

Supranationalism and Devolution in a Changing World

Political boundaries structure human affairs and understandings. Political boundaries of significance exist both 'above' and 'below' the state. 'Below' the state boundaries consist of municipalities (local self-government) and special districts, counties, States, provinces, voting districts, to the state itself. For 'above' the state, boundaries such as the former Iron Curtain, the current boundary between NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and non-NATO states, or the boundaries that have been drawn through the world's oceans to demarcate zones of control have been devised.

Influences of Boundaries on Identity, Interaction, and Exchange

Borderlands have often been the locale of major folk cultural achievements. A line drawn in various ways, a border marks the place where adjacent jurisdictions meet. This combined conjunction and separation of national laws and customs creates a zone in which movements of people and goods are greatly regulated, examined, discussed, and hidden. Commerce attains a higher importance in border society as does dialogue about the identities of its peoples. Smuggling, the myriad signs in border towns, legal and illegal immigration, and the use of unneighborly names between neighbors are parts of this picture of accentuated concern with the trade in goods and the flow of people.

The border is an environment of opportunity. Individuals find work enforcing or avoiding the laws that regulate movement. Companies use national differences in labor and environmental regulations to pursue their advantage. Border society thrives on difference, and people and institutions come there to exploit niches in its environment. Borders are artifacts of history and are subject to change over time. When borders shift, lands and peoples are subjected to different sets of rules; this creates opportunities for exploitation, conditions of hardship, and motivations for revolt.

An approach to describing a society constructed by difference is necessarily many-voiced. Rather than a central, authoritative perspective, we strive for a de-centered point of view, one with many authoritative speakers.

Supranationalism

The phenomenon of interstate cooperation is quite old. In ancient Greece, city-states formed leagues to protect and promote mutual benefits. This practice was imitated many centuries later by the cities of Germany's Zollverein. But the degree to which this idea has taken root in the more modern world is unprecedented. The twentieth century has witnessed the establishment of numerous international associations in political, economic, cultural, and military spheres, giving rise to the term **supranationalism** (technically, the efforts by three or more states to forge

associations for mutual benefit and in pursuit of shared goals).

Supranational unions range from global organizations such as the United Nations and its predecessor, the League of Nations, to regional associations such as the European Union. All signify the inadequacy of the state system as a framework for dealing with important issues and problems in the world in the twenty-first century. Today, there are more than 100 supranational organizations, counting subsidiaries. The more states participate in such multilateral associations, the less likely they are to act alone in pursuit of a self-interest that might put them at odds with neighbors.

League of Nations to United Nations

The modern beginnings of the supranational movement came with the conferences that followed the end of World War I. The concept of an international organization that would include all the states of the world led to the creation of the **League of Nations** in 1919. The league was born of a



worldwide desire to prevent future aggression, but the failure of the United States to join dealt the organization a severe blow. It collapsed in the chaos of the beginning of World War II, but it had spawned other organizations such as the Permanent Court of International Justice which would become the **International Court of Justice** located at The Hague in the Netherlands after World War II. It also initiated the first international negotiations on maritime boundaries and related aspects of the law of the sea.

The United Nations was formed at the end of World War II to foster international security and cooperation. Representation of countries in the United Nations has been more universal than it was in the League. In 2005, there are 191 member states with only a handful of states still not members. It is important to remember that the United Nations is not a world government; member states participate voluntarily but may agree to abide by specific UN decisions.

Among the functions of the United Nations is the imposition of international sanctions and mobilization of peacekeeping operations are the most high-profile. The sanctions imposed on Iraq following the Gulf War in 1991 had significant economic consequences for most Iraqis, producing a storm of protest across much of the Islamic world.

Peacekeeping has become a costly and controversial responsibility, with the UN active militarily in more than a dozen countries today. The organization's peacekeeping function provides major benefits to the international community. Since 1994, UN peacekeeping operations have

faced one of their most difficult challenges in the former Yugoslavia, where a civil war among Serbs, Croats, and Muslims, chiefly in Bosnia, long defied UN efforts to relieve the crisis. In Bosnia, in particular, the UN had difficulties in preventing massive bloodshed. The peacekeepers did manage to keep the conflicting parties at bay until U.S. diplomatic intervention, through the **Dayton Accords** in 1995, produced a revised map of Bosnia. Suspicion and hostility among Muslims, Serbs, and Croats persist, and resentment of refugees and political accommodation has continued to cause problems.



