King's Research Portal

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Schofield, R. N. (2015). Back to the Barrier Function: Where Next for International Boundary and Territorial Disputes in Political Geography? *GEOGRAPHY*, 100(3), 133-143. [Geography Volume 100 Part 3 Autumn 2015].

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Back to the barrier function: where next for international boundary and territorial disputes in political geography?

Richard Schofield

ABSTRACT: *This article¹ takes a broad view in selectively tracing geography's coverage of international boundaries and territorial concerns from the (much-maligned) classical period at the turn of the twentieth century through to the vogue prisms of border studies and critical geopolitics that enliven the discipline today. The first section makes the point that international boundaries and the territorial reach of the state have remained very much in the media over the past two years – in Ukraine, Gaza, Iraq and Syria. Conscious of the somewhat troubled, deterministic legacy geography's traditional coverage of contestation over territory has provided, the discipline has pondered over how it might best re-evaluate the international boundary. To some degree, this has been achieved by refreshing ideas and conventional wisdoms that have largely stood the test of time. This article shows that there have always been aspects of merit in geography's coverage. It presents a series of case studies throughout the world to demonstrate that the time has come for the discipline to contribute more fully to the study of inter-state disputes over boundaries and territories – including those in the maritime realm.*

Generalised themes and historical precedents

As ever with international boundaries, different things are happening at different speeds in different places. On the basis of the recent securitisation of a few prominent state territorial limits following the events of 11 September 2001 in the US (hereafter 9/11), and their visually dramatic fortification, it is possible to argue that the international boundary is reverting to one of its traditional key functions: that of defensive barrier (see the example of Israel's wall in Figure 1). Although this may not be a general phenomenon, it is timely to ask whether this preoccupation will mark a watershed for the manner in which geography has covered international boundaries, as opposed to borders more generally. In some ways, the discipline has always reacted to perceived structural change or developments on a global (or, perhaps more accurately, Eurocentric) scale in what it has had to say about inter-state limits. Let's now illustrate such a tendency with some historical perspective.

It has to be said that the 'classical period' of academic writing from the 1890s followed the most intensive period of boundary-drawing ever witnessed with the territorial expansion of the European colonial powers during the late nineteenth century. At that time, pioneering academics were guided by a hugely deterministic interpretation of geography and state power, while many architects of fledgling territorial frameworks in colonial regions endeavoured to justify their handiwork retrospectively, most notably before the First World War.

Within Europe, it was only with the frozen territorial stability of the Cold War era that a decisive change in emphasis of geographical coverage arrived. Introduced in the 1960s, the borderland studies approach aimed to gauge the effect of international boundaries on the people and regions they affected on a daily basis – in short, humanising their study (Rumley and Minghi, 1991). The focus on the operative width of borderlands, the degree of trans-boundary interactions and the affiliations of border communities was welcome. However, it

Back to the barrier function

Figure 1: Continuity and change – old and new: Israel's security fence near Bethlehem, September 2005. Photo: © Richard Schofield.

was obviously premised on a stable European territorial order, for a very different picture pertained outside Europe.

To some, the end of the Cold War signalled a new world order in which the role and purpose of the international boundary was increasingly open to question. Initially, aspects of coverage took on a rather crude disposition, with idealistic forecasts that boundaries might effectively disappear. These inadequacies were counterbalanced by intelligent (and deservedly) influential studies that questioned whether the state now continued to define the operative spatial extent of sovereignty in the mid-1990s. By the end of the last millennium,

more rounded and nuanced commentaries were imaginatively addressing themes of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation. Paralleling this was a discussion of whether seemingly intractable disputes might be best dealt with by moving towards either shared or separate spaces (Newman, 2006).

