

# **BORDERLINE**

It's Not About Maps

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A country's borders should not be confused with those familiar dotted lines drawn on some musty old map of nation-states. In an era of mass migration, globalization and instant communication, a map reflecting the world's true boundaries would be a crosscutting, high-tech and multidimensional affair.

Where is the real U.S. border, for example, when U.S. customs agents check containers in the port of Amsterdam? Where should national borders be marked when drug traffickers launder money through illegal financial transactions that crisscross the globe electronically, violating multiple jurisdictions? How would border checkpoints help record companies that discover pirated copies of their latest offering for sale in cyberspace -- long before the legitimate product even reaches stores? And when U.S. health officials fan out across Asia seeking to contain a disease outbreak, where do national lines truly lie?

Governments and citizens are used to thinking of a border as a real, physical place: a fence, a shoreline, a desert or a mountain pass. But while geography still matters, today's borders are being redefined and redrawn in unexpected ways. They are fluid, constantly remade by technology, new laws and institutions, and the realities of international commerce -- illicit as well as legitimate. They are also increasingly intangible, living in a virtual and electronic space.

In this world, the United States is adjacent not just to Mexico and Canada but also to China and Bolivia. Italy now borders on Nigeria, and France on Mali.

These borders cannot be protected with motion sensors or National Guard troops.

Political unions, economic reforms and breakthroughs in technology and business came together to revolutionize the world's borders during the 1990s.

It was a decade during which a global passion for free markets erupted. From Latin America to Eastern Europe, politicians and their electorates felt that prosperity was possible by enticing foreigners to invest, tourists to visit, traders to import and export, banks to move funds freely in and out of countries, and businesses to operate free of heavy regulations.

It was also a decade when nations with long histories of conflict or animosity surprised the world by dismantling or rearranging their borders through political unions and trade agreements. The European Union kicked into high gear; Argentina, Brazil and rival South American nations formed a regional customs union; and Mexico joined Canada and the United States in their own trade agreement. These efforts sought to maximize economic growth and political harmony (or so the leaders hoped).

Meanwhile, new technologies were vastly reducing the economic and business importance of distance and geography. The only prices that dropped faster than shipping

a cargo container from Shanghai to Los Angeles were those for sending e-mail, making phone calls, or rapid-firing text and images across borders.

With borders much more fluid, opportunities for profit multiplied and cross-border activity boomed. Suddenly it seemed normal to invest in Thailand, visit China, trade in exotic currencies, take seasonal jobs in different countries or download stolen software from Bulgarian Web sites.

Even something as simple as buying a counterfeit Prada handbag on the streets of Manhattan or Washington represented the final step in a long journey of border crossings. The bag's original design -- probably acquired or stolen in Europe -- was transported electronically or physically to China. There, the leather, zippers, belts and buckles were procured and assembled into tens of thousands of counterfeit handbags. The finished products were then smuggled onto containers officially carrying, say, industrial valves, to ports such as Naples or New York.

Once the handbags reached these final markets, street merchants took over -- often African immigrants who themselves were smuggled across borders by human-trafficking networks. Yes, the poorly paid street vendors are usually as illegal as the goods they're peddling. Meanwhile, the overall counterfeit enterprise reaped enormous cash profits that were converted into bank deposits and laundered across the globe electronically, again trespassing across multiple borders.

These changes reflected a severe and acute new asymmetry: Borders became harder for governments to control, and easier and more lucrative for violators to bypass. Anyone seeking to cross them found it easier to do so, while government agencies floundered in their efforts to regulate the new world they had helped create.

Today's borders are violated, enforced and remade not only on the ground but also in cyberspace, multilateral agencies and the virtual world of international finance.

Consider the most mundane of examples: the ATM machine. When an immigrant living in the United States sends her ATM card to her children in the Philippines and they draw money from her U.S. checking account, where has the transaction taken place? Did the kids cross a border to tap the funds from an American bank? In a sense, they did -- the ubiquitous ATM has become a powerful, easy-to-use, border-crossing tool. Often, such crossings are perfectly legal. But not always.

National boundaries are also being transformed by new -- or newly empowered -- international institutions. For example, when the World Trade Organization's 149 member states agree on the reduction of tariff rates around the globe, our time-honored beliefs about controlling sovereign borders are upended. On trade, the borders that matter may be drawn at the WTO headquarters in Geneva as much as anywhere else.

The fluid, unpredictable nature of modern borders is evident even among the most geographically isolated and remote nations on earth. Try landlocked Bolivia and Afghanistan. Their rugged geography and poor roads make internal travel exceedingly difficult and time-consuming. Yet narco-traffickers regularly and swiftly connect Bolivia's remote Chapare region, where coca is cultivated, with Miami or New York, where cocaine is consumed (with a processing stopover in the jungles of Colombia and

a transshipment detour to a deserted beach in Haiti). And in Afghanistan, opium traffickers seamlessly link the Deshu district in the lawless Helmand province with elegant consumers in London or Milan.

Even for experienced travelers, reaching Chapare or Deshu is a tough proposition. But location and geography now matter less and less for traffickers or for anyone seeking to violate national borders. In major cities across the globe, the availability of banned merchandise stands as a monument of sorts to nations' eroding sovereignty -- no matter the billions of dollars that governments spend seeking to keep such goods from reaching their shores and penetrating their borders.

In 2004, the Guardian published a dispatch from the banks of the Yalu River, on the border between China and North Korea. "Here and there shadowy figures can be seen on both sides of the misty river quietly carrying out an illegal -- but thriving -- trade in women, endangered species, food and consumer appliances," wrote Jonathan Watts.

If a paranoid police state such as North Korea is incapable of controlling its borders and deterring illicit trade, there seems to be little hope for open, democratic and technologically advanced nations seeking to uphold their sovereign borders. This issue gained urgency in the United States in particular after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, when security concerns became paramount.

Yet the paradox of policing borders in a high-tech, globally integrated era is that today, less sovereignty may equal more protection. In order to reinforce national boundaries and combat terrorism, one of the most effective tools a government can deploy is collaboration with other nations -- in effect, ceding or "pooling" certain aspects of their sovereignty.

That is no easy task. It requires partnering with less efficient, less democratic and less trustworthy nations and sharing information, technology, intelligence and decision-making power. In many quarters -- Washington and beyond -- the notion of diluting national sovereignty verges on treason.

But if sovereignty is indeed a hallowed concept, it has become a somewhat hollow one, too. Traditional borders are violated daily by countless means, and virtual borders seem even more permeable and misunderstood. "Closing the border" may appeal to nationalist sentiments and to the human instinct of building moats and walls for protection. But when threats travel via fiber optics or inside migrating birds, and when finding ways to move illegal goods across borders promises unimaginable wealth or the only chance of a decent life, unilateral security measures have the unfortunate whiff of a Maginot line.