In 1991 the United Nations created the **Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO)**, which by 2002 had 51 members. Albanians in Greece, Basques in Spain, Palestinians in Israel, North Dakota's Lakota Nation, Tibetans under China's rule, and dozens of other peoples seek some sort of voice, and the UNPO provides this. It gives them a platform to be heard, and ensures that appeals from its members, applicants, and others are channeled to appropriate agencies.

Law of the Sea

Although the meaning of the term "**frontier**" has been debated, it generally connotes an area where borders are shifting and weak, and where peoples of different cultures or nationalities lay claim to the same area. Frontiers tend to come in the forms of territorial "cushions" like swamplands, impenetrable forests, wide deserts, mountain ranges, or river basins. The Amazon Basin (bordering between Brazil, Peru, Bolivia, Colombia and Venezuela) and Antarctica (with territory claimed by seven countries) are good examples of frontiers. Another important and highly contested frontier, the world's oceans, cause massive confusion and disputes.

National claims to waters (**territorial sea**) originated in Europe many centuries ago. Some suggested that the width of the offshore zone should be determined by the distance a shore-based cannon could fire a cannonball.

Through the League of Nations, the Soviet Union proposed an unheard-of 12 nautical miles, which would mean that many straits and bays could be closed off. Delimitation became a major issue as states expressed the need for protection against smuggling, pollution, and general security.

In 1945, before the newly formed UN could deal with this issue, President Truman specified that the U.S. would claim jurisdiction over the continental shelf and its contents would be limited to the region within the 600-foot isobath (line connecting points of equal depth). The **Truman Proclamation** also reconfirmed that the high seas above the continental shelf would remain open. Argentina, in 1946, claimed not only its wide continental shelf, but the waters lying above it. Many other claims were made and were contested by other countries.

The first United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS I) convened in 1958 and failed to completely resolve the issues of international waters. It wasn't until UNCLOS III, beginning in 1973 and ending in 1982, that 157 countries signed an agreement (the U.S. was one of four that didn't sign). The key provisions were the following:

The Territorial Sea: States were allowed to delimit their territorial seas up to 12 nautical miles (14 statute miles). State sovereignty extended over this zone, however, ships of other countries had the right of passage through these seas to keep them open for transit.

The Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ): States' economic rights were extended up to 200 nautical miles (over 230 statute miles). The coastal state has the right to control exploration and exploitation of all natural resources – fish, minerals, oil, etc.

Another provision stated the mineral resources below the high seas constituted a "common heritage of human kind," and their exploitation is subject to UN management. The purpose of this provision was to enable states without any coasts to derive some benefit from the Earth's maritime resources (the world's landlocked states are part of a UN group called the Geographically Disadvantaged States). This provision initially caused the U.S. not to ratify the agreement, however, after some modification the U.S. finally came to terms with it in 1994.

But what happens when countries lie closer than 400 nautical miles to each other so neighbors can have the full 200-mile EEZ? In such instances (e.g., Caribbean, North, Baltic, and Mediterranean Seas) the **median-line principle** takes effect. States on opposite coasts divide the waters separating them. The South China Sea, in particular, is a problematic maritime region. On the map, the black line

shows China's share based on its possession of numerous small islands. The red line represents China's published claims to the region. A key geographic problem is the Spratly Islands, which are potentially rich in oil and are claimed by China and five other states. This type of problem, however, is the exception, not the rule.



Germany is by far the most populous and economically dominant state within the EU. Another issue related to this deals with expansion. Under the rules of the EU the richer states must subsidize (provide a fixed amount of money to) the poorer ones; therefore the entry of Eastern European states or even Turkey will add a burden to the wealthier members (Germany).



