



61/2023

06/09/2023

Pedro Sánchez Herráez

21st Century: Borders... scars of history or wounds of the present?

21st Century: Borders... scars of history or wounds of the present?

Abstract:

Borders, usually known as the scars of history, are one of the elements of sovereignty that give rise to the existence of a state. And if there have always been differences, disputes and wars over their conformation and modification - hence that meaning of scar, of old, apparently closed wound - it seemed that in the 21st century, globalisation and the planetary flows associated with it made these scars a thing of the past.

Curiously - or not - in the era of global geopolitical reconfiguration in which the planet is immersed - the war in Ukraine being only one of its most obvious elements - this concept, which in much of the world seemed to have been almost overcome due to globalisation and supranational integration, has once again come to the fore. And often painfully, as new wounds are opened, or attempted to be opened, in the skin of the Earth, it is argued that these borders only reflected a relationship of forces at a given moment, and are therefore not intangible or immutable.

Some considerations in this regard, accompanied by a few examples, and a kind of final reflection, form the core of this paper.

Keywords:

Border, globalisation, states, populations, geopolitics, integration, secession.

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the **Analysis Papers** are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

Siglo XXI: Fronteras... ¿cicatrices de la historia o heridas del presente?

Resumen:

Las fronteras, habitualmente conocidas como cicatrices de la historia, constituyen uno de los elementos de soberanía y que dan pie a la existencia de un Estado. Y si siempre han existido diferendos, disputas y guerras por su conformación y modificación –de ahí esa acepción de cicatriz, de vieja herida aparentemente cerrada-, parecía que en el siglo XXI, la globalización y los flujos planetarios asociados a la misma convertían dichas cicatrices en algo del pasado.

Curiosamente –o no-, en la era de reconfiguración geopolítica global en la que se encuentra sumida el planeta –siendo la guerra en Ucrania solo uno de sus elementos más patentes- ese concepto que en gran parte del mundo parecía casi superado, por mor de la globalización y de la integración supranacional, ha vuelto a saltar a la palestra. Y en muchas ocasiones de manera dolorosa, a modo de nuevas heridas que se abren, o se intentan abrir, en la piel de la Tierra, se alega que dichas fronteras no reflejaban más que una relación de fuerzas en un momento determinado, y, por tanto, no son intangibles ni inmutables.

Unas consideraciones al respecto acompañadas de algunos ejemplos, y una suerte de reflexión final nuclea el presente Documento.

Palabras clave:

Frontera, globalización, Estados, poblaciones, geopolítica, integración, secesión.

Cómo citar este documento:

SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro. *21st Century: Borders... scars of history or wounds of the present?* Analysis Paper 61/2023.

https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2023/DIEEEA61_2023_PEDSAN_Fronteras_ENG.pdf y/o [enlace bie³](#) (consultado día/mes/año)

Introduction: Is everything new in the 21st century... or is there nothing new under the sun?

"In the midst of a rather muddled situation, one thing seems clear: the reunification of Germany and the disintegration of the Soviet Union and its vast security zone have affected, be it directly or indirectly, all of Europe's borders, paralysing a process of integration that sought to blur them in the West; and in the centre and in the East, multiplying them with the rupture of the great balances on which the continent had rested since the Second World War"¹.

Appropriately transposed, these words, written in 1993 in the midst of Yugoslavia's war of decomposition and with the separation (peaceful in this case) of Czechoslovakia ² giving rise to two states (the Czech Republic and Slovakia), could reflect part of the current situation: European integration - that reduction, in certain aspects, of the concept of "border" - has not only come to a halt, but the exit of Great Britain and the dissensions within the EU have also meant a certain setback for it. And that is not to mention the ongoing war in Ukraine, where certain nations are trying - with weapons - to change the border... or in fact, to change the "border" - because that is what the name Ukraine means; or forgetting the change in the so-called "world order" and the search for a new one, with the powers once again at loggerheads.³.

And regarding the disintegration in Yugoslavia, a country that certainly had no historical roots but which had functioned surprisingly well since the end of the Second World War, it was plunged into a series of cruel wars, conflicts with a level of violence and evil no longer thought possible in "civilised Europe": massacres, ethnic cleansing, forced pregnancies, deportations and genocides on both sides, the arguments for such barbarities centred around ethnicity, nationality and religion. Exclusionary nationalism and powerful "one-another" narratives contributed to the disintegration of the once proud and in many ways model nation, and to the emergence of a plethora of new, smaller and

¹ DE LA TORRE DEL RÍO, Rosario, Las frágiles fronteras de Europa, Cuadernos del mundo actual, número 2, Historia 16, Madrid, 1993, page 5.

² A good summary can be found in EL KANFODUI, Asma, What was the dissolution of Czechoslovakia like, The World Order 14 April 2023. Available at https://elordenmundial.com/como-fue-disolucion-checoslovaquia/?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F NOTE: All web links in this paper were active as of the closing date, 30 August 2023).

³ SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro, La nueva pugna de las potencias: ¿Guerra mundial 3.0 o guerra fría 2.0?, Analysis Paper 28/2023, Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, 19 April 2023. Available at https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2023/DIEEEA28_2023_PEDSAN_Potencias.pdf

irrelevant nations, many of which still, almost three decades later, are haunted by these events and where the potential for war and secession remains, with the creation of new borders. It seems that the evils are still lurking in the lands of the former Yugoslavia ever since the opening of Pandora's box.

