

International Borders: What They Are, What They Mean, and Why We Should Care

Harvey Starr

Borders matter. Even in today's post-Cold War world of growing democracy, interdependence, and globalization, borders still serve a wide variety of functions across the areas of security, economics, politics, and social interactions. Despite contemporary challenges to sovereignty, borders still delineate areas of legal competence. Borders encompass the territoriality necessary to the concept of the "state." They provide a key element in the structure of the global system—mapping the number and arrangement of the territorial units upon which all humans live. Thus, borders are central to a spatial approach to international politics, by setting out the location and arrangement of states, and their distances from one another. Borders both facilitate and constrain human interaction in conflict and trade, in war and in peace.

Borders, Realism, and Territoriality

In a recent article on the nature of borders and their relationship to international conflict, this author noted:

The location of states, their proximity to one another, and especially whether or not they share "borders," emerge time and again as key variables in studies of international conflict phenomena: from major power general war, to the diffusion of international conflict, to the analysis of peace between pairs of democracies... From Boulding's (1962) ideas of "behavior space," "loss-of-strength gradient" and "critical boundary" to the simple but profound concern of geographers that humans interact most with those to whom they are closest (Zipf 1949), there are powerful theoretical reasons to be interested in borders and how they affect international relations.¹

Broadly, the concept of "border" has been an important one throughout world history. The concept of a border as the demarcation of two sovereign states was essential to the Westphalian state system that developed following the Thirty Years War. This example illustrates two related aspects of borders derived from realism's approach to international relations: borders as legal phenomena and borders as related to security.

Harvey Starr is the Dag Hammarskjöld Professor in International Affairs and Chair of the Department of Political Science at the University of South Carolina. He specializes in international relations theory and method, international conflict, and geopolitics. He is co-author of *World Politics: The Menu for Choice*, 8th edition. (2006).

International law and legal matters have never been key concerns of realism. However, territoriality is a central component of state security and is fundamental to the (more or less deterministic) *geopolitical setting* that also affects the security of states. The establishment of legal boundaries provided the nation-states that emerged in the Westphalian system the *territoriality* dimension that had been lacking in the previous system of feudal organization.

The Treaty of Westphalia, signed in 1648, gave the ultimate political authority to the “prince” of a given territorial unit, rather than to the Pope or the Holy Roman Emperor. This legal condition of sovereignty gave the prince’s government complete control over the territory and people on that territory, and established that no external authority had the legal right to dictate the behavior of the state or its peoples. The state’s boundaries determined the crucial *legal* distinction between what was internal (or domestic) and external (or the realm of foreign relations). One primary function of borders, therefore, was to define and delineate the boundaries of states—to describe the areas of legal jurisdiction and to indicate *where* states had rights and responsibilities.²

Liberal and pluralist challenges to realist theory have developed various models over the past 50 years—models of integration, international interaction, and economic interdependence. Paired with the current attention to globalization, these models question the existence or utility of sovereignty, territoriality, and significant borders in this highly interdependent, globalized world. Yet, as noted, borders continue to play an important legal role in world politics. Given the “democratic peace” theory, which observes that pairs of democracies have not fought wars against each other, borders have far less to do with conflict or militarized conflict than legal issues. Indeed, for neighboring democracies, debates about borders revolve around issues of legal jurisdiction regarding commerce, the movement of people or ideas, and other ideas.

That said, borders *are* intimately related to the security of states, which is the primary concern of realism. John Herz,³ for example, argued that humans choose their form of self-organization based on how well it will

Borders *are* intimately related to the security of states.

protect them. The sovereign territorial state provided a “hard shell” against would-be aggressors, thus making the state the dominant form of organization. The chief thesis of Herz’s 1957 article “was that for centuries the characteristics of the basic political unit, the nation-state, had been its ‘territoriality,’ that is, its being identified with an area

which, surrounded by a ‘wall of defensibility,’ was relatively impermeable to outside penetration and thus capable of satisfying one fundamental urge of humans—protection.”⁴