Regional Multinational Unions

The global manifestation of international cooperation is most strongly expressed at the regional level. States have begun to join together to further their political ideologies, economic objectives, and military, cultural, and strategic goals. In 2001 there were more than 60 **multinational unions** internationally active corporations that can strongly influence the economic and political affairs of the countries they operate in). Among the many regional multinational associations, the **European Union (EU)** is the most complex and far reaching. The origin of the EU began with **Benelux**, a trade union formed by Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg before the end of World War II. The three states eliminated tariffs, trade quotas, and licenses between them. This union later joined the European Economic Community (the EEC, or the Common Market) in 1958, along with France, Italy, and West Germany. Today, 12 of the 15 member states of the EU have adopted the Euro as their uniform monetary unit. Other states are likely to join the EU within a decade.

The EU is far from a "United States of Europe" in that there is such diversity with respect to their history and cultures. Integration is often a painful process. For example, agricultural practices vary from country to country, but the EU must have a general policy to have real meaning. Another concern is the maintenance of a balance of power.

The EU has facilitated the development of cross-border cooperation regions that are reshaping the spatial parameters of Europe's political and social order. More broadly, discussing the impetus behind European integration, and the geographical circumstances that facilitated that impetus (e.g., economic complementarities, commonalities of political and economic systems, an infrastructure and settlement pattern facilitating integration) allows students to understand the context of the European integration initiative and to compare and contrast it with regional integration initiatives in other parts of the world.

The main motives for supranational cooperation are economic, for example the members of the **Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)** produce and export oil. This exemplifies an economic alliance. Along with economic prosperity, a shared military threat (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO] for example), appears to be equally strong in promoting international cooperation. The Warsaw Pact was organized in response to NATO, for example. The **African Union (AU)** is often described as a cultural alliance to promote shared goals and resolve disputes, but the AU also has clear political objectives. Another **cultural organization** with political overtones in the Arab League, a multinational alliance of Muslim states in North Africa and Southwest Asia.

Euroregions

Since the collapse of communism, the political geographic situation has fundamentally changed. Anxious for external investment and transnational cooperation, local authorities in Poland began actively pursuing cross-boundary cooperation. They soon succeeded in achieving "Euroregion" status for the transboundary region. Euroregions are formal entities designed to promote cooperation and reduce inequalities across international boundaries. The so-called Nysa Euroregion was created along the Polish-German-Czech border region in 1991. A coordinated strategy has developed in Nysa to attract investment and encourage economic development. The inhabitants of the region no longer see themselves as living in an area fundamentally fragmented by national boundaries. New institutions have emerged that link peoples and activities on different sides of the border, such as music competitions, sporting events, land-use planning, and historic preservation.

The Changing Nature of Sovereignty and the State

The state is the crucial building block in the global international framework, yet the world today is burdened by a weakening state system and an antiquated boundary framework. The state's weaknesses are underscored by the growing power of regions, provinces, States, and other internal entities to act independently of the national government. With the end of colonialism, the legacy of such decisions has produced devolution and conflict. Supranationalism may be a solution to at least some of these problems but the state system did not evolve quickly or painlessly and it is doubtful its successor, whatever that may be, will proceed more smoothly.

The concept of sovereignty itself is being questioned, as developments at a variety of different scales are undermining the state-territorial system. They range from the expanding scope of multinational corporate activity to the inability of some states to exert much control over the domestic economy in the face of international debt payments and the need to sustain the production of key cash crops for

external consumption (in peripheral regions like South America or Sub-Saharan Africa).

Forces of Devolution

Ours is a world of contradictions. At every turn we are reminded of the interconnections of nations, states, and regions, yet separatism and calls for autonomy are rampant. In the 21st century, we appear to be caught between the forces of division and unification.

Devolution, the disintegration of a state along regional lines, is occurring in a growing number of countries, old and young, large and small, wealthy and poor. States are the result of political-geographical evolution that may have spanned millennia (China) or centuries (many European states). Still others have evolved from colonial empires only a few decades ago, as in much of Africa. Revolution, civil war, and international conflict accompany the evolution of states. Even the oldest and apparently most stable states are vulnerable to a process that is the reverse of evolution, propelled by forces that divide and destabilize.