But apparently - or not - this desire for all borders to be affected - as pointed out in the quote at the beginning of the epigraph - is not confined to this troubled Balkan area. Aside from the external borders of many nations resulting from this reconfiguration of the global order, the internal borders of many states, whether or not they coincide with these planetary tensions that so often divide and polarise, are also being questioned, be it with secessionist or annexationist desires. In short, borders, those scars of history often drawn in the wake of great bloodshed and pain, and which in many cases seemed solid and consolidated, appear in certain cases to be questioned.

The end of the First World War (1914-1918) saw, at least in Europe, the disappearance of four empires (Ottoman, Russian, Austro-Hungarian and German) - often called "prisons of nations" - and the emergence of a large number of new nations and a host of new borders in Europe. Two decades later and aside from some adjustments, the end of the Second World War (1939-1945) did not see the creation of new borders, although populations moved by the millions. Nonetheless, the borders, the scars of history, essentially remained because the experience of their reshaping after the First World War had had very bad results despite apparently being undertaken from a certain idealistic stance. In this regard, among other aspects, US President Wilson's so-called "Fourteen Points"⁴ indicated that a state needed to be provided for each nationality in the empires located in Europe... an idealistic vision, as is sometimes proclaimed, or simply and plainly a clear manifestation of "divide and rule"? It is rather shocking that a US President that was putting an end to the so-called "Indian Wars"⁵, wiping out the existing native tribes in the north of the American continent and putting the few survivors into reservations, should proclaim the need to create a plethora of states, a multitude of new borders in a continent that was still echoing with the unification/birth of Germany and Italy, bringing together a multitude of entities, including political ones, that made infeasible the development of economies of scale and capacity for competition at regional level, and with echoes of the

⁴ Dipublico.org, President Wilson's Fourteen Points (1918). Available at <https://www.dipublico.org/3669/catorce-puntos-del-presidente-wilson-1918/>

⁵ A dispassionate and comprehensive account can be found in COOZENS, Peter, The earth is weeping, Knopf Publishing, New York, 2016.

benefits of unification... to be a regional and global power. Because the US, already in the 20th century, aspired to be a global power, and perhaps the more borders that fracture potential rivals, the better.

Having said that, this is the 21st century, the century of globalisation, where everything is new and different. These scars of history are just that, things of the past, confined to history, because in the present and above all in the future, and despite the literary artifices one might wish to employ, current reality flows in a different way.

And borders, in this global world, are increasingly blurred by the constant flows that circumvent them... they are, to this effect, things of the past, aren't they?

Global world... Frontiers, a thing of the past?

Globalisation, that increasingly intense and widespread flow of resources, people and ideas across the planet, is understood as an unstoppable process that has gradually reduced the value of borders. In this regard, the crossing of goods, ideas and people across these once much less penetrable borders is seen by many as something almost unstoppable and which, little by little, gradually erodes the idea of borders as "national walls", the few gates through which they could be crossed becoming little less than fully cosmopolitan open spaces.

In this image of walls, fences, isolation and protective measures, of scars, borders are affected and influenced - and therefore also the societies they contain - by various elements, one of which is the cross-border transport and communication infrastructures⁶ (cars, motorways, railways, ferries, etc.), which allow us to measure, albeit with a high degree of approximation, their permeability - the existence of these "gates" between nations, of potential gaps that cross the border, providing a reference for the real or potential mobility of flows on both sides of the border.

And the number of communication infrastructures in a large part of the planet is growing, generating a greater degree of territorial structuring that is even transnational, this being

⁶ DEUTSCHMANN, Emanuel, GABRIELLI, Lorenzo and RECCHI, Ettore, Roads, rails and checkpoints: assessing the permeability of nation state borders worldwide, World Development, Volume 164, April 2023. Available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X22003655>

a known and reiterated fact in history: the transcendence of the Camino de Santiago in the conception of Europe as an entity⁷ is a proven fact.

Reality, however, to some degree always puts a stop to dreams. If the COVID-19 pandemic was already a clear manifestation of the possibility of borders being closed and their permeability largely being severed - aside from generating other powerful effects⁸- different events such as meteorological phenomena, major catastrophes and conflicts of different types, or the simple refusal of a government to allow its border to be crossed, show⁹ the potential vulnerability of this globalising concept, so popular and established, almost like an axiom - at least in part of the West and the planet - in terms of the quasi-disappearance of these scars.

For the moment, however, not only do borders exist, but they are materialised, sometimes with large works including fences - such as the one Finland is building on part of its border with Russia¹⁰- and other times with simple milestones, landmarks which, like scars, make them recognisable on the skin of the planet. But these physical landmarks that delimit borders not only reflect the existence of one or the other nation on either side of them - and are therefore a major political component - but they also have a powerful symbolic charge. One of the photos that went round the world at the beginning of the Second World War - and as a materialisation of the start of the war - was that of German army troops tearing down the barrier of a crossing point on the Polish border. More recently, in the middle of the last decade, the terrorist group Daesh shockingly publicised the materialisation of its Caliphate of Syria and Iraq by removing the border markers between the two nations with bulldozers, with the lapidary sentence that "the Sykes-Picot era was