Herz initially believed that the era of nuclear weapons, delivered by long-range bombers and missiles, would require the replacement of states by the “bloc,” a much larger mode of organization, dominated by a single

power, and the only form of organization capable of existing in a bipolar world of nuclear superpowers. In essence, Herz argued that the strategic interdependence of states (which could no longer maintain a "hard shell" against the penetration of nuclear delivery systems), would lead to the demise of the territorial state. Today, it is clear that technological developments in weaponry, communications, and transportation have indeed found gaps in the walls of defensibility. Borders are now more permeable and penetrated than ever (as will be noted by some of the articles in this issue). Yet, analysts would be greatly mistaken to underestimate the legal importance of borders and their role in assigning jurisdiction and responsibility in the international system.⁵

The important point for this discussion is that for many analysts and policy-makers, the borders of states both represented and *were* the "hard shell" promised by the (legal) phenomenon of sovereignty. The geopolitics of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries stressed not only the immutable effects of geography on the state, but carried much of this determinism over to the geopolitical *arrangement* of states as well. Where a state was located, which other states sat on its borders and how large/small or powerful/weak they were, how long or vulnerable those borders were, and how those legal borders related to geographical features, were all key questions in the analysis of a state's security.

We must also keep in mind Boulding's concept of a "critical boundary," which captures the defensive aspects of a border, but at the same time moves away from the legal character of a border:

The legal boundary of a nation, however, is not always its most significant boundary. We need to develop a concept of a *critical boundary*, which may be the same as the legal boundary but which may lie either inside it or outside it... The penetration of an alien organization inside this critical boundary will produce grave disorganization... War, therefore is only useful as a defense of the national organism if it is carried on outside the critical boundary (emphasis in original).⁶

Much of the validity in security-oriented geopolitical realist arguments remains. However, the strongly deterministic and ideologically oriented European (especially German) approaches to geopolitics from the end of the 19th century up to World War II pushed geography and geopolitics to the margins of the study of international relations. Although its origins go back to the work of Harold and Margaret Sprout, and their concern with "possibilism," a "new geopolitics" fully emerged only within the past two decades. In the "new geopolitics," geography was seen as only one of a set of conditioning factors, providing possibilities and opportunities, both facilitating and constraining choices and behavior.⁷ These same "new" perspectives can be brought to bear on borders, and it is to these attention must now be turned.

Borders, Possibilities, and Interaction Opportunities

Paul Diehl summarizes the continued importance of borders in studying international politics and international conflict in his seminal work on ge-

ography/territory and war.⁸ We may substitute “borders” for “geography” or “territory,” with borders serving as indicators and measures of distance, location, and spatiality. Diehl’s work is important for the way he categorizes the literature. He breaks down the empirical studies of geography and war into two groups: (1) territory as a facilitating condition for conflict, and (2) territory as a source of conflict. The next section addresses the latter issue. Here we will focus on borders as a facilitating condition for both conflict and cooperation.

The idea of *interaction opportunity*, developed by Benjamin A. Most and Harvey Starr,⁹ captures the idea of borders as a “facilitating condition.” They based the interaction opportunity concept on the work of Kenneth Boulding, G.K. Zipf and earlier geographers, as well as that of the Sprouts. In Most and Starr’s terms, the closer states are, the greater the possibility of interaction. This is now so generally accepted that a measure of contiguity is regularly used as an independent, intervening, or control variable in statistical analyses of international politics.

Borders delineate and clarify the arrangement of the territorial units (states) that comprise the international or global system. They provide vital information regarding the question of “distance”—how close or far units are, in regard to security, social interaction, or economic relations. Data sets on international borders have measured borders in terms of contiguous land borders—either between two states, between states and other territories, or between the colonial territorial holdings of two states. Border data sets also have measured borders in terms of distance across bodies of water. There is a section of complex international law dealing with international borders and rivers, lakes, and the sea (for example, straits, the continental shelf, or the length of the territorial sea). In this article, the concept of “borders” almost exclusively refers to the contiguous land borders between two states. In all measures of borders, distance is a key factor.¹⁰

Distance is also a central question in international relations. It is key to Boulding’s seminal notion of the loss-of-strength gradient (LSG), the general principle “that each party can be supposed to be at his maximum power at home... but that his competitive power, in the sense of his ability to dominate another declines the farther from home he operates. This is the great principle of *the further the weaker*”¹¹ (emphasis in original).