To date, we have not seen the critical mass of writing to suggest that a preoccupation with state security post 9/11 constitutes a coherent new bloc of geographical analysis. Yet, the expectancy of certain policy-makers is that we ought to be moving towards 'smart' boundaries, i.e. ones that can be managed to perform the filter function of

Figure 2: Here at Qalundiyah, near Ramallah, Israel's security fence widens to constitute a zonal feature, September 2005. Photo: © Richard Schofield.

distinguishing between the benign and hostile flows that cross them, seems a huge ask. It does, however, highlight the challenge that confronts international boundary management and borderland populations – particularly in regions that are just emerging from, or still locked in, conflict. Allowing borderlands to breathe and develop economically as trans-boundary regions requires an opening of borders, while we are often told that maintaining state security often involves the opposite (Figure 2). Hence, at international boundaries – and again in broad generalised terms – we always have a potentially uneasy clash between those two great lobbies in the West: the free trade movement and the defence establishment.

International boundaries in contemporary media

It is decidedly traditional concerns that lie behind a uniformly depressing series of recent media headlines surrounding the borderlands of Gaza, Syria and Ukraine during 2014–15 – namely, the alignment, status and permeability of international boundaries and the territorial reach of the state. As images of profound human suffering and misery continue to define these territorial disputes visually, state responses to these established regional challenges are generally tried and tested. Yet the processes unleashed in consequence – including spatially – are increasingly much less predictable. Let us now briefly illustrate such a point.

Crimea and eastern Ukraine 2014

Whatever the background and motivations, the rights, wrongs and legalities, Russia's annexation of (Ukrainian) Crimea in February 2014 can be seen as a delayed consequence of the collapse of empire. Here the fate of a key territorial node had not been properly broached in the post-Soviet era. The continued rebellion in eastern Ukraine in the period since reconstitutes only too vividly the arguments about extended ethnographic national territories – the basis by which Europe's boundaries were drawn (and/or redrawn) following the First World War (1914–18).

Gaza 2014

Israel's most recent intervention in Gaza during the summer of 2014 was apparently premised (like earlier ones) on the unlikely goal of sealing the former's international boundaries against missile attack from surrounding territories. Such incursions, as with the erection of Israel's security

wall and fence system in and around the West Bank (see Figures 1 and 2), address the concern of rendering borders less permeable to the threat from the outside. If putting up walls has been part of this strategy, then unilaterally demilitarising (or – in the instance of Gaza – trying partially to eradicate) hostile borderland spaces on the other side is an established state practice. Here, Israel's effective creation of a buffer zone in southern Lebanon during the 1970s as, effectively, an autonomous Lebanese space under a compliant militia comes to mind.

Syria 2015

Syria's protracted civil war over the last four years (2011–15), allied with the general marginalisation of the Iraqi north-west from that country's own post-conflict reconstruction effort over the last decade has resulted in a contiguous collapse of state authority centred round the *Jazirah* (the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers). In many ways, the *Jazirah* existed as a trans-boundary region (albeit a sparsely-populated one) long before Britain and France decided to cut a boundary through the desert in 1920 to give shape to the general scheme they had agreed four years earlier for partition of the (Ottoman) eastern Mediterranean and Mesopotamia with the Sykes-Picot arrangements of 1916 (Schofield, 2008). While the Islamic State's current success in carving out a territory for its proclaimed caliphate may be only temporary, its spatial character represents a challenge wholly different from Russia's annexation of Crimea (above) for our current system of territorially-defined states. What we have on the ground in the early summer of 2015, at least in territorial terms, is akin to a trans-boundary borderland (would be) state – centred upon areas of the Iraqi and Syrian states that were typically regarded as marginal.

Geography's 'thing': international boundaries

Geography has never reflected happily or easily upon its history of covering international boundaries. Despite the dense acreage of trees devoted to the study of boundary evolution and territorial disputes in the tomes and journals of the classical geopolitical era, the discipline's collective historic output is often seen as hugely deterministic and subjective. It would soon be regarded as a theory-free zone in which practitioners often wrote self-justifying narratives and one which preferred to concentrate on the dramatic over the routine. It is only within the last couple of decades that geography has