⁷ ANES, Gonzalo, El camino de Santiago en la formación de Europa, Política exterior, 1 September 1993. Available at <https://www.politicaexterior.com/articulo/el-camino-de-santiago-en-la-formacion-de-europa/>

⁸ SÁNCHEZ HERRAÉZ, Pedro. "Era COVID: ¿Un nuevo paradigma de seguridad?", Analysis Paper 36/2020, Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, 18 November 2020. Available at https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2020/DIEEEA36_2020PEDSAN_eraCovid.pdf

⁹ SÁNCHEZ HERRAÉZ, Pedro. Flow of resources on a global scale!... ¿y si hay un bloqueo?", Analysis Paper 36/2021, Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, 6 October 2021. Available at https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2021/DIEEEA36_2021_PEDSAN_Flujo.pdf

¹⁰ EURONEWS, Finland's border fence with Russia will cost hundreds of millions of euros, 2 April 2023. Available at <https://es.euronews.com/2023/04/02/la-valla-de-finlandia-en-su-frontera-con-rusia-costara-cientos-de-millones-de-euros>

over"¹¹; or, as a sign of sovereignty, in Spain the border markers¹² are periodically checked to ensure that they are where they should be.

Nonetheless, we must remember that for the states contained within them, borders must provide security for their citizens - as holders of the legitimate monopoly of violence, as part of the social contract - in an era of increasing mobility - which obviously complicates the capacity and possibility of providing an adequate degree of security. This makes borders¹³ paradoxical and sensitive, their simultaneously having to facilitate growing flows as far as possible, while providing an adequate level of security in an increasingly complex world.

This leads¹⁴ to the consideration that, in contrast to the idea that borders are increasingly porous and permeable, they are becoming powerful tools of classification, technology and digitisation having, borders having become "smart", making it possible to decide what crosses and what does not on a scale unprecedented in history. In this regard, while for some people borders open without any problem, for a huge number of people they close in a way that is difficult to compare with any other moment in history, affirming that the border has been reinvented in the 21st century.

Recalling the classical geopoliticians, borders were not only cited as the scars of history, but also as the consequence of a relationship of forces in a given place and time. They are, therefore, not immutable.

No, not scars, but simply the relationship of forces!

The daily events that populate the media in relation to the war in Ukraine and Moscow's eagerness to modify the border between the two nations, the also abundant - albeit mediatically less suggestive - events related to national boundaries in the South China Sea where Beijing claims as its own spaces that *de jure* are not, and the attempts by jihadist terrorists to create a new caliphate in the Sahel - as Daesh already achieved in

¹¹ Aljazeera, A century on: what remains of Sykes.Picot, 18 May 2016. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/5/18/a-century-on-what-remains-of-sykes-picot>

¹² OJER, Pablo, Spain redraws its borders every six years, El Debate, 3 July 2023. Available at https://www.eldebate.com/espana/defensa/20230703/espana-redibuja-fronteras-cada-seis-anos_124732.html

¹³ In this regard POPESCU, Gabriel, Bordering and ordering the twenty-first century, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham (Maryland), 2011.

¹⁴ MAU, Steffen, Sorting Machines: the reinvention of the border in the 21st century, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2023.

the middle of the last decade between Syria and Iraq - are clear examples of this other conception of the border, of that line that simply defines the relationship of forces that existed at some stage in the past, but can be feasibly, maybe inevitably, changed once this relationship is modified.

And to do so, each and every possible tool can be employed - political, diplomatic, economic, military - without forgetting the powerful use of narrative, articulating with the combination of these tools either some form of low-intensity or hybrid conflict, or open warfare - and without forgetting, at the risk of being repetitive, the key role of victimising narratives. Strength, the balance of power, especially in the 21st century, refers not only to military force but above all to the capacities and potential of a group and the actors that support it, either openly or from the shadows. And this balance of power is not always as obvious as it may seem, nor as complex to change as one might think.

To this effect, the actual or alleged imposition of a border in the past by a power, empire or nation with a degree of force far superior to that of the other actors involved constitutes one of the most commonly used arguments to validate (or attempt) a border change, that of ending the "symbol of an era in which external powers used to impose their will, draw borders and remove and replace governments, playing divide and rule with the "natives" and a complex game of chess with their colonial rivals"¹⁵.

But fortunately this is not always the case. The Sykes-Picot (secret) agreement between the UK and France on 16 May 1916, with the knowledge of Russia and within the framework of the First World War, divided the possessions of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East into areas of influence, ending up largely defining, following the post-First World War San Remo agreement of 1920, the current borders of the states in that region. The arguments against these borders resort to the clichés - without forgetting their substrate of certainty - that these borders are nothing more than reflections and semblances of foreign imperialism, that they do not reflect reality or a profound knowledge of the realities of the region, that ethnic and human groups were divided and distributed among different spaces, separated by these new borders, and that this has led and leads to tribal and ethnic violence erupting in certain situations in these spaces, in these states that are the result of these "nasty geopolitical realities". However, 100 years after the

¹⁵ BBC, A century of the Sykes Picot, the agreement that created Syria and Iraq and triggered a hundred years of resentment, 17 May 2017. Available at https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2016/05/160516_sykes_picot_mapa_historia_medio_oriente_ei_kurdos_aw

Sykes Picot agreement, and despite the self-serving narratives, it really does seem¹⁶ that there is no great eagerness to redraw the Middle Eastern borders, and that they are more consolidated¹⁷, albeit the regrets, than might appear to be the case.