Students of international relations have been concerned with distance for two broad reasons, the concepts of opportunity and willingness.¹² States (or any other social units) that are close to each other are better able to interact—have the possibility or opportunity of interacting with one another. This is the “interaction opportunity” argument or approach, deriving directly from the work of the Sprouts on “environmental possibilism.” One key aspect of borders is that they affect the *interaction opportunities* of states, constraining or expanding the *possibilities* of interaction that are available to them. States that share borders will tend to have a greater *ease* of interaction with one another, and thus will tend to have greater numbers of interactions. The number of other countries with which any single state has interaction opportunities might measure such opportunity. The *degree*

to which such opportunity exists between any particular pair of states is another measurement option. For example, James Wesley argues that the length of a common border between two countries is a better measure of “geographic opportunity” than simply the number of borders.¹³

In addition, states that are close to each other are perceived as important or salient to each other, for a variety of reasons. Greater perceptions of threat, gain, and interdependence are ways in which proximity can generate salience. These perceptions affect the willingness to interact and to manage subsequent conflicts. Any combination of the opportunity and willingness generated by proximity makes states that are close to one another “relevant” to one another. Students of international relations have structured research designs to include only “relevant” dyads—pairs of states that are able to interact with one another, are highly likely to interact with one another, and/or perceive important stakes involved in that interaction.

The opportunity for interaction concept, as measured by borders and contiguity, points to the possibilities for increased interaction and the increased probability of interactions—both positive and negative. It must be stressed that interaction opportunity *only* holds that closer units will *interact more*. Greater interaction does not necessarily mean more conflict. Zipf’s “law of least effort” applies to interactions in general, *positive* as well as negative. For example, Siverson and Starr find that borders (as well as alliances) only increase the probability that ongoing wars *might* diffuse to “warring border nations,” not that they necessarily will do so.¹⁴

Indeed, recent studies based on a project that has re-measured borders using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology have shown that high interaction opportunities may lead to *more cooperative behavior* as well as conflictual behavior. The work of Starr and G. Dale Thomas indicates that high levels of ease of interaction across borders—greater interaction opportunities—are also related to positive interdependence and/or integration effects.¹⁵ Such relationships are consistent with the integration models of Karl Deutsch. Starr and Thomas argue that conflict is most likely where the expected utility of conflict is greatest—where states have not only the opportunity, but also the willingness to engage in conflict. The GIS project created measures of the “ease of interaction” across any part of any border, along with summary measures for a border as a whole (based on roads, railroads, and slope of the terrain). Measures of the “salience” or importance of a border, or any portion of that border, were also created (using populated places, capital cities, and the clustering of infrastructure facilities).¹⁶

Using this data set, it was found that borders with the highest average salience (importance) scores were in the European Union. Led by the German-Dutch border, a cluster of relatively high salience borders are found among the original members of the EEC. In addition, because of a high density of road and rail facilities, European Union dyads also have the highest weighted averages in terms of ease of interaction: Belgium-France, Belgium-Netherlands, Germany-Netherlands, and France-Luxembourg. That is, the borders of the original core countries of the EU (a group of nations notable for the depth of their *peaceful* interaction) also have borders that

look like the *internal* jurisdictional boundaries of states, in terms of both salience and ease of interaction.

Borders, Stakes and Conflict

Borders may also represent the *cause* of a conflict, the *source* of conflict, or the *stakes* of a conflict.