When a state's government joins a supranationalist union, it does so on behalf of all its people. However, minorities can feel disadvantaged, or even threatened. Paradoxically, then, supranationalism can result in stronger

centrifugal forces within states. For example, when the United Kingdom moved to join the European Union, some Scottish nationalists argued that Scotland would be disadvantaged. In 1997 the newly elected Labour Party gave the Scots (and the Welsh) the opportunity to vote - not for independence, but for greater autonomy, to be embodied in regional parliaments. As a result, some Scottish nationalists now see supranationalism as a positive development - offering an alternative political framework to work with (the EU), instead of only London. The Scottish development exemplifies one way in which ethnic groups display power.

Devolution results from many factors, and rarely is the process propelled by a single one, but the primary ones are *cultural*, *economic*, and *spatial*. Ethnic differences within states can threaten the territorial integrity of the state itself. **Ethnonationalism**, then, can be a fundamental force



promoting devolution. Most of the world's nearly 200 states are multicultural. Consider, for example, the Canadian province of Quebec. The concentration of French-speaking Canadians in this eastern region is a devolutionary force that poses a constant threat to Canada's stability. Another example of devolutionary forces at work is in the Basque area of northern Spain, and in the eastern province of Catalonia. Both areas have their own parliaments, but divisive pressures still exist - especially evident through recent violence from Basque separatists.

Devolutionary pressures have affected Belgium in the past. After the Congress of Vienna in 185, Belgium was united with the Netherlands to create a stronger state near France. However, linguistic and religious differences led to rioting and the eventual break-up of these two states. The people in the Netherlands mostly spoke Dutch and were generally Protestant. The people in Belgium mostly spoke French and were generally Catholic. A similar situation exists today in Belgium as the subcultures of the Flemish in the north (Dutch) and the Walloons in the south (French) contrast sharply in several ways. Belgium is still very much one country, but it is difficult to qualify it as one nation.



In Eastern Europe, Czechoslovakia succumbed to devolutionary pressures in 1989 after the fall of the "Iron Curtain." In an event called the "Velvet Revolution," Slovakia amiably split from the Czech Republic without a single shot being fired (it was called the Velvet Revolution because it was so smooth). Yugoslavia ("Land of the South Slavs"), however, was not so fortunate in its devolution. Thrown together after World War I, Yugoslavia was home to 7 major and at least 17 smaller ethnic and cultural groups. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Yugoslavia eventually devolved into Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, and Macedonia. Serbia and Montenegro is all that remains of Yugoslavia today. In 1995, the U.S. sponsored a conference in Dayton, Ohio, to redraw the boundaries of Bosnia after bitter fighting.

Ethnocultural differences play a significant role in the devolutionary pressures within Spain, but so does economics. Catalonia makes up only 6 percent of Spain's territory, but produces around 25 percent of all Spanish exports by value and 40 percent of its industrial exports.

Such economic strength lends weight to devolutionary demands based on ethnonationalism. During the 1990s a devolutionary movement arose in Brazil. Southerners complained their tax money was being misspent by the government on assistance in Amazonia. In Italy, the richer, industrialized North stands in sharp contrast to the poorer, agrarian south. These devolutionary pressures are nothing new - Austria-Hungary split up in 1918, partly because Austria was more industrial as compared to largely agrarian Hungary.

If devolutionary events have one feature in common, it is that they occur on the margins of states. Note that every one of the devolutionary-infected areas in Europe (shown on the map on the previous page) lies on a coast or a boundary. Distance, remoteness, and peripheral location are allies of devolution. In many cases the regions adjoin neighbors that may support separatist objectives. As stated previously, the basic reason for almost all devolutionary forces is territory under one guise or another.

Many islands are subject to devolutionary processes. France, often cited as a strong nation-state, is experiencing devolutionary problems on the island of Corsica. The United States faces its most serious threats of devolution on the island of Hawaii. Political entities situated in border zones between geopolitical power cores may become **gateway states**, absorbing and assimilating diverse cultures and traditions - and emerging as new entities, no longer dominated by one or the other. Hawaii, although very stable, is a candidate for this status.

Devolution of the Soviet Union

In most instances of devolution, the problem remains domestic; that is, it has little or no impact on the world at large. One notable exception is the devolution of the former Soviet Union by a powerful combination of political, cultural, and economic forces. When this occurred, the world was transformed. The former Soviet empire is left with a political-geographic legacy that will remain problematic for generations to come.