¹⁸However, in this combination of tools to modify the balance of power - and consequently, either directly or subtly, the border - we must not forget the transport infrastructures themselves, the roads that provide permeability and interconnection - and in many cases, backbone and union - but which, depending on how they are designed, can generate differences, especially where there is a great asymmetry of capacities, of the balance of power between the nations whose borders are crossed by these infrastructures. In this line, and initiated in 2013 - in 2011 China became the world's second largest economic power - the so-called 'New Silk Road' project (One Belt One Road) aims, according to the Chinese narrative, to interconnect more than 60 countries on several continents to create a community of shared prosperity; while what China really wants, it is said, is nothing more than to generate a new tool of imperial domination on an almost planetary scale.

Even within nations themselves, however, within their own external borders, the possibility of creating new spaces, of generating new borders through a mutation in the relationship of forces between actors and groups living within the same country, is also sometimes raised. And that fact can take different forms, some more obvious, others less so.

In this regard, let us consider the so-called "no-go areas", spaces generally in the suburbs of large cities where the police and public services themselves can often only enter with great difficulty, and where the laws of the nation are not really enforced, making them almost autonomous and separate spaces. In Paris, for example, there is a mobile phone application¹⁹that tells you that you are in the vicinity of one of the areas - close to the "border" - where you are at high risk of a security mishap.

¹⁶ MILLER, James, Why Islamic State militants care so much about Sykes-Picot, Radio Free Europe, 16 May 2016. Available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/why-islamic-state-cares-so-much-about-sykes-picot/27738467.html>

¹⁷ The Washington Post, Is this the end of Sykes-Picot, 20 May 2014. Available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/05/20/is-this-the-end-of-sykes-picot/>

¹⁸ OutlookIndia, One Belt One Road a tool in China's imperialistic plan. How can India wean away other states, 14 May 2017. Available at <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/one-belt-one-road-a-tool-in-chinas-imperialistic-plan-how-can-india-wean-away-ot/298889>

¹⁹ INFOBAE, In Paris, the use of the "no-go zone" app to avoid areas where Sharia law is in force is growing, 7 July 2017. Available at <https://www.infobae.com/america/mundo/2017/07/07/en-paris-crece-el-uso-de-la-app-no-go-zonepara-evitar-zonas-donde-rige-la-sharia/>

In France (and on a different scale in several European nations), the situation has reached such a level of concern and complexity that in 2021 senior French security-related officials warned of the risk of France's disintegration, stating that "(...) there cannot and must not be any town or district where the laws of the Republic do not apply"²⁰. Recently, in July 2023, riots of such intensity broke out in several French cities that thousands of police and elite units of the French army were mobilised to contain the outbursts of violence, which far surpassed the great wave of riots in 2005. Among other issues, the possibility of a situation of this kind arises because rioters and violent people "(...) understand no other code than the law of the strongest"²¹.

With force - in the broad sense of the word - rules are changed and borders are changed; a new balance of power within a nation generates, can generate, the appearance of new borders when the state is not capable of exercising the legitimate monopoly of violence throughout its territory. From there it is just one step to feudalisation (and a "no-go zone" is nothing more than a fiefdom where not "the government" but "Lord X" rules), the nation-state gradually weakened, and from there it is only a few steps to a failed, or semi-failed state. Making allowance for the obvious differences in capabilities, this is the path that has been followed in the Sahel²², and which has exponentially accelerated the extremely complex situation in which this vast African territory finds itself, enabling the operation of terrorist groups, organised crime and foreign powers.

It seems, then, that borders are not only those scars of the past, they are not only that relationship of forces existing at a given moment, but are things that in many cases are under revision, and often in a traumatic way... in the 21st century, in a global world, are we seeing a return to apparently already resolved disputes?

²⁰ La Gaceta, The open letter from the French military: "disintegration alongside Islamism leads to the secession of many parts of the nation" 27 April 2021. Available at <https://gaceta.es/europa/la-carta-integrade-los-militares-franceses-la-desintegracion-junto-al-islamismo-lleva-a-la-secesion-de-muchas-partes-de-la-nacion-20210427-1436/>

²¹ El Mundo, Riots in France: "This crisis is 10 times more virulent than that of 2005", 2 July 2023. Available at <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2023/07/01/64a073e0e4d4d8d7728b45ef.html>

²² SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro, Siglo XXI...¿y el Sahel yendo hacia la Edad Media?, Documento de Análisis 29/2022, Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 4 May 2022. Available at https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2022/DIEEEA29_2022_PEDSAN_Sahel.pdf

Global world... Borders, wounds of the present!

In the 21st century, in a global world, we have to some degree returned to the localist and "nationalist" narrative. In this regard, the borders of states that divide nations, populations with ethnic, cultural and religious affinities, simply divide these human groups, especially when the borders have been imposed and are not even scars of history from centuries-long wars and conflicts on the ground, but have appeared by the designs of superior powers or forces at an office table. The arguments, both own and sometimes others', to deny or question the validity of these borders are ongoing, given the existence of "divided nations" and "multinational states",²³ in what, despite sometimes being justified, can appear to be nothing more than the longing for the "ethnically pure state"... which has brought so many tragedies to humanity."