Borders are not simply facilitating mechanisms, however. Borders, and the territories they separate, may also represent the *cause* of a conflict, the *source* of conflict, or the *stakes* of a conflict. Diehl refers to the tangible "intrinsic importance of territory," (e.g., natural resources, control over populations, access to trade, and strategic value), and more intangible or symbolic aspects of territory (e.g. historic value, and its relationship to the group identity/ethnicity of the people living on it). As the place where peoples live, territory provides an important component of group identity, endowed with extraordinary symbolic importance. David Newman sees territory as a "demographic container" which holds people, providing territorial symbolism to their identity, such that territory becomes an "exclusive entity" for a people.¹⁷ When this creates a powerful we/they or us/them divide over territory, borders become both the symbol and mechanism of this divide. Borders figure significantly in conflicts over territorial claims, territorial changes, territorial disputes and their settlement. This has been demonstrated by a large amount of empirical research studying the connections between proximity, contiguity, territory and interstate conflict.

Territory as a source of conflict falls under both opportunity and willingness. A contiguous border is present with territory that connects, or sits between, or is disputed by, two states. This is not simply a facilitating condition, with borders facilitating interaction. Because of territory's tangible and intangible value, territory is something that people care about, and are *willing* to fight over. People, groups, and states come into conflict every day during the course of normal social transactions and interactions over incompatible claims of interests and preferences. Most such incompatibilities are managed simply through routine mechanisms or are ignored, because they do not make claims to things that are highly valued. The research on territory, borders, and conflict indicates that territory is literally always of high value or importance to people and groups. Territory raises the stakes and value of conflict, thus raising the probability of escalation, and lowering the probability of easy management. In other words, because territory is of high value it increases the expected utility of fighting for it, even if the probability of success appears to be low.

Finally, because territory so often takes on high salience, borders also serve as a clear-cut "trip wire" during militarized disputes. Moving military forces toward another state's borders is an indicator of a serious threat to a state's security and territory. Such was the case when Nasser moved Egyptian forces across the Sinai in 1967. Elsewhere, alliances have

Finally, because territory so often takes on high salience, borders also serve as a clear-cut "trip wire" during militarized disputes. Moving military forces toward another state's borders is an indicator of a serious threat to a state's security and territory. Such was the case when Nasser moved Egyptian forces across the Sinai in 1967. Elsewhere, alliances have

been characterized as “manipulable” borders—as ways to overcome distance and geographic constraints—or as mechanisms by which states can project capabilities beyond their own borders to newly contiguous areas.¹⁸ In turn, alliances also have been characterized as having a “trip-wire” function in conflicts, especially situations of extended or third-party deterrence. Such a trip-wire function, it has been argued, was the main purpose for stationing American troops in the Federal Republic of Germany during the Cold War. So, while alliances might be considered as manipulable borders, borders may play the same symbolic trip-wire functions as alliances by drawing lines that adversaries cross only at their peril.

Conclusion

Borders matter. Even in today’s “turbulent,” post-Cold War world of growing democracy, ever-extensive interdependence, and globalization, borders still serve a wide variety of functions across the areas of security, economics, politics, and social interactions. Even as some aspects of international law challenge or erode traditional notions of sovereignty, borders delineate areas of legal competence. Borders provide one key element in the structure of the global system: mapping the number and arrangement of the territorial units upon which all humans live. Borders permit a spatial approach to international or global politics by setting out the location of states and their absolute and relative distances from each other. Borders act as factors of constraint on human interaction, as well as factors that facilitate human interaction. Borders have significant effects on international politics, both by their presence and by their *meaning* to humans (either peoples, policymakers, or scholars). In turn, the internal and external politics of peoples, sub-state organizations, and states affect the creation, dissolution, and meaning of borders.

As I have argued in earlier work, analysts of international politics cannot ignore the spatial dimension of human relations. For analysts, and policymakers, the temporal dimension—time—dominates analytic frameworks. But focusing on time only tells half of the story. All human phenomena exist simultaneously at some point in space and time. The spatial dimension must be included, and we must find better ways to integrate the temporal and the spatial. While not the only element of spatiality, borders continue to be a significant factor in the spatial analysis of human relations. It is hoped that this article, and this issue of the *SAIS Review* will encourage scholarly and policy interest in borders and promote continued research in this important area.