Back to the barrier function

Back to the barrier function

rediscovered its confidence in covering boundaries, showcased in the rise of border studies and its perceptive new critiques of the bounding and bordering processes (Paasi, 1998; van Houtum, 2005). In many ways a welcome application of critical geopolitics (O'Tuathail, 2008), but also a consequence of the ascent of critical studies within the social sciences more generally, contemporary border studies have been much lauded within geography for their theoretical rigour, adroit handling of the workings of power and strong commitment to ethics and social justice (see Wilson and Hastings, 2012). Working at a variety of scales and levels of encounter, researchers have built upon established geographic concerns to gauge how borders are confronted, experienced and negotiated. Writers, such as Parker and Vaughan-Williams (2012), have also begun to theorise their actual production in spatial terms. A central concern here has been to better understand not only how distinct spaces are actually produced by borders, but also the converse, to appreciate how the management of space (particularly in the instance of contested regional resource environments) creates new, operative borders (see e.g. Strandsbjerg, 2012).

When launching the journal *Geopolitics* (and *International Boundaries* as it was then called) in 1996, frankly, I for one, could not foresee that geographic coverage of boundaries and territory would be reinvigorated as much as it has been in the ensuing two decades or adopt the direction it has taken. Above all, border studies now counts among its successes the development of an explicitly non-state-centric approach – seemingly taking its cue from Etienne Balibar's (2002) elaboration of the theme that 'borders are everywhere'. Where there has been renewed concentration on the international boundary, it often concerns the dramatic and symbolic confrontation between state power and human movement in the context of migration. And the media has never been slow to showcase the striking visual of this 'border spectacle' (de Genova, 2012) in representing the supposed threat from the outside.

Yet, the very sophistication of border studies often contrasts with the essential crudity of continuing state actions over territory and boundaries – in addition to the three instances discussed earlier is China's highly visible naval power posturing in the East China Sea over the last 18 months. For all of its real advances and successes, is the analytical lens of border studies capable of (or even interested in) focusing upon inter-state disputes? In the late 1990s, concerns were voiced over the prospect that geography's history of covering

international boundaries and their contestation, might get lost in the direction border studies now seemed to be moving (Blake, 2000). A decade or so back, it was also postulated (deliberately mischievously, if perhaps validly) that within geography an *us* (critical border studies) and *them* (more traditional boundary studies) had already developed. Each of these camps had different constituencies with their own audiences, journals and conferences (van Houtum, 2005). The premise of critical geopolitics was also now being increasingly contested (Kelly, 2006) *inter alia*, for its methodological reliance on the imprecisions of discourse (Muller, 2013) and its initial preoccupation with élite rather than more popular everyday concerns (Thrift, 2008). Just as critical geopolitics would subsequently try to grapple with similar charges, a number of geographers have responded to observations that the sub-discipline of border studies might be 'doing the international boundary better'. In recent years, Nick Megoran (2012) has called for fuller acknowledgement of the role of ethnography and (where appropriate) history. Harald Bauder (2011) perceives a need for greater determination in the forging of unitary approaches that are more inclusive of traditional and modern concerns in conceptualising the border – seemingly taking up the gauntlet laid down by Israeli geographer David Newman over the last decade as editor of the journal, *Geopolitics*. James Sidaway (2011) notes that, while border studies has clearly been energised by the significant import of cultural, social and political theory, it has also become rather unwieldy – adding that balance needs to be retained through a 'parallel array of critical, novel and scholarly approaches' (p. 974).

If these efforts or calls to improve coverage of the international boundary within contemporary border studies are significant, a discernible hesitancy to tackle (seemingly) old-style inter-state disputes over boundaries and territory still remains. Demonstrably, geography and geopolitics (but especially border studies) has generally failed to engage with the maritime dimension – boundaries at sea and island sovereignty disputes have, with a few honourable exceptions (Steinberg, 2001; Strandsbjerg, 2010), received short shrift. More academic treatments of island sovereignty disputes have appeared within legal, political and security studies than within geography in recent years (Schofield, 2014). Perhaps the troubled legacy of the discipline's coverage of boundary questions is the reason for this imbalance as well as the relative silence over inter-state disputes. I will return to the issue of maritime disputes towards the end of this article.

