Geopolitics and Conflict:
Reconciling Spatiality, Borders, and Sovereignty in the Modern World System

Harvey Starr

Dag Hammarskjöld Professor in International Affairs, University of South Carolina, USA

Abstract

This essay provides a brief overview of how geopolitics and spatiality relate to borders, and, in turn, the role of borders and proximity to the study of conflict. The author's research program is used to provide examples of these relationships. The continued relevance of borders is examined within the context provided by the contemporary world of transnationalism, globalization, and increased interdependence, as well as the different perspectives given by the "borderless world discourse" and the "security discourse."

International relations scholars are keenly aware of the role of temporal dynamics in understanding phenomena of international politics, and the influence of temporality is acknowledged in works adhering to diverse methodological traditions. It is important, however, in both refining extant theories of global politics as well as in developing new theories from evolving realities, to be attentive to the contexts of those theories and the phenomena to which they pertain. World politics must be contextualized not only in time (across history) but also across space. Whether the units of analysis being studied are world systems, regions, states, or other international actors, the external and internal contexts must include time as well as space and place. Broadly, *space* includes the spatial dimension of how things stand in relation to one another across physical space, the various ways in which the distance between and among them may be conceptualized and measured, and the meaning of spatial factors. Similarly, *place* is about where people live, where things are located, and the ways in which people give meaning to those places and draw their identity from them.

Temporality by itself offers an incomplete framework for understanding international relations. In my work on geopolitics—contiguity and borders, diffusion, proximity and conflict, as well as in the theme of the 2014 annual meeting of the ISA, "Spaces and Places: Geopolitics in an Era of Globalization," and in my most recent book, 2013's *On Geopolitics* I have tried to devote more explicit and extensive attention to the spatial elements, or the spatial contexts, of socio-political phenomena. I have tried to encourage the exploration of the importance of space, the relationship between space and time, how space and place can be studied, and the continuing challenges of combining the study of spatiality and time in our analyses of world politics. Moreover, these relationships have been emerging and converging in an increasingly globalized world, one in which the very meanings of space, distance, and place are called into question as technology—along with the growing and deepening of the interdependence it engenders—challenges traditional patterns of interstate interactions.

Indeed, especially in my work on borders I think scholars of international relations must ask whether many of the foundations of the Westphalian system are still relevant, and in what ways. We are driven to address issues such as: the impact of borders and their meaning (or lack thereof); the relationships between place and identity; the tensions between place as local with the push and pull of globalization; the relationships among the concept and reality of sovereignty, law and legal borders, and the context generated by the cross-border workings of modern technology, economics, and transnational actors.

PROXIMITY, BORDERS AND CONFLICT

While much of my earlier work on borders, proximity, space and geopolitics has been summarized in the 2013 book, *On Geopolitics* (Starr 2013),[1] a short comment in Starr and Thomas (2005, 123) may suffice here:

> 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 (see, for example, the recent survey by Hensel 2000). 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.

It will be of no surprise to those familiar with my work that these "powerful theoretical reasons" are based along opportunity and willingness. Territoriality, proximity, and spatiality have all played central roles in the study of international conflict. Proximity, especially through borders or contiguity, is important because states (or any other social units) that are close to each other, are better able to interact. Simply, they have the possibility or opportunity of interacting with one another—an "interaction opportunity" argument that is central to the spatial aspects of opportunity.

A second reason why we should be concerned with distance is willingness: because states (or any other social units) that are close to each other are also *perceived* as important or salient to each other. Greater perceptions of threat or gain, or of interdependence, are ways in which proximity can generate salience. Such views affect willingness through the expected utility calculations of policymakers. Willingness to interact and to manage subsequent conflicts in different ways, for example, will depend on the importance or salience of an issue or an opponent. Proximity makes states (or other social units) that are close to one another "relevant" to one another through some combination of both opportunity and willingness.

We can identify some broad ways in which proximity through territory can

---

1   See also Starr (2005).

be related to conflict via opportunity (ease of interaction) and willingness (importance or salience). A large literature on territory may be summarized by looking at the role that territory plays in international politics. Territory serves at least two distinct purposes in the study of international relations. First, by defining the territorial extent of political units, territory creates spatial arrangements among the units indicating the physical-geographic distance between those units. This "distance" is dynamic, in that the "time-distance" between the units changes with changing technologies of transportation and communication. But the physical-geographic distance between states may also change with changes in the arrangements of the units through alliances, or with the merging of units through conquest or voluntary integration; or with the splitting up of states whether through civil war or non-violent agreements. Second, as the place where people live, territory provides an important component of "group identity" and becomes endowed with extraordinary symbolic importance to people.