For nearly half a century the Soviet Union had been one of the world's two superpowers, so that, geopolitically, the world was bipolar. The Cold War pitted the Soviet Union against the United States, each side trying to hamper the

other against a dangerous background of nuclear weapons. Centrifugal forces in the multiethnic and economically troubled Soviet Union led to a weakening of Moscow's control over Eastern Europe. One of the most striking events occurred in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall (as well as the Eastern Bloc) leading to the reunification of Germany.

Even before the Soviet Union broke apart in 1991, leaders in newly-democratic Russia tried to replace the old Soviet framework with a new supranational entity called the **Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)**. On Christmas Day 1991, the Soviet flag flew no more, and the CIS was but a skeleton organization – unable to replace what had been a cohesive empire.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, as many as 25 million Russians actually found themselves outside of Russia's borders. Initially, many leaders in the new Russian government described the former Soviet sphere as the Russian **Near Abroad**, and implied the right to intervene if they were threatened. However, no threats materialized, and Russia was forced to deal with issues within its own borders. The most serious devolutionary pressures within Russia today are between the Caspian and Black Seas, where Chechen Muslim extremists have waged a violent campaign of secession. The Chechnyan capital, Groznyy, was almost totally demolished, and thousands of Russian troops and civilians have been killed.

Forces of Change

Devolution is the direct result of a vision of greater autonomy or independence for ethnic or cultural groups wishing to overcome real or perceived threats to their well-being or security. Other major transformations are also changing our world. **Globalization**, the expansion of economic, political, and cultural activities to a global scale, has produced a network that often has little to do with the map of the states of the world. States do provide the territorial foundation for these influences – international trade, popular culture (e.g., music, dress, fast food), information – but the state is losing its dominance.

The idea of **democracy** is found throughout the world, although practiced in many ways. In June, 1989, the communists in China killed scores of pro-democracy demonstrators in Tiananmen Square. Representative government has made little progress in the North African-Southwest Asian realm. Some African ruling elites see no contradiction in the term *one-party democracy*.

Revival of religion is a force in global affairs, such as the continuing diffusion of major faiths like Islam, and the renaissance of the Orthodox churches in the post-Soviet era. **Religious fundamentalism** has affected the entire world. Many Jews have been prompted to settle in contested territory due to Biblical passages. In the Sudan, the Islamic regime extended the severe *sharia* criminal laws to both Muslim and non-Muslim communities, causing a devolutionary conflict.

The State in the New World Order

During the early 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the **bipolar** world, there was optimistic talk of a New World Order, a world in which the balance of mutual opposition and nuclear terror between two superpowers would no longer determine the destinies of the states. The risks of nuclear war would recede and negotiation would replace confrontation. In reality, although states were more closely linked to each other than ever before, national self-interest still acted as a powerful centrifugal force.

The terrorist attack on the United States of America on September 11, 2001 provided a stark reminder of the growing importance of extrastate networks and organizations in the contemporary world. When Pearl Harbor was bombed, there was no question what that meant: war with Japan – and by extension Germany and Italy. In the wake of 9/11, however, the map of states was of little use in analyzing the situation. Afghanistan was deeply implicated, and the ruling regime at the time – the Taliban – aided and abetted the operation of the terrorists behind the attack. However, many Afghans and almost all world governments did not regard the extremist Taliban regime as legitimate. Al-Qaeda, the terrorist organization implicated in the attack, had members in dozens of locations and states. Afghanistan was invaded and liberated in 2002 by the United States, but Al-Qaeda (“the base”) still threatens the world with terrorism.



If a New World Order (as opposed to disorder) is to come into being, it must do so under multiple, and often conflicting, pressures. We are in the twenty-first century with a boundary system rooted in the nineteenth, which is a recipe for disaster. We have emerged into a **multipolar** world focused on at least four centers of gravity – the United States, a united Europe, a stable Russia, and a developing China. The flow of weapons, diffusion of nuclear arms, and the ongoing diffusion of nuclear technology also tend to destabilize the world. We live on a small, crowded, environmentally changing, economically disparate, politically unstable planet. To understand its geography is to marvel at its diversity, capacity, and continuity.