States retain a personality in international law that long disappeared in the social sciences, and, within geography, developing a multidisciplinary approach to the study of territorial disputes that embraces this dimension may have been perceived as unpalatable. This may be due to the discipline's self-consciousness about its own history of determinism, subjectivity and bias. Yet, to do justice to the complexity of contemporary disputes and the sensitivities and rivalries that often surround them it might be beneficial to adopt more sensitised multidisciplinary approaches. As a long-time observer of how disputes develop and operate (in the Middle East in particular), might I make a modest suggestion: in order to get started we could try to connect the contemporary legal and technical status of disputes more closely with their historical and political drivers – all within the context of their own complex geographies (Schofield, 2013).

Studying the international boundary in geography

For some time, researchers have grappled with the challenges of studying boundaries in geography. Academics from Jones in the 1940s to critical geopolitics' founding father, Gearoid O'Tuathail, in the 2000s have been attempting, for instance, to establish how best to address the unique case syndrome. While each new wave of territorial thought in geography has tended to make space for itself by highlighting the limitations of its predecessor, it is striking how a few good ideas and keen observations tend to re-circulate. Many of these ideas date to the much-maligned classical period of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, as is indicated below.

Living with a troubled legacy

As was stated at the outset, generalised chronological phases in geography's coverage of territorial questions have a distinct Eurocentric/First World character, and are usually responses to perceived systemic change in the developed world and its relations with the rest of the world. The 1960s witnessed the emergence of borderland studies in the overriding context of territorial stability within Europe, while, simultaneously, the European colonial powers 'bequeathed' all manner of boundary delimitation questions to their independent successor states on decolonisation.

Reflecting back upon the classical period, it is not difficult to see why geography has always felt such retrospective angst. Friedrich Ratzel's (1895) likening of a state to an organism in a constant battle for survival, one whose boundary was a skin

that would expand and contract to reflect its fortunes was born from social Darwinism (much of which, after Gobineau, had a rather nasty racial tinge to it). The early twentieth-century writings of those great servants of the British India government, George Nathaniel Curzon (1907) and Thomas Holdich (1916), were self-congratulatory, deterministic, and conspicuously pompous. Perhaps it was the plethora of prominent natural features surrounding British India that encouraged Holdich and Curzon to utilise these in bounding 'the Jewel in the Crown' territorially. However, a fad for natural boundaries was, at that time, not limited to the European colonial powers: for a couple of decades at least, the notion that such boundaries were somehow more worthy and superior enjoyed surprisingly universal appeal. Take Holdich's almost reverential characterisation of the Himalaya's: '[N]ever was there such a God-given boundary set to such a vast impressive and stupendous frontier' (1916, p. 46). It was also his view that boundaries must be barriers – where suitable physical features were in short supply, it was down to the military to make strong artificial ones.

From the First World War through to the Second, there was a concern to understand those territorial issues that had contributed to conflict, and to work out arrangements that might best avoid further conflict. If the manual-like contributions of American geographers Samuel Boggs (1940) and Stephen Jones (1945) later expounded this logic in encyclopaedic depth, the classical era's central concern with boundaries in war and peace had been neatly surmised decades earlier by Curzon himself: 'Frontiers are indeed the razor's edge on which hang suspended the modern issues of war and peace' (1907, p. 7).

Nevertheless, not everything said during this period was quite so rooted to its time and conventions. Curzon himself (unlike his contemporaries) was mindful of the manner in which technological change was likely to affect boundary suitability for defence purposes over time. Charles Fawcett's recognition that transition was the dominant spatial characteristic of any frontier has largely stood the test of time. While the boundary-type classifications forwarded by Hartshorne in 1936 (based on the human landscape) and Boggs during 1940 (based on the physical) have enjoyed a surprising utility. Applying both their schemes in recent boundary cases before the courts (particularly those involving typically vague and ambiguous colonial delimitations) helps potentially to get inside the minds of the original boundary-drawers to better approximate their intent. Treaty texts or their attachments rarely reveal very much here.