In this regard, and as a paradigm of this situation, Africa's borders are often drawn with straight lines responding to imperial interests, without considering populations or realities on the ground²⁴, and it is argued - obviously with a degree of veracity - that this drawing of borders is a source of problems and conflicts. Having said that, it must not be forgotten that after the independence of most African nations in the 1960s, at the Cairo Conference, and despite reaffirming that the borders of these new nations were artificial and separated communities and peoples, these new countries decided not to move them, something that they could have agreed to do in the exercise of their sovereignty.

As the Kenyan ambassador to the UN Security Council recently (21 February 2022) pointed out²⁵ (on the occasion of the tensions between Ukraine and Russia, which would lead to war a few days later), the reason for this decision not to change borders was that creating new states in Africa on the basis of ethnic, racial or religious homogeneity would have led to the outbreak of bloody wars that would still be being fought today, and instead there was a need to move towards economic, political and legal integration on the

²³ On these concepts KNIGHT, Katelin and ROMANO, David, Nations across borders, Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies, 15 September 2022. Available at <https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-638?rskey=x1fHY3&result=8>

²⁴ CEAMANOS LLORENS, Roberto, El reparto de África: de la conferencia de Berlín a los conflictos actuales, Los Libros de la Catarata, Madrid, 2022.

²⁵ The Standard, Amb. Martin Kimani's full speech on Russia-Ukraine tension, 22 February 2022. Available at <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/national/article/2001438419/amb-martin-kimanis-full-speech-on-russia-ukraine-tension>

continent rather than create self-centred nations with dangerous nostalgia. Although, for many reasons beyond the scope of this paper, the situation has been far from idyllic - not least because of continued external interference in the continent - the exercise of realism and common sense of those leaders should not be forgotten.

Furthering the intention to advance integration,²⁶ solutions have been proposed that focus on increasing cross-border cultural and socio-economic exchange networks, especially considering that the borders of many African states are weak and very porous, and that they largely respond to this plurinational reality.

Furthermore, in a globalised world, where millions of people have migrated and settled in other countries, and where large pockets of diasporas constitute relevant actors both in their country of origin and in their host country - and with all the nuances one might wish to make to the concept of "nation" - is it really feasible to find "ethnically pure" states?

"Rectilinear" borders do not only exist in Africa. Across the Atlantic, and leaving aside the coasts, the external and internal borders between the states that make up the US are essentially straight lines drawn on a map²⁷ - lines that, to a large extent, reflect the victory of the ideal over the concrete, of westward advance and colonisation, and of Cartesian order versus chaos on the ground, beyond other considerations. The "Manifest Destiny" made cartography.

And so the borders of the US states were artificially drawn - after expelling and annihilating the native inhabitants in most cases - and, in this era of change, even in a country often perceived as a model of unity, there are now movements seeking to redefine the borders. For example, there is a call for the immense California to be divided into six, or perhaps three, differentiated states and, among other proposals, the secession of part of Colorado and its potential annexation to Wyoming²⁸ on the allegation that changes in population densities and the different economic activities that have developed over the decades and years have generated an asymmetry that makes these borders obsolete - aside from the fact that the political representation in some of the chambers of government does not correspond to reality or to the specific weight of these territories. In

²⁶ SASAOKA, Yuichi, SUMO TAYO, Aimé and UESU, Sayoko, Perspectives on the state borders in globalized Africa, Routledge, New York, 2022.

²⁷ SIMON, Ed, Why are U.S. borders straight lines?, 20 October 2018. Available at <https://daily.jstor.org/why-are-u-s-borders-straight-lines/>

²⁸ MCKEN, Ryan, The borders between US states are obsolete, 5 January 2023, Mises Institute. Available at <https://mises.org/wire/borders-between-us-states-are-obsolete>

the end, it seems that these proposals are still nothing more than an attempt at change due to a new correlation of forces (internal to the nation), understood in a broad sense. Redrawing borders according to the mutations of populations seems to be a relatively novel idea, but it is in fact based on approaches from the 19th century, when nationalism emerged, and from which Wilson drew his fourteen points; not forgetting that the Millet of the Ottoman Empire²⁹ and Lebanon today - where the political and social order is based on the country's different confessionals (communities)³⁰- largely respond to this vision. The force of events reminds us that the Ottoman Empire is gone, and that Lebanon, that wonderful country once called "the Switzerland of the East", is in permanent crisis. More novel (albeit also based on claims already made in the past) is a proposal to redefine borders in the US on the basis of the environment³¹, on the reality of the nature of the terrain and existing resources - especially water resources - so that the divisions are more functional, and so that the political reality corresponds more accurately to the reality on the ground, as opposed to on the basis of lines drawn on a table without regard to other considerations. It is an approach that has echoes today considering the impact that climate change has and will have. However, the current reality is that the different countries have increasingly shared interests and mutual influence is growing in this global world, the common threats -climate change, terrorism, pandemics, etc.- having no understanding of borders or limits, but instead benefiting from them because of the unequal response on either side, thereby highlighting the urgent need to unite to face these risks and challenges. Yet contrarily, it seems that in this stage that will perhaps be "remembered in the future as the adolescence of humanity"³², it is forgotten that the different "isms" that tend to fracture the territories do not constitute the best way to achieve a better world.

