, but also psychological, social or cultural, as they make it possible to define relationships with the outside world and those individuals that

---

[1] "A border is – to use Michel Foucault's term – a spatial *dispositif* that regulates and orders the relationship between inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion." Dario Gentili, "Hic sunt leones. Border/Frontier. The Political Genealogy of a Spatial Disposition", in Wolfgang Müller-Funk (ed.), *Borders of Europe*, Rome, Istituto Italiano di Studi Germanici, 2021, p. 111.

Pablo Bravo is a graduate student in International Relations from Sciences Po University in Strasbourg.
This is a winning article (2nd place) submitted to the 2022 edition of the IAI Prize contest and presented at a public debate organised by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) in Rome on 9 November 2022.

inhabit other states. A sum of such psychological boundaries allows for the creation of a cultural boundary that defines a community distinguished by similar values, customs and traditions.

Historically, the importance of these early types of boundaries grew in the aftermath of the agricultural revolution. As Yuval Noah Harari argues,[2] nomadic tribes that had become sedentary developed their repertoire of common myths (such as religion, money, the state and thus borders as well) in order to maintain unity in an increasingly large and unequal society. The concept of boundary thus made its appearance, albeit still remaining fluid, flexible and expandable depending on the power relations among the various agricultural communities. Such a system of uncertain boundaries allowed communities to define themselves and unite, but also gave rise to tensions between them, for instance over the search for resources.

Such fluidity surrounding the notion of boundaries has characterised much of the classical era and the Middle Ages, undergoing a radical change in the modern era in Europe. With the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, the centrality of sovereign states was affirmed and, with them, the modern concept of the border. Borders thus became rigid, a sharp demarcation delimiting and protecting a defined national community. Arguably, the existence of complex bureaucratic apparatuses protected by rigid boundaries enabled reform in some European states. In the Kingdom of England, thanks in part to an isolated geographical location, absolutism based on extractive political-economic models was gradually overtaken by new systems.[3]

Beginning in 1688, the Kingdom of England (and then Great Britain) headed toward a society equipped with more politically inclusive models, such as a free and sovereign parliament, as well as more inclusive economic models, such as freedom of enterprise. All this resulted in the first Industrial Revolution. The success of the English model can also be attributed to England's relative remoteness from the continent's wartime affairs and the strenuous protection of a border, the English Channel, which had become impenetrable, allowing Britain to play a major role in several international conflicts during the 18th Century without these affecting its own territory.

While borders may allow for the development of new ideas within a community protected from outside interference, they are also characterised by a degree of porosity that allows for the circulation of such ideas: for example, diplomatic representations, merchants and wise men, who even in pre-industrial times moved from one state to another to practice their professions. In this way, the English experience quickly crossed the Channel, both in the form of political demands opposed to the absolutist state and through the spread of the Industrial Revolution

---

[2] Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens. A Brief History of Humankind*, New York, Harper, 2015.

[3] Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail. The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*, New York, Crown Business, 2012, p. 208-212.

across the continent.

The French Revolution, the revolutions of the 19th century and the industrialisation of certain areas of the continent were phenomena made possible by the porosity of those very borders that in previous centuries had created a safe place for the embryonic development of such phenomena. Thus, from the 19th century onwards, the European economy began to internationalise through increased international trade, business companies operating in third states and migration flows towards industrialised countries. The porosity of borders allowed, not without clashes and tensions, to take full advantage of the new capitalist structure of European and North American societies.

At the same time, such societies were swept by growing nationalist feelings, depicting the nation as having superior rights over others. Nationalist theories re-evaluated the concept of border in a more rigid fashion, sacralising it and making it the symbol of the preservation of internal community values against external barbarism.

In the early post-World War I period, a dichotomy emerged between ongoing internationalisation of economic relations and the concurrent closure of political borders: an economy based on cross-borrowing between the United States, Germany, France and the United Kingdom developed while confronted with a period of enduring geopolitical tension. It was precisely this interdependence between Western powers and the absence of economic boundaries that allowed the 1929 crisis to quickly spread to the Weimar Republic, thus creating a fertile environment for the rise of Nazism and a further tightening of borders.

In the post-World War II period, the increasing internationalisation of economic borders was finally matched by a relaxation of geopolitical borders in some areas of the world. Global projects such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organisation, as well as regional ones such as the European Economic Community/EU, the ASEAN and Mercosur, broke down economic borders for the movement of goods, services and – in the EU – people. This ushered a period of peace and prosperity unparalleled in human history, marked by rapid economic growth and a reduction in the number and intensity of armed conflicts.