Back to the barrier function

Then there was French jurist Paul de Lapradelle (1928) who, while not a geographer, made one of the most useful geographical observations of the period – that boundaries in reality operated as zonal features. His comment was quickly picked up upon by the legal community, though not so frequently as his summary scheme of how a boundary evolves in international law through the stages of territorial allocation, delimitation and demarcation (de Lapradelle, 1928), a classification that survives to this day (and which was modified usefully by Jones, 1945).

Last, but not least, we have that collection of key quotes from the Second World War period that gets us to focus on the question as to whether boundaries are really at the root of (or just an excuse for) disputes between states. Jaques Ancel, best known during the 1930s for trying to face down Karl Haushofer and the German *Geopolitik* school (which infamously took Ratzel's (1985) metaphors and similes literally), started the ball rolling when he commented that 'there are no problems of boundaries, only of nations [states]' (Ancel, 1936, p. 196). Jones (1945) would admit as much a decade later but also offer the counterbalancing caution that the way boundaries shape and size a state territory might well give rise to problems of access and communications. Meanwhile, Boggs' (1940) ruminations on what had made for a good or bad boundary have been mulled over by many commentators since – including van Houtum's (2005) suggestion that the ethics and justice of socio-spatial borders be reassessed from this perspective.

If de Lapradelle (1928) had coined the term *voisinage* in the 1920s to connote the borderland, Jones (1938) would employ the term directly from the late 1930s. Three decades later Julian Minghi (1963) and John House (1973) would build upon the spatial angle to mirror wider changes in human geography and the social sciences more generally. Instead of looking at the lines on maps that had served as a source of conflict, Minghi (1963) argued that geographers should look at the impact of an international boundary on its surrounding landscape, thus widening the area of study and essentially humanising it. The 'borderland studies' approach held out for both a greater focus on cross-border interactions and flows and the changing affiliations and identity formations in borderlands in routine, everyday settings. Although significant, Ratzel had identified its essential premise back in the 1890s: 'The borderland is the reality, the boundary line an abstraction thereof' (1897, p. 538) (this is just one example of how Ratzel's more prescient observations have

received rather less attention than his outlandish ones).

John House furthered the borderland studies agenda with his operational cross-border interaction model of the US–Mexico boundary in 1980, importing methodologies from political science and nodding to emergent trends within political geography – such as the adoption of systems approaches and fuller recognition of regional contexts. His model's imaginative embrace of the three dimensions of structure, space and time would later encourage American historian Oscar Martinez (1994) to develop his four-stage evolutionary typology for borderlands. Martinez (1994) postulated that, as relations between neighbouring states improved, these might pass from (i) an alienated (closed) state, through (ii) co-existent and (iii) interdependent stages, with their operative widths ever widening, to full integration (iv). Premised once more on US–Mexico, Martinez's (1994) schema is looser and much more transferable at a general level than House's model to other regional contexts. Arguably, it is also capable of working in reverse to reflect deterioration in any inter-state relationship. Yet the utility of both these spatial representations is increasingly challenged by the complexities of globalisation – they will work much better in some contexts than others, while their chief value might be in charting the effect of an international boundary on its borderlands historically.

If Ladis Kristof's seminal 1959 article on 'The nature of frontiers and boundaries' is accredited as the bridge between classical boundary and critical border studies, then the 1960s borderland studies approach pioneered contemporaneously continues to be influential. The term 'borderscape' is now appearing more frequently within geography, thus extending beyond a traditional preoccupation with the visual bases of border landscapes. This might refer to the complex, layered human identities present within international borderlands (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, 2007); multiperspectivism at all levels of border production (Rumford, 2012); or the extensive *EU Borderscapes* (see website) research consortium headed by American geographer James Scott. Beyond geography, political economists and anthropologists have begun to elaborate the crucial role played by borderlands in regional conflict systems – as 'the places in between' (Goodhand, 2008). Some historians and geographers have drawn attention to the fact that we do not know as much as we should about historic borderlands and (countering an over-emphasis on representation) have called for

renewed emphasis on their materialities. Even if it is just to understand contemporary borderlands better, there is plenty of room for more research on how states have attempted to project their power historically and how this has been resisted locally (Schofield *et al.*, forthcoming).