²⁹ AVIV, Efrat, Millet System in the Ottoman Empire, Oxford Bibliographies, 28 November 2016. Available at <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780195390155/obo-9780195390155-0231.xml>

³⁰ SÁNCHEZ HERRAÉZ, Pedro and RODRIGUEZ BARRIGÓN, Juan Manuel, El conflicto del Líbano, Conflictos Internacionales Contemporáneos número 11, Madrid, 2008, page 22.

³¹ DILLARD, George, What if state borders made environmental sense, Climate Conscious, 30 April 2021. Available at <https://medium.com/climate-conscious/what-if-state-borders-made-environmental-sense-584b90e78e1b>

³² Diario 16plus, Borders are the scars of the world, 15 October 2017. Available at <https://diario16plus.com/las-fronteras-las-cicatrices-del-mundo/>

Attempts to change borders are nevertheless increasing, although it is well known - at least by leaders - and there is a solid basis in history to support that these changes are almost always traumatic, generating conflicts and disputes and, in many cases, wars. They generate new wounds on the skin of the planet, when apparently the globalising trend was towards a gradual reduction of the scars.

As Josep Borrell points out,³³ "What are borders? Borders are the scars that history has left etched into the skin of the earth. Engraved in blood and fire. Let's not raise any more borders, because we have had to suffer enough pain to get here".

The border, which marks and defines limits at all levels - political, economic, security, etc. - is much more than a line on a map, a line in the sand - or in the water. And their modification or fracture, whether due to endogenous or exogenous causes, generates a series of problems and added derivatives which are always very complex to quantify and assess in their fair measure, but which undoubtedly constitute sources of conflict. And even after the new borders have been established, the embers and differences continue. As a simple example, suffice it to recall how after the disappearance of Yugoslavia there was a fierce - and largely unfinished - struggle over "its inheritance", an inheritance understood not only in terms of the distribution of assets, debt, armed forces, etc., but also in terms of apparently minor issues - but which are not, since they help to materialise the "greatness" of a country - such as awards, Olympic medals, etc. Although Serbia remained the heir of Yugoslavia (in collective matters, such as trophies of the Yugoslav football team³⁴), in individual matters there are still many problems... and much nostalgia too, such as when³⁵ it was pointed out that the sum of the medals of the nations of the former Yugoslavia in the Tokyo games gave a higher result than that of many great nations.

³³ CL, Josep Borrell: "Borders are the scars that history has left pomegranates on the skin of the earth", 8 October 2017. Available at <https://confilegal.com/20171008-josep-borrell-las-fronteras-las-cicatrices-la-historia-ha-dejado-grabadas-la-piel-la-tierra/>

³⁴ AP, Croatia surpasses great Yugoslav teams of the past, 13 July 2018. Available at <https://apnews.com/63d034871d274ad89ba6ffb6ecc76e1c>

³⁵ Slobodenpecat, The countries of the former Yugoslavia have more Olympic medals than superpowers such as Great Britain, Germany, France... Available at <https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/en/zemjite-od-poraneshna-jugoslavija-imaat-povekje-medali-na-oi-od-velesili-kako-velika-britanija-germanija-francija/>

Decades later, and with these brand-new borders in place, they remain wounds in the present, because the aftermath of that wound is still fresh, and not only on the two sides. By way of example, the awarding of the Nobel Prize for literature to Austrian Peter Handke, who is still accused by part of the intellectual community of not having demonised Serbia during the wars of Yugoslavia's disintegration - as was the tone of the majority of the narrative of the time - has generated such a level³⁶ of acts of boycott and rejection of the nomination that, as an article³⁷ points out, "the wounds have been reopened"... and all this with no-one disputing his literary merits. Yesterday's scars, and even new and much more recent ones, still hurt and are still more or less open wounds today³⁸.

Likewise, there has been powerful open debate on the return of the cultural heritage of former colonies - which have now become countries - sent to the metropolis years ago, including the case of the Benin bronzes³⁹... should it be the states, with their "arbitrary" colonial borders, that receive this return, or should it be the descendants of the native cultures, descendants who are often spread over several states?

Whatever the case may be, on a planet in the midst of an era of competition and where history is (often) forgotten or manipulated outright, it seems that the time has come to question the scars and open (as many as necessary?) new wounds.

³⁶ Millennium, Bosnian women protest against Nobel for writer Peter Handker, 5 November 2019. Available at <https://www.milenio.com/cultura/literatura/peter-handke-mujeres-protestan-entrega-premio-nobel> | El País, A Swedish academic boycotts the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Peter Handke, 6 December 2019. Available at https://elpais.com/cultura/2019/12/06/actualidad/1575632356_556451.html | DW, Kosovo declares Nobel laureate Peter Handke "persona non grata", 11 December 2019. Available at <https://www.dw.com/es/kosovo-declara-al-nobel-de-literatura-peter-handke-persona-non-grata/a-51634748>

³⁷ While there are some inaccuracies in the article, especially regarding the political process of how Yugoslavia disintegrated, the rest of the information given is interesting. COSOVSKI, Agustín, Handke y las guerras en la ex Yugoslavia: una herida que vuelve a abrirse después del Nobel, Infobae, 12 October 2019. Available at <https://www.infobae.com/america/cultura/2019/10/12/handke-y-las-guerras-en-la-ex-yugoslavia-una-herida-que-vuelve-a-abrirse-despues-del-nobel/>

³⁸ In this regard, the documentary "Once brothers and enemies" ("Once brothers" is its original title, 2010), which narrates the events between two Yugoslavian basketball stars, Drazen Petrovic (Croatian) and Vlade Divac (Serbian), during the war of Yugoslavia's decomposition, is both illustrative and moving. The documentary is available online on various platforms, and is regularly broadcast on television.