The fall of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and China's accession to the WTO fuelled economic globalisation further, giving rise to an economic model in which goods, multinationals and capital move around the world in pursuit of profit while most states fail to govern such phenomena. While this kind of globalisation has allowed rapid economic development for some, it has also resulted in lower living standards for Western middle classes, generating a feeling of bewilderment and frustration.

This dissatisfaction has affected Western democracies through the growth of national-populist and Eurosceptic movements, chief among them Brexit and Trumpism, which offer domestic responses to international

issues.[4] Notably, they all emphasise the merits of re-borderisation (or "taking back control"). Examples include the widening of the border-wall between the US and Mexico in the case of Trumpism or the re-establishment of an economic border between the UK and the EU in the case of Brexit but also the EU's policy of externalising borders to stifle migration to Europe.

As we have seen, geopolitical, economic and cultural boundaries do not have positive or negative connotations per se: they can give rise both to positive phenomena, such as the development of innovative ideas in a protected environment, and to negative phenomena, such as armed conflict and competition.

From this analysis, it appears that the greatest tensions develop when the three types of boundaries, geopolitical, economic and cultural are discordant. This type of disassociation is the reason for international tensions between countries and can give rise to armed conflicts like in the early twentieth century. On the other hand, periods of greatest development and prosperity unfold when the three types of borders match. During these periods, tensions tend to decrease and states cooperate more effectively, enabling the economic, scientific and cultural development of their populations like in the post-World War II period.

Today's world is fragmented: the globalisation of economic boundaries clashes with a division into macro-regions along cultural boundaries and the more or less pronounced state-centrism of geopolitical boundaries. In such a situation, border tensions are numerous.

Cultural and political tensions between Russia and Russian-speaking minorities and the West, which have developed into armed conflict in Ukraine and other locations is one example. Economic tension between China and the West, manifested through the reciprocal imposition of economic tariffs on imports,[5] is another manifestation. Cultural and economic tensions and disparities with developing countries is another example, contributing to migration flows to which European countries have responded by tightening geopolitical borders; and, finally, geopolitical tensions between neighbouring states, such as in the Indian subcontinent or in the Korean peninsula.

This mismatch between geopolitical, economic and cultural boundaries, in addition to creating areas of tension, is an impediment to addressing global challenges that require global responses: climate change, terrorism, epidemics, but also the fourth industrial revolution, as well as the aging of some areas of the world compared to the overpopulation of others.

The discord between geopolitical, economic and cultural boundaries reduces the responsiveness of

---

[4] Manlio Graziano, *Geopolitica della paura. Come l'ansia sociale orienta le scelte politiche*, Milano, Bocconi, 2021, p. 34-49.

[5] Chad P. Brown, "US-China Trade War Tariffs: An Up-to-Date Chart", in *PIIE Charts*, 22 April 2022, https://www.piie.com/node/13948.

international organisations, states and individuals. In a context of tightening geopolitical and cultural boundaries, a transitional solution could be a relative narrowing of economic boundaries. This had already started in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and has become more pronounced with the conflict in Ukraine: states and multinationals are designing ways to shorten supply chains in order to reduce their dependence on specific countries such as Russia or China. The EU is consistently pursuing this goal both on an energy and technology by lowering its energy-supply dependence from Russia through new partners and the European Green Deal and by implementing the "Chips Act" which will promote self-sufficiency on semi-conductors.

A polarisation of economic boundaries into regional areas can be expected to negatively affect global economic growth and hardly contribute to address challenges on a global level but could be effective in preventing large-scale conflicts. The tightening of cooperation between countries in the same cultural and economic macro-area would allow for a more efficient addressing of common issues in the immediate term while still permitting global multilateral cooperation in the longer term with those countries outside the respective macro-areas.

To conclude, geopolitical, economic and social borders have the capacity to protect citizens from global challenges if, however, they also allow for cultural, social and economic exchanges. Globalisation has not proven effective in addressing global challenges because of the mismatch it created between geopolitical, economic and cultural borders. De-globalisation and regionalism can be an opportunity to re-establish a balance between these types of boundaries while keeping in mind the importance of not exacerbating the concept of borders in a rigid way and considering global multilateralism as an effective tool to account for regional positions and experiences and contribute collectively to the global interest.

25 October 2022

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), three book series (*Global Politics and Security*, *Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17
I-00186 Rome, Italy
Tel. +39 066976831
iai@iai.it
www.iai.it

Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Director: Andrea Dessì (a.dessi@iai.it)