A (qualified) place for determinism?

Robert Kaplan (2014) has gained traction beyond geographical circles by plying upon the classical view that the unchanging realities of geographical location are determining state actions and driving territorial disputes. Hence the Chinese demonstrations of force off the Diaoyutai/Senkaku islands must be seen within the context of an expanding naval power trying to break out of the effective encirclement presented by island groups (or, more specifically here, an inner and outer ring of island chains) being owned in sovereign terms by neighbouring powers (Kaplan, 2014). While most observers would rather point to an as-yet-unsatisfied nationalistic appetite domestically within China (and its neighbours) as a more likely driver of state actions, such deterministic explanations will doubtless recur as long as regional hegemony indulges in such crude and classic game-playing.

Notwithstanding the popular mini-resurgence of determinism enjoyed by Kaplan and others, surely no-one would any longer accept Nicholas Spykman's view from the late 1930s that geographical position compels state actions uncritically. However, to argue that relative geographical position does not influence state policy would be misleading (Kelly, 2006). Let's briefly mention the case of Iraqi access to Persian Gulf waters and the association of long-running territorial disputes with recent episodes of conflict.

The historical view of Iraq's limited access to the Gulf as a strategic time-bomb was a classic spatial imaginary maintained by the British government (the principal architect of the region's territorial framework in the early twentieth century) right the way up until Iran and Iraq signed a momentous package of territorial agreements in 1975 that involved dividing up the waters of the long-disputed Shatt al Arab River on an equal basis. British ministers and diplomats had been largely persuaded from the mid-1930s onwards that a triangular operation of disputes between Iran, Iraq and Kuwait posed a serious threat to regional stability in the northern Gulf and, increasingly from the turn of the 1970s, a genuine threat of conflict. This perceived pattern of dispute saw Iraq push

claims on Kuwait hardest when Iran held the aces over the Shatt al Arab River. With the 1975 package, Iraq was seen as having conceded completely to longstanding Iranian demands for shared river status and many observers wondered whether Iraq might now turn its full attention on Kuwait to address its 'access problem'. Britain's ambassadors in Kuwait, Baghdad and Tehran openly and seriously contemplated the possibility of an Iraqi takeover of Kuwait itself in those frenzied first six months of 1975 as the logical culmination of this old spatial imaginary (Schofield, 2009). We all know what happened 15 years later with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait – perhaps the most graphic example of how an imperial spatial imaginary has eventualised in the postcolonial period. Maybe there was something in it all along.

Figure 3: The Iraq–Kuwait boundary south of Umm Qasr: note that anyone entering the piers on the Khor Zubair water inlet from Kuwaiti territory would soon end up in Iraq. Source: Google Earth, 2004.

As geographers there is also the consideration of the pictorial or cartographic representation of a state's geographical positioning on maps. It has recently been observed that 'cartopolitics' may have been more instrumental in the incidence of many territorial disputes than 'geopolitics' *per se* (Strandsbjerg, 2010, 2012).

The unique case syndrome

Just as the social sciences have toiled for a good half-century now with the question of balancing thematic and theoretical rigour with regionally-nuanced research, study of the international boundary has long juggled with the challenge of developing a comparative basis in its conceptualisation. Over the last five or so years, it is interesting that once accepted, or conventional, wisdoms have now been reworked through critical lenses. Leading traditional boundary scholar Victor Prescott has always maintained that one of the best contributions a political geographer can make is to unravel 'the evolution of international boundaries whether or not they have been the subject of serious dispute' (Prescott, 1999, p. 264). Megoran (2012) has seemingly connected with such advice to forward his recipe for 'boundary

Back to the barrier function

Back to the barrier function

biography' – that is to explore the experiences of individual boundaries (with the borders of scale that they produce) that render them more or less materially significant to those that confront them.

