Boundaries in war and peace

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A boundary is a line indicating where I stop and you begin, separating me from you. Boundaries have to do not only with physical separation but also with social and psychological separation: that is, with identity, indicating who we are and who we are not. Since they divide, they also protect what they have divided, again both physically and psycho-socially.

Most boundaries are artificial (the exception being water boundaries around islands), because I and you do not separate easily and naturally, and even if we do, there is likely to be plenty of traffic, transport, and communication across the line. Geographic features help, as walls and moats, but are often ambiguous. Mountain crests tend to separate populations if they are high enough but they are complex. Rivers divide shores but unite valleys.

In many senses, boundary conflicts have all the characteristics of any other conflict. Their special feature is that they involve land and its division. The spatialisation or territorialisation of the conflict gives it a concrete nature that is both a complication and facilitation of conflict management.

Studies show that territorial conflicts are easier to solve than conflicts over intangibles, and although the sacralisation of territory makes it less easy either to divide or to trade it, those possibilities do nonetheless exist. Agreement over a boundary and its conditions provides a specific conclusion to a conflict that is hard to achieve with intangible stakes.

Disputes about boundaries

Trans-boundary means ‘over boundaries’, and there are two types of trans-boundary disputes: disputes over (about) boundaries and disputes over (across) boundaries. There are two reasons for disputes about boundaries: we do not know where the line is, or we do not like where the line is. Boundary uncertainty can occur because the line has never been drawn or never been accepted by both parties. Territorial limits to a state are a new development in many parts of the world, where the polity was traditionally a population unit rather than a territorial unit.

Entrance into the modern international state system, often brought by colonisation, has required establishing territorial limits, often in inhospitable areas. Until 1972, much of the boundary between Morocco and Algeria was never formally defined (having been declared ‘superfluous’ because the area was largely uninhabited); in the 1970s, aerial photography revealed new geographic features in an undelimited area in the otherwise demarcated boundary between Ecuador and Peru; and the Somali-Ethiopian boundary was once drawn ‘from a rock to a tree to traditional grazing areas’ and the treaty on the resulting line was then lost.

All these uncertainties have given rise to wars and only the Andean boundary has been fully resolved. But there are other reasons for uncertainties, frequently less conflictual. A notable instance arises from the shifting bed of boundary rivers, but shifting roads can also ignore and complicate boundary certainty.

A boundary commission in the 1990s made small but useful rectification in the Zairean-Zambia boundary for these reasons, and the US-Mexican Chamizal dispute received a technical solution after some years of contestation.

Finally, the very act of defining the boundary can create conflict. Efforts to overcome uncertainty can rouse sleeping dogs and can bring to light details worth disputing, according both to physical and human geography, and to relations for other reasons between the bounded countries. An effort to clarify the Eritrean-Ethiopian boundary around the apparently
insignificant little town of Badme made each country realise how much it really meant to them, and how tense the rest of the relations between the two of them were anyhow.

Disputes over the acceptance of an otherwise established boundary have more to do with the territory behind the line than with the line itself, and hence are properly territorial disputes. Again, such claims can occur for physical or social reasons.

Physical sources of claims concern resources or positions that the territory holds. An oil-rich neighbouring territory, such as Kuwait next door to Iraq, or a coal-rich territory, such as the German Saar next to France, arouses covetous looks from the other side of the border that then calls the border into question.

The simple location of the territory in question in the name of geographic logic issues a powerful directive. Iraq questions its treaty boundary with Iran running down the thalweg of the Shatt al-Arab because it leaves Iraq with a very narrow entrance into the Persian Gulf; Idi Amin’s Uganda claimed the Kagera salient to the Kagera river as a ‘more African’ boundary instead of the colonially-drawn straight line; and the United States arrived at its current continental form by following its ‘Manifest Destiny’ to reach the Pacific shores.

Social sources involve above all ‘ethnic overhang’, where a part of one country’s national population also lives on the other side of the border. Somalis in the Ethiopian Ogaden, German-speakers in the Italian Alto Adige (Süd Tyrol, across the mountain wall), Bosnian and Kosovar Serbs, and Turkish, Iranian and Iraqi Kurds all contest the state boundaries that keep them from ‘themselves’ in the neighbouring country.

By extension, this same sort of boundary dispute can be applied to secessionist demands, in the sense that the ethnic group is protesting the absence of a boundary between themselves and the rest of the country. Diola-led Casamançais in Senegal, Muslim Moros in the Philippines, some Kashmiris in India and Pakistan, and Tamils in Sri Lanka all have territorial disputes requiring a new boundary.

Disputes across boundaries

Disputes that cross boundaries are more complex and are not easily categorised. Of course, disputes about boundaries cross boundaries too, since they involve not only a line but also the contested territory that that line divides. The dynamics of the conflict carry it back and forth across the borderlands, either in search of a new line or to destroy an old one. However, such conflicts are unlikely to be limited to border wars, restricted to the disputed territory, or the land around the boundary; they extend much deeper, in circles.