Notes

¹ See Kenneth E. Boulding, *Conflict and Defense* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), and G. K. Zipf, *Human Behavior and the Principle of Least Effort* (Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1949). The quoted material is from Harvey Starr and G. Dale Thomas, “The Nature of Borders and International Conflict: Revisiting Hypotheses on Territory,” *International Studies Quarterly* 49 (2005), 123.

² For example, the 1933 Montevideo Convention, in Article I noted that, "The State as a person of international law should possess the following qualifications: (a) a permanent population; (b) a defined territory; (c) a government; and (d) the capacity to enter into relations with other states." It is important that territory must be "defined"—thus the importance of borders. See, David J. Bederman, *International Law Frameworks* (New York: Foundation Press, 2001), 51.

³ John Herz, "The Rise and Demise of the Territorial State," *World Politics* 9 (1957), 473-493.

⁴ John Herz, "The Territorial State Revisited: Reflections on the Future of the Nation-State," in James N. Rosenau, ed., *International Politics and Foreign Policy* rev. ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1969), 76-77.

⁵ Indeed, a decade after his initial article, Herz recanted. He recognized that the allure and power of the territorial state as a mode of organization transcended his earlier argument regarding defense, to issues of identity, recognition, and status; Herz, "The Territorial State Revisited."

⁶ Boulding, 265.

⁷ See, for example, Harold Sprout and Margaret Sprout, *The Ecological Perspective on Human Affairs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965). See also, Michael D. Ward, ed., *The New Geopolitics* (Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach, 1992).

⁸ Paul Diehl, "Geography and War: A Review and Assessment of the Empirical Literature," *International Interactions* 17 (1991), 11-27.

⁹ See Benjamin A. Most and Harvey Starr, "Diffusion, Reinforcement, Geopolitics, and the Spread of War," *American Political Science Review* 74 (1980), 932-946.

¹⁰ For a conceptualization of borders, see Harvey Starr and Benjamin A. Most, "The Substance and Study of Borders in International Relations Research," *International Studies Quarterly* 20 (1976), 581-620. The primary international borders data set currently used by analysts was developed by the Correlates of War Project.

¹¹ Boulding, 78-79.

¹² Note that the opportunity and willingness framework developed by the author derived heavily from Sproutian alternatives to geographic determinism. Harvey Starr, "'Opportunity' and 'Willingness' as Ordering Concepts in the Study of War," *International Interactions* 4 (1978), 363-387.

¹³ James Wesley, "Frequency of Wars and Geographical Opportunity," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 6 (1962), 387-389.

¹⁴ And, of course, none of the arguments for the interaction opportunity apply *only* to territorially proximate homelands. The interaction opportunity argument (based on the LSG) also recognizes that "great" or "major" powers are so named because they possess a greater ability to interact with states far from their homelands. All studies using "relevant dyads" include the dyads generated by major powers.

¹⁵ For example, see Harvey Starr and G. Dale Thomas, "The Nature of Borders and International Conflict: Revisiting Hypotheses on Territory," *International Studies Quarterly* 49(2005), 123-139.

¹⁶ See also Harvey Starr, "Opportunity, Willingness and Geographic Information Systems: Reconceptualizing Borders in International Relations," *Political Geography* 21 (2002), 243-261. It should be noted that an analysis of Israel using this new data set clearly highlights how Israel's "critical boundary" was vulnerable until the 1967 war from all three of its rivals—Egypt, Syria and Jordan. The maps generated by the GIS demonstrate a case where the legal boundary and critical boundary did not appear to coincide. One consequence of the 1967 war, then, was to reduce Israeli vulnerability by moving the legal border outward to coincide with the "critical boundary."

¹⁷ David Newman, "Real Spaces, Symbolic Spaces: Interrelated Notions of Territory in the Arab-Israeli Conflict," in Paul Diehl, ed., *A Road Map to War* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press), 3-34.

¹⁸ See Harvey Starr and Randolph M. Siverson, "Alliance and Geopolitics," *Political Geography Quarterly* 9 (1990), 232-248.