Prescott (1999) has also consistently emphasised Stephen Jones' admonition that 'each boundary is almost unique [and] therefore many generalisations are of doubtful validity' (Jones, 1945, p. vi). (Reputedly, Victor made his doctoral students pencil in such a caution as they begin writing every page of their theses). In his recent, declaredly critical, treatment of the 2008 Russian/Kosovan South Ossetia crisis, O'Tuathail comes perilously close to endorsing Jones' point about boundary uniqueness when commenting that the critical geopolitics of any dispute begin locally with the essential 'messiness of place' (2008, p. 672).

Emerging territorial themes and challenges

I would like to return to some of the emergent territorial challenges to which border studies and geography might extend its notably creative recent coverage. Surely the case studies of Syria, Ukraine and Israel above suggest that the international boundary is far from exhausted as a legitimate focus of geographical enquiry. Wider processes may be afoot, however. The emergence of new states and the fragmentation of old ones appear a more distinct prospect than ever. For example, just look at the current media obsession with revisiting

the colonial territorial framework ushered in by the colonial powers in the Middle East during and after the First World War – the Sykes-Picot system if you will. To the south and west, the 2008–9 Abyei judgement at the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague effectively ushered in partial northern territorial limits between the new state-in-waiting that was Southern Sudan and Sudan to its north. However, serious questions were posed along the way of the processes by which international law determines boundaries. The colonial record offered threadbare evidence for a flimsy and uncertain former provincial boundary in this long-contested region of the central Sudan. In reaching its decision on the territorial extent of Abyei province (Figure 4), the PCA placed more decisive emphasis than is usual on other key geographical indicators and evidence. These included mapping surveys, travellers' reports, burial sites and oral testimonies. If the Abyei case was the vital first territorial stage in the process by which a new state is emerging, knowledge of how borderlands work or did work historically in far less ordered instances of state fragmentation within the contemporary regional conflict systems of the Middle East and South Asia is something that geographers should be in a unique place to provide.

Demonstrably, there might usefully also be greater political geographic engagement with the maritime territorial dimension. Island sovereignty disputes are unique among territorial disputes in possessing dualistic political and pragmatic

Figure 4: The territorial extent of Abyei Province in Southern Sudan after the Permanent Court of Arbitration's award, July 2009. Source: Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2009.

dimensions, the balance of which tends to vary according to the dynamics of regional politics and the potential for natural resources in the surrounding waters and seabed (Schofield, 2014). With the end of the Cold War a repressive cloak was lifted from the conduct of regional political relations in East Asia and island disputes have since served as symbols of contested nationalisms, state rivalries and bitter historical memories. While disputes over Dok-do/Takeshima (Korea/Japan) (Figure 5) and Diaoyutai/Senkaku (China/Japan) have generally been confined to the rhetorical level (albeit a heightened one), a recent upsurge in power posturing in the East China Sea (mentioned above) might indicate that the disputes comprise more than effective safety-valves and rhetorical devices.

The pragmatics of disputes often revolve around the fact that an island, once its sovereignty is established, may generate exactly the same suite of maritime jurisdictional zones as a state's mainland coast. These include a territorial waters belt, an adjacent zone and, more importantly, a continental shelf (CS) and exclusive economic zone (EEZ) extending typically for a minimum of 200

nautical miles from the 'shore'. In law, these last two doctrines govern ownership of resources in the seabed surrounding an island, the former an inalienable right and the latter something that has to be proportionately claimed and managed. However, the picture is hugely complicated by the international community's failure to codify a workable definition of insularity in the *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* (UNCLOS, 1982). As a consequence, states may have a greater material incentive to 'try it on' when making claims to true insularity or jurisdictional zones (Schofield, 2014).

This can take several forms. Arguably against the spirit of UNCLOS's less than exacting Article 121, whose three short paragraphs (see Figure 6) supposedly regulate island sovereignty status, states have claimed or are continuing to claim rocks as islands in order to advance rights over the substantial, resource-rich maritime zones around them: Japan continues to do this with Okinotori-Shima – a couple of small rocks lying some 1700km south of Tokyo. The defences built there by the Japanese to protect against wave erosion are bigger than the rocks themselves. Britain claimed the same for Rockall in the North Atlantic for 20 years before formally retracting its use of the rock as a base-point in defining its EEZ when acceding to UNCLOS during the summer of 1997.