In turn, we can also identify two broad ways in which territory plays a causal role in conflict, drawing on the work of Paul Diehl (e.g. 1991, or Goertz & Diehl 1992). Importantly, Diehl categorizes the literature by breaking the empirical studies of territory and war into two groups: (1) territory as a facilitating condition for conflict, and (2) territory as a source of conflict. The first may be represented by increased opportunity, or ease of interaction, while the second represents willingness to engage in conflict because of the importance of territory—the stakes of territory whether in terms of resources/capabilities/wealth or the symbolic importance of group identity.

Both of these relationships are of great causal import, which often co-exist and interact—for example, group identity and the drive for self-determination are both linked to territory (which then provides the geopolitical setting of neighbors and regions). Because of the individual and joint causal impact of these factors, a large literature has demonstrated the various relationships between proximity and the onset of conflict, proximity and the diffusion, spread, or growth of conflict, and both the frequency and intensity of conflict. A quick overview of some of my own empirical analyses can illustrate these relationships. With the exception of the path breaking studies of Lewis Richardson (1960), my work with Benjamin Most presented some of the earliest research linking the numbers and types of borders with the frequency of the onset of interstate war (for example, Starr & Most 1976; 1978). This work involved our creation of one of the first systematic data sets on world borders that was available to other scholars, which included the contiguous land borders of states, across-water borders between states, and the borders between the colonial territories of states. Along with the growing large-N quantitative literature on war, we also produced some of the earliest work on the diffusion

of war, focusing on the positive contagion effects that borders had on the spread of wars—particularly contiguous homeland borders, but also the borders between the territories/colonies of states (e.g. Most & Starr 1980). Along with Randolph Siverson this diffusion research was extended to demonstrate the positive effects of alliances in the growth of ongoing wars as well (Siverson & Starr 1991).

While the existence of contiguous land borders has been demonstrated to be positively linked to the onset of interstate war, so much so that contiguity is regularly used as a control variable, the literature has been primarily focused on the number of borders, or the simple dummy variable of whether or not there was such a border between two countries. While mostly supportive, studies of the effects of the length of borders have produced mixed results. My research on the nature of borders, creating a new border data set based on one of the first uses of GIS in international relations, attempted to probe how useful it would be, and for what questions, to go beyond the simple "yes/no" of the presence of territorial contiguity (e.g. Starr 2002). My work with Glenn Thomas (Starr & Thomas 2002; 2005) demonstrated that we could go beyond simple contiguity, and that coding specific arcs (or borders) or border segments for "ease of interaction" (opportunity) and "salience" (importance related to willingness) could provide additional explanatory power to the relationship between borders and conflict, and *how* borders promoted conflict. We found that for the existence of crises, escalation, and the onset of violent conflict, the GIS data set could show there was not a strict "more proximity-→ more conflict" relationship. We demonstrated that the nature of contiguous borders could help explain the relationship between proximity, the number and type of interactions, but importantly, also the *positive effects* of interdependence related to integration; (for a discussion of borders, cooperation, and integration, Starr 2013, chapter 8). For some of the questions relating to diffusion and the recurrence of conflict, the effects generated by the simple existence of contiguous borders could not be improved upon. Note that my ongoing project on borders has allowed us to look at both "space" and "place" as defined above.

BORDERS IN AN INTERDEPENDENT, GLOBALIZED WORLD OF

"SOVEREIGN" STATES[2]

What do territory and borders mean regarding location and place in a globalized world where people, things, and information seemingly move about without constraint? 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 a broad set of contemporary challenges to sovereignty, borders delineate areas of legal competence, encompassing the territoriality necessary to the concept of the sovereign "state." 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. They continue to be intimately related to the security of states and the analysis of interstate conflict, but affect interstate cooperation as well.

Two significant ways to view borders between sovereign states derive from Realist approaches to international relations. The first way involves borders as *legal* phenomena—the legal boundaries which were provided to the nation-states that emerged subsequent to the Thirty Years War. These states were seen to have a *territoriality* dimension that had been largely lacking in the system of feudal organization which it replaced.[3] The legal condition of sovereignty gave the "prince's" government complete control over the territory and people on that territory, with no external authority having the legal right to order the state how to act. The state's boundaries—borders—determined the crucial *legal* boundaries between what was internal (or domestic) and external (or the realm of foreign relations). The whole basis of international law is *jurisdiction*: what actions were permitted to which governments on what territory and to which groups of people/or individuals; what was to be considered domestic and what was external. Borders provided the answer.