³⁹ DW, Stolen and returned, 14 July 2023. Available at <https://www.dw.com/es/robado-y-devuelto-la-restituci%C3%B3n-del-arte-expoliado-en-la-mira-de-la-pol%C3%ADtica-mundial/a-66218806>

The more the merrier?

So-called "Balkanisation", the "dismemberment of a country into opposing communities or territories"⁴⁰, constituted the "solution" that the Directory of Powers, the group of powerful European nations that in the 19th century governed the destinies of a large part of the planet, used as a way of trying to avoid, or at least postpone, the problems generated by the social, political and economic mutations of the territories of the Balkan peninsula, an area in constant conflict and struggle for four empires (Ottoman, Russian, Austro-Hungarian and German), not to mention the active presence and action of the British and French empires. And when the situation became apparently unsustainable, and when tensions could potentially give rise to a war that would end up dragging these empires into conflict with each other - at times and places that were not desired by these great powers - the solution was precisely to create new spaces, new imitations of nation-states, based in most cases on criteria of "nationality", and thereby try to find a new kind of balance that would enable conflagration to be avoided, or at least postponed, for a more appropriate geopolitical moment.

But that, obviously, did not happen, and so the plethora of new territories, desirous for growth - critical mass is essential for national survival, and many of these new nations had little population and territory, and therefore little chance of being viable and sustainable - and for irredentism. The desire to incorporate groups of people who, rightly or wrongly, were claimed as their own and who continued to live outside "their true nation", outside "their borders", kept the drums of war beating, leading to wars and disputes between these new nations and generating constant ethnic cleansing - for I can only be sure "with my own", only the "ethnically pure" nation is valid - and the outbreak of the so-called Balkan wars in 1912-1913, aside from inducing - although it was probably inevitable - the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. It seems that balkanisation, the creation of a plethora of new borders and small nations, was therefore no guarantee of stability.

Nonetheless, the invention of borders and the creation of states as a geopolitical measure, under different arguments, has been a constant in history, often making terms such as buffers and buffer states simple artifices in the search, by creating new borders,

⁴⁰ Real Academia Española, Diccionario de la lengua española, Edición del tricentenario actualización 2022 "Balcanización". Available at <https://dle.rae.es/balcanizaci%C3%B3n?m=form>

for their own security and/or the blocking of access to rival spaces and resources that could give them a competitive advantage. During the so-called "Great Game" in the 19th and 20th centuries - although the geopolitics of the inter-war period and the Cold War (just remember the theory of containment) were very similar - between the Russian Empire, a land power in constant search of an outlet to warm seas, and the British Empire, a maritime power par excellence trying to deny Russia access to the sea, proxy wars, the creation of buffer states (such as Afghanistan or Albania, among others) and constant political and diplomatic intrigues were at the centre of much of the geopolitics of the planet. The full range of grand strategy tools and capabilities (political, diplomatic, informational, military, economic, etc.) were employed to create new borders - states - or to modify or fracture existing ones to achieve the geopolitical ends of these great powers. And has anything changed in the 21st century?⁴¹.

From the economic point of view - one of the true realities that covers the basic needs of human beings, and one that is also easily quantifiable - it should be pointed out that the economy was one of the essential driving forces for the unification of nations and of Europe itself: economy of scale, critical mass, markets, efficiency, are terms which, with little research, become evident as necessities to achieve an increase in economic capacity and, therefore - if there is a certain social justice - an improvement in the quality of life of citizens. And the creation of borders hampers and limits economic development. Fragmentation - it is insisted, all within certain margins - is bad for the economy of scale; and, to continue on this point, note⁴² that if fragmentation is very costly even in "normal" times, it becomes almost impossible to bear in times of today's great global challenges: wars, climate change, pandemics, and so on.

Let's take Kosovo, a "fabricated" proto-state, as an example. New borders have been erected where none existed before... and? After more than two decades of (illegitimate) war, conflict, disorder, ethnic cleansing, death and chaos, and after billions and billions of euros have been invested by the international community after having created a situation

⁴¹ 21st century: ¿el retorno a la lucha por el Rimland?, Analysis Paper 12/2021, Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, 17 March 2021. Available at https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2021/DIEEEA12_2021_PEDSAN_Rimland.pdf

⁴² GEORGIEVA, Kristalina, The price of fragmentation, Foreign Affairs, 22 August 2023. Available at https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/price-fragmentation-global-economy-shock?utm_medium=promo_email&utm_source=special_send&utm_campaign=PROM_Aug23-camp1-promall&utm_content=20230823&utm_term=EPPAZ003G1

that is certainly difficult to reverse, the question is is Kosovo a good place to live and does it provide opportunities for its inhabitants?⁴³.

And, retracing an already trodden path, Britain has left the EU in the so-called Brexit, with the argument that it will regain sovereignty and will be better off on its own. The reality is that new borders have appeared, including in Gibraltar, a British colony in Spain - the last colony in Europe - generating a multitude of problems and the installation of a hard border⁴⁴; and in Ireland, where to avoid the appearance of a physical border on the island and to properly manage the flow of people and goods, a protocol was signed⁴⁵ - which has applied since January 2021 - requiring negotiations and reforms to reach a new agreement to avoid the creation of a "hard border"⁴⁶, although the situation is far from being as comfortable and fluid as it was when it was a constituent part of the EU.

And not only are new "hard" borders appearing, with their associated problems, but in the UK a recent report⁴⁷ presented by former Prime Minister Tony Blair's think tank states that only 7% of citizens think that the post-Brexit situation is satisfactory in the medium term, and that the majority of the population would like to return to the EU. The (re)creation of a (new) frontier, the retracing of the path that had been cleared with so much hard work and dedication, has not meant more wealth or stability for the population, but quite the contrary.

In fact, an unstoppable fracture process can begin in the search for a better quality of life. In the maelstrom of reconfigurations and changes, of modifications or of the consideration of these as possible, "irredentist" territories - spaces that generate territorial claims based on cultural, linguistic or ethnic affinities⁴⁸- disputed areas and human groups considering

⁴³ In this regard, SÁNCHEZ HERRAÉZ, Pedro, Kosovo year 10, Opinion Paper 21/2018, Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, 27 February 2018. Available at https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2018/DIEEEO21-2018_Kosovo_PSH.pdf

⁴⁴ RTVE, Si no hay acuerdo, Gibraltar será frontera dura de la UE, 29 December 2020. Available at <https://www.rtve.es/play/audios/las-mananas-de-rne-con-inigo-alfonso-gonzalez-laya-acuerdo-gibraltar-frontera-dura/5747967/>

⁴⁵ European Council, How the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland works. Available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/es/policies/eu-relations-with-the-united-kingdom/the-eu-uk-withdrawal-agreement/the-protocol-on-ireland-and-northern-ireland-explained/#when>

⁴⁶ BBC, UK and EU reach agreement on Northern Ireland border: why it was the "last big hurdle" to sealing Brexit, 27 February 2023. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-64784523>

⁴⁷ Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, Moving forward: the path to a better post-Brexit relationship between the UK and the EU, 22 June 2023. Available at <https://www.institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/moving-forward-path-to-better-post-brexit-relationship-between-uk-eu>

⁴⁸ ARANCÓN, Fernando, Irredentismo en Europa: a la busca de un gran país, El Orden Mundial, 8 September 2014. Available at https://elordenmundial.com/irredentismo-en-europa-en-busca-de-un-gran-pais/?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F

other more profitable options for life are appearing everywhere. Let's take, for example, the Orkney Islands, a small archipelago less than 20 kilometres off the north coast of Scotland, who are considering applying to become part of Norway, of which they were part until 1472; and although cultural affinities are claimed, note that the main argument⁴⁹ is the financial neglect to which they are subjected by the British and Scottish governments.

In the midst of an era of geopolitical reconfiguration, it seems that some are taking advantage of the saying "when the waters are troubled, the fishermen take advantage" - although the fishermen are but a few and never the population - forgetting the saying "in times of trouble, make no new moves". And also forgetting the adage "divide and rule".

Conclusion?

Despite cosmopolitanism, the feeling, especially in today's liquid societies, that there are issues that are no longer as important, such as borders - especially in the West, in societies with a certain level of wealth and development in which travelling around the world has become very common and where, in the case of the EU and for Europeans, there is a feeling, thanks to the euro and the few restrictions on mobility, of this perception of "open spaces" - the truth is that this does not strictly correspond to reality.

In being "increasingly of the world", and also by a simple reflex of trying to avoid losing identity and subsuming oneself in an over-homogenising global identity, one is also "increasingly of one's people", which can be instrumentalised to generate new borders, new future scars resulting from the wounds generated in the conflicts of the present... and for which, in many cases, one must simply actively work to change the relationship of forces.

And all this without forgetting that, in the midst of a geopolitical reconfiguration process such as the one currently shaking the planet, the need arises for powers and major actors to inflict wounds on others - whether directly, by proxy or covertly - in order to redraw the map of scars at their convenience. And if the affected populations believe that they are really achieving "the objectives of their people"... then so much the better!

⁴⁹ ABC, Orkney Islands consider leaving UK and joining Norway, 5 July 2023. Available at <https://www.abc.es/internacional/islas-orcadas-considera-abandonar-reino-unido-unirse-20230705130433-nt.html>

What is certain is that borders, those lines painted on the map, are still scars reflecting a certain relationship of forces from the past, but after decades of progress in integration, in the attempt to open more and more doors and more spaces of interconnection... is it really the smartest thing to do, especially at this time, to "re-divide"? Is it the smart thing to do to make the scars of the past also the wounds in the present?

Probably not. But between passion and reason there is usually no balance - quite the contrary. And, decades later, looking at the scars that mark us and, in many cases, hurt, we may feel both nostalgic for the times when we did not have them and when we were more whole and fuller and, in most cases, ashamed to remember how we got them.

But that's all right, isn't it? (Un)reason is used and a narrative of (self-) conviction is generated... until the next generation and/or geopolitical reconfiguration?

*Pedro Sánchez Herráez**

COL. ET. INF. DEM

PhD in Peace and International Security

IEEE Analyst