1. An island is a naturally formed area of land, surrounded by water, which is above water at high tide.
2. Except as provided for in paragraph 3, the territorial sea, the contiguous zone, the exclusive economic zone and the continental shelf of an island are determined in accordance with the provisions of this Convention applicable to other land territory.
3. Rocks which cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of their own shall have no exclusive economic zone or continental shelf.

Closer inspection of historical state practice will show that states have frequently taken advantage of an absence of effective legal regulation to opportunistically advance their interests. Britain even emplaced flags to occupy the Silver and Mouchoir banks (lying north of the Caribbean island of Hispaniola in the mid-1950s), when it felt its commercial interests in the region were being threatened by American oil companies. This was despite reaching the earlier conclusion that features such as low-tide elevations were not capable of being occupied in international law.

Back to the barrier function

Figure 5: Disputed rocks in the East Sea/Sea of Japan are portrayed by Korea as cuddly patriotic friends – cover from 'Dokdo and the East Sea'. Source: Dokdo website.

Figure 6: Article 121: Regime of islands. Source: UNCLOS, 1982.

Back to the barrier function

Figure 7: (left) Purported 'Ottoman map of Qatar and its borders with Bahrain', dated 27 June 1867, and (right) purported 'Map of the borders of Qatar islands and seas...' dated May 1898. These were two of the 81 suspect documents presented by Qatar in the Hawar Islands case at the ICJ. They aim to show that during the late nineteenth century the waters and islands surrounding the peninsula had been recognised formally as Qatari (Ottoman). Source: Suspect items III.46 and II.21 (Bahrain-Qatar ICJ case), Expert Forensic Report (author's own copy), Appendix 4, volume 1b, ICJ Qatar versus Bahrain, 1997.

(Schofield, 2014). Thus, there is perhaps nothing that unique about contemporary Japanese claims over Okinotori-Shima, rather surprise in some quarters that these things are still happening in 2015.

Aside from shows of naval power over disputed islands in the South and East China seas, there has been another way in which states have recently 'tried it on' – one that finds far fewer precedents. The dispute over the Hawar Islands between Qatar and Bahrain was treated by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in a case that lasted from 1991 to 2001, the longest-running in the history of the institution. In a (somewhat bizarre) bid to substantiate the basis of its historical claim to the island group and surrounding shoals, Qatar included 81 'suspect' textual and cartographic documents in its evidence (two of which are presented in Figure 7). Following a court order of 1997, Qatar could not account for the provenance of the documents so they were discounted as evidence by the ICJ in its arrival at a judgement (Schofield, 2014). To some observers the fact that Qatar was prepared to use such documents illustrates the lengths to which states will go to in their efforts to see territorial claims made good. Bahrain's claim to the islands was upheld.

Conclusions

Geography could benefit from a multidisciplinary analysis of the workings of island sovereignty disputes – to understand their operative balance of pragmatics and politics; both law and geopolitics need to be engaged with. For now, however, it seems that an escalating regional dynamic of clashing nationalisms is driving East Asian

disputes more than their resource potential, yet the 'whys' remain to be addressed. At best, states will continue to behave opportunistically in their conduct of island sovereignty disputes. With respect to the question of international boundaries generally, the challenge for border studies will be in matching theory to examples in the face of diverse and often crude, state practice and behaviour.

Note

1. This is an updated and extended version of a presentation to the Geographical Association's Annual Conference at the University of Surrey, Guildford, March 2008.

References

- Ancel, J. (1936) 'Les frontieres: etude de geographie politique', *Recueil de Cours*, 55, pp. 207–97.
- Balibar, E. (2002) *Politics and the Other Scene*. London: Verso.
- Bauder, H. (2011) 'Toward a critical geography of the border: engaging the dialectic of practice and meaning', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 101, 5, pp. 1126–39.
- Blake, G. (2000) 'State limits in the early 21st century: observations on form and function', *Geopolitics*, 5, 1, pp. 1–18.
- Boggs, S. (1940) *International Boundaries: A study of boundary functions and problems*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Curzon, G. (1907) *