While international law and legal concerns have never been key components of Realism, territoriality was, as a central component that defines a state. And territoriality has long been seen as a central component of state security, because it is fundamental to the *geo-political setting* (or context) which affects the security of states. Thus, the second broad way to view borders within a Realist perspective is that borders have been seen as intimately related to the security of states, as the

---

2   This section is based on Starr (2013, chapter 4) and Starr (2006).

3   Although, see Bueno de Mesquita (2000) for an alternative perspective that challenges this view by proposing that the process of instituting territorial rights began 500 years before Westphalia.

borders of states both represented, and *were*, the "hard shell" promised by the (legal) phenomenon of sovereignty (e.g. Herz 1957).

Non-Realist approaches such as liberalism, transnationalism, pluralism, and more recently globalism as a successor to neo-Marxism and world systems theory—all strongly based in international political economy— raised questions about the importance and role of state borders. As with the strongly non-Realist theories of integration, transnational theories explicitly looked at the interaction between internal factors as well as the external relations of states, and argued that military security did not always sit at the top of state interests, on all issues or for all states. By looking within societies and governments, and denying security a primacy of importance to all states at all times, this perspective violated core assumptions of Realism.

Economic issues, for a variety of reasons, were seen as important (or even more important) areas than military security for large numbers of state and non-state actors. Interdependence, and especially economic interdependence are built around ideas of externalities, collective goods, and the problems of collective choice (e.g. Starr 1997; Ostrom 1990). Ultimately, these approaches argued that states did better taking care of longer term collective interests, than their short-term self interests. Only in this way could states deal with the prisoner dilemma situations that were produced by interdependence and collective goods or common pool resources (such as the "tragedy of the commons"). All of the non-Realist approaches, for different theoretical reasons, question the degree to which borders can still provide any form of "hard shell" around a state, and given the thick web of interdependences, whether they even should. Today, it is clear that technological developments in weaponry, communications, and transportation, as well as the growth of democracy in the world system, and cooperation promoting international organizations, have indeed made borders far more permeable, penetrated, and porous than ever.

A FURTHER WORD ON BORDERS AND CONFLICT

I concluded an earlier article (Starr 2006, 9) by saying. "Borders matter… While not the only element of spatiality borders continue to be a significant factor in the spatial analysis of human relations." They have meaning for legal reasons and security reasons. They have meaning for both the "security discourse" and the "borderless world discourse." They are critical to the identity of groups, and how the different identities of groups separated by borders (or *not* separated by borders!)

affects their social, political, or security relationships.[4]

The liberal position noted above, relating borders to positive interdependent relationships and integrative processes, and based on the "borderless world" perspective, is reflected in the politics of the European Union. However, even here there is a border-conflict relationship. The 1985 Schengen Agreement(s) for the free movement of the nationals of signatory states (with these agreements becoming part of the EU legal framework in 1999, through a protocol to the Treaty of Amsterdam.), which removed cross-border barriers such as border checks and border posts, and created a common visa policy for signatories—exemplify the "borderless world discourse" and the non-security orientation of a "zone of peace" (or better, a pluralistic security community as defined by Karl Deutsch). But even here, scholars such as David Newman (2006, 6) can note that "Borders constitute institutions that enable legitimation, signification and domination, creating a system of order through which control can be exercised. Management procedures are central to this process…" Such *management* involves allowing or preventing physical movement and access.

As such, borders still affect interaction—people can be let in or kept out—with ensuing ethical questions as well as political conflict. For example, while movement within the Schengen area has been facilitated, in some cases the restrictions on non-Schengen nationals in regard to entering the area have been substantially tightened. This is what Basilien-Gauche (2014) has called, "the harmful extra territorialisation of European borders." The role of borders is not to protect the ownership of territory, or the resources that exist on a territory. Here, they are more closely related to identity issues. And despite the globalizing effects of economics, here borders exist to "protect" (that is, "constrain") elements of economic relations (and the economy of states) through legal means.