They are likely to involve other bordering areas between the two countries, often otherwise not in dispute. A second circle carries the dispute to the two capitals, the centres of the peripheries. A third circle then encompasses the two countries’ allies, for each country will seek additional power by engaging political, economic and military support from abroad. For example (one of many), the Iraqi-Iranian border war in 1975
Disputes about sacred boundaries or boundaries around sacred lands are obdurate problems with high potential for escalation

Concerned Iranian support for Iraqi Kurds, then spilled over into war at other points along the border including the southern salient near the Shatt al-Arab. Settled in 1975, the war broke out again between the traditionally hostile neighbours in 1980 after the Iranian revolution and spread to threats of direct air attacks on the capitals, while in both cases bringing in regional and global allies of both sides.

Disputes across borders arise from the fact that an artificial line interrupts normal human interaction. In some cases life goes on across the soft borders, families continuing their family life despite the line. On the Togo-Benin border, between two sometimes hostile states with burdensome customs and immigration procedures on the main road between them, family weddings and funerals (and night-time bride-snatching) go on free of official interference. And on the French-Swiss border, towns and even backyards are divided by an unpatrolled invisible line.

On the other extreme, hard borders sharply divide, patrolled by frontier guards and marked by mined strips, barbed wire, and no-man’s lands. The very sharpness of the frontier gives rise to attempts to get around it, creating new professions: smugglers, middlemen, border officials, etc. These two boundary models can be called black-and-white and grey: the Iron Curtain and the current Cypriot Green Line are examples of the first; the Rhine valley and the Rio Grande Valley, until recently, examples of the second.

More profoundly, these different types refer to the boundaries in depth – borderlands, the area on either side of the border. It is important to realise that these areas are inhabited by people who identify as borderlanders, whatever their attitudes toward their national identity.

The black-and-white and grey models are pictures of some borderlands, but other pictures are available, each with its own implications: buffered, where a third population is inserted to separate the other two; spotty, where islands of one population are scattered within the other; layered, where social strata separate different populations related to either side of the boundary; or, one should add, something else or a mixture of these. The Serbs inserted by the Austrians in the Krajina to separate Croats from Muslims, Jewish settlements in Palestine, and Palestinians in Israel are examples of the three models.

Mostly, these types of borderland populations are the result of conflicts across boundaries, but they then form the context for future conflicts. The US-Mexican frontera, locally termed the Serpent; Israel and Palestine, entire countries (even if thin) which make up their own borderlands; and Republika Srbska (formalised or not) in Bosnia and Kosovo – these are the conflict, not merely its observers or its subjects.

The other side of the centre-periphery relationship – relations between centres – is also crucial to the nature of conflicts across boundaries. Conflicts, inter-state or intra-state, know no boundaries; they reach out from their centres until they meet resistance, and they reach into the other side of the boundary, whatever the relations that the borderlands had enjoyed before. The wars over the breakup of Yugoslavia and the control of Rwanda turned previously peaceful neighbours and inter-ethnic couples into killing fields; the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front and the Tigrean People’s Liberation Front fought together to overthrow the Ethiopian government, but later turned on each other in a mindless boundary dispute.

The third dimension of conflicts across boundaries reaches from the borderland to the centre to the region. Internal conflicts play on the neighbour and the neighbour plays back, bringing in other neighbours; peripheries have reciprocal links and centres have networks of alliances. This is of course the history of European wars from the 15th to the 20th century, but also the more contemporary story of the West African cancer, spreading from Liberia to Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau, and Casamance, then to Côte d’Ivoire. Or of the Afghan war, bringing in the USSR and then the US, pulling in Pakistan, and, indirectly, India and Iran, and then giving birth to al-Qaeda, in the 20th and now 21st century version of the ‘Great Game’.

The lure of escalation: conflict beyond boundaries

Disputes across boundaries by their very nature involve at least the threat and most likely the lure of escalation, of conflict beyond boundaries. There are many types of escalation, other than the escalation of space, and each feeds the others: escalation of means, ends, conflicts, parties, images, risk, costs and commitment. Many of these effects operate intransitively (conflicts escalate on a mechanism of their own) as well as transitively (they are escalated by one and then both of the parties).

Escalation of space means that competing claims between Ethiopia and Eritrea on Badme expand to competing claims for one whole state covering larger portions of previously
uncontested territory. Escalation of means means that greater efforts – from border guards to insurgents to back-up troops to full armies – are thrown across the border, as between Iran and Iraq. Ends refers to an expansion of goals from cultural rights to autonomy to independence, as in Kosovo.

Parties refers to the agglutination of interest participants, as the war against Colombian guerrillas expanded to involve Venezuela and Ecuador, and then the two sides brought in external allies, the moderate Latin American states against the Bolivarians, and then the US against Russia, among others. Conflicts refers to the contagion effect, in which one conflict encourages another with no direct relation to the first; Ethiopian and Ugandan support for Southern Sudanese rebels was met by Sudanese support for Eritrean rebels and for the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda, and so on in the Horn of Africa where bilateral conflicts have been inextricably interlocked.

Escalation of images runs from worthy opponent to enemy to evil one, as vilifying and demonising sets an ever heightening barrier against dialogue, negotiation and reconciliation. Escalated risk involves the chances the conflicting parties are willing to take, often as they fall into the maelstrom of entrapment, throwing good efforts in after bad, as the Moroccan-Algerian conflict over the Western Sahara has led to competitively destructive efforts in the then-Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and to the destruction of the Arab Maghreb Union.

Costs too relate to entrapment, and the investment and damages each party is willing to undergo, as Greece went to great and ultimately childish efforts to deny the nominal existence of (the Former Yugoslav Republic of) Macedonia and then the existence of (the Turkish Republic of) Northern Cyprus.

Finally, commitment covers many of the above, referring to the depth of engagement of the two sides in their conflict, often felt in existential terms.

Boundary conflict management and resolution

How can this complex of conflict situations be handled to reduce, manage and even resolve the conflicts?

Disputes about boundaries can be handled preventively by simply establishing clearly demarcated boundaries. The effort to delimit and then demarcate involves cooperation between neighbours, itself a step toward conflict reduction. It is often objected that sleeping boundaries should be let lie, but the fact is that demarcation in times of peace or at least quiet relations is far better than demarcation in response to a crisis.

Whereas ripeness theory tells us that states do not act until they find themselves in an uncomfortable impasse, the theory can also be applied prospectively, when states realise that they will be in a hurting stalemate if they leave their potential boundary problem to simmer until the boil bursts. There have been repeated calls from the time of the OAU for African states to declare the Year of Boundary Demarcation to stave off future boundary disputes that are so potentially frequent, and the African Union (AU) Border Programme is now actively working on this very task. Even though a segment left undemarcated because unknown was later to cause conflict, most of the Peru-Ecuador boundary was demarcated and thus removed from dispute in the mid-1940s.

But clear definition is not enough. Because of their artificial nature in human terms, boundaries need to be made permeable so that borderlanders can cross easily to do their daily business and make their normal contacts. Often this poses problems for authorities, since illegals and criminals can slide across under the cover of normal contacts, and are often cleverer than the normal controls. The balance between clarity and openness is, as usual, a work of continual tending. The US-Mexican border and the Chinese-North Korean borders – both fully demarcated – pose such problems.

A third word of prevention is need for wise and careful rectifications as conditions change. Rectifications refers to small changes as roads and rivers alter their courses to fit nature, as new terrain features are discovered, or even as new population patterns mean that salients need to be changed or exchanged. The more territory involved, the more delicate the rectifications become, of course, and even rectifications may involve territory that is sacred or strategic for other reasons. Nonetheless, small changes can prevent big conflicts.

Disputes about sacred boundaries or boundaries around sacred lands are obdurate problems with high potential for escalation. Such territories are often presented as absolute and indivisible. The problem is that they engender such tense and hostile relations that it is difficult to make the parties sit down and coldly and creatively examine the problem. There are always technical, objective and innovative solutions available, but the parties are not feeling objective and creative. Trust, the necessary ingredient of any agreement, is lacking, not only in the negotiation process but also in the longer time of implementation. Such situations require confidence- and security-building measures to render the situation as controllable as possible.

Research has shown that a necessary ingredient is third-party monitoring after an agreement. Jerusalem is indeed divisible,
but the parties must be open to the principle of division (admitted in Ehud Barak’s proposals in Camp David II in 2000) and must have confidence that each side will administer its part and cooperate in city administration honourably (as the bitterly rival Christian sects have done, more or less, in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre). The patriotic and holy Serb sites in Kosovo can be handled by open access and administration regimes (or even ‘ownership’ as opposed to ‘sovereignty’, as invented for a Peru-Ecuador site). All that is necessary is mutual trust and creativity, with a little attention from a friendly and committed mediator!

Disputes across boundaries enter into the realm of all conflict management. Conflict between centres is the problem on which efforts need to focus. Escalation in space and parties can be controlled by invoking the regional dimensions of the conflict, using third-party neighbours and regional organisations to dampen the conflict, urge negotiations and respect for common values, and care for borderland populations.

In the Mediterranean islands disputes, the EU’s refusal to side with its members, Spain and Greece, and instead urge restraint, removed the Union as a mediator but did much to calm the tension. Other regional organisations, such as the AU, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Organisation of American States (OAS) have been similarly helpful in boundary disputes among their members. On the other hand, such organisations are often impeded from acting as mediators, and mediation needs to come from an external source with a certain amount of standing, often the US or the UN, but in the Beagle Channel boundary dispute between Argentina and Chile it was the Vatican. Regional organisations are, after all, groups of members, who may be involved in the conflict, too close to it to be effective mediators.

Despite the difficulties boundary disputes present, the world is well-equipped to act as peacemaker. There is plenty of expertise and many examples of effective conflict management (reducing the conflict from a violent to a political stage) and conflict resolution (settling the issues at dispute). Countries, often assisted by NGOs, need to be ready and willing to limit and mediate conflicts, despite the conflicting parties’ frequent resistance to third-party involvement and the ‘internationalisation’ of their conflict (even while they look for foreign support). Parties in conflict need help, even if they are unwilling to admit it. Often they overcome their unwillingness, only when they find themselves painfully stalemated in their efforts, hence the difficulty of, but crying need for, preventive efforts.