A liberal view of the world does take into account the "territory as identity" issue, and with conflict over this issue within (or between) democracies essentially being handled in non-violent ways. Examples would include the referendum in Canada over the independence of Quebec, or the dissolution of Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. These examples could be contrasted dramatically to the current situations of violent (identity-driven) conflict in autocracies (or at best, anocracies) such as Syria, Iraq, and some of the post-Arab Spring countries.

Thus the Realist/security view of borders continues to be reflected in both the internal and external relations where one or more of the states involved are autoc-

---

4   But, as noted by John Vasquez at the Workshop, we must be careful *not* to confuse or conflate identity and nationalism.

racies (or anocracies). Especially with autocracies borders continue to be seen as the demarcation between *sovereign* states. But, at the same time, issues of identity have quite often been employed as an excuse for the military violation of that sovereignty. Two obvious examples are the behavior of Russia towards Georgia in the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, and similar Russian actions in the current ongoing conflict with/within Ukraine.

In regard to conflict borders do still count. The liberal perspective is important in that it represents a large segment of the contemporary international system where states and international organizations struggle to finds ways to reconcile the legal role that borders still play in the face of the interdependence, transnationalism, and globalism which penetrate (or jump over) the traditional "hard shell" security role that borders had represented for centuries. The Realist perspective is important as it represents areas where the more traditional security views of borders (and geopolitics in general) remain relevant in terms of sovereignty; where borders serve as key elements in either deterrence or defense. The liberal view tends to work in the zones of peace dominated by groups of democratic states; the Realist view in areas dominated by autocracies and anocracies. Ironically, more conflict may be generated when these different states, with different ways of looking at borders have to interact with, or react to, the behavior of the other.

References

Basilien-Gauche, Marie-Laure (2014). The EU external edges: Borders as walls or ways? *Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies* 2(1).

Boulding, Kenneth (1962). *Conflict and Defense*. New York, USA: Harper and Row.

Bueno de Mesquita, Bruce (2000). Popes, kings, and endogenous institutions: The concordat of

worms and the origins of sovereignty. *International Studies Review* 2, 93-118.

Diehl, Paul (1991). Geography and war: A review and assessment of the empirical literature. *International Interactions* 17, 11-27.

Goertz, Gary & Paul Diehl (1992). *Territorial Changes and International Conflict.* London, UK: Routledge.

Hensel, Paul (2000). Territory: Theory and evidence on geography and conflict. John Vasquez (Ed.), *What Do We Know about War?* Boulder, USA: Rowman and Littlefield.

Herz, John (1957). The rise and demise of the territorial state. *World Politics* 9, 473-493.

Most, Benjamin & Harvey Starr (1980). Diffusion, reinforcement, geopolitics, and the spread of war. *American Political Science Review* 74, 932-946.

Newman, David (2006). The lines that continue to separate us: Border in our 'borderless' world. *Progress in Human Geography* 30, 1-19.

Ostrom, Elinor (1990). *Governing the Commons.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Richardson, Lewis (1960). *The Statistics of Deadly Quarrels.* Chicago, USA: Quadrangle.

Siverson, Randolph & Harvey Starr (1991). *The Diffusion of War.* Ann Arbor, USA: University of Michigan Press.

Starr, Harvey (1997). *Anarchy, Order, and Integration.* Ann Arbor, USA: University of Michigan Press.

Starr, Harvey (2002). Opportunity, willingness and geographic information systems: Reconceptualizing borders in international relations. *Political Geography* 21, 243-261.

Starr, Harvey (2006). International borders: What they are, what they mean, and why we should care. *SAIS Review* 21, 3-10.

Starr, Harvey (2013). *On Geopolitics: Space, Place, and International Relations.* Boulder, USA: Paradigm Publishers.

Starr, Harvey & Benjamin Most (1976). The substance and study of borders in international relations research. *International Studies Quarterly* 20, 581-620.

Starr, Harvey & Benjamin Most (1978). A return journey: Richardson, 'frontiers' and war in the 1946-1965 era. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 22, 323-356.

Starr, Harvey & G. Dale Thomas (2002). The 'nature' of contiguous borders: Ease of interaction, salience, and the analysis of crisis. *International Interactions* 28, 213-235.

Starr, Harvey & G. Dale Thomas (2005). The nature of borders and international conflict: Revisiting hypotheses on territory. *International Studies Quarterly* 49, 123-139.

Zipf, George (1949). *Human Behavior and the Principle of Least Effort.* Cambridge, USA: Addison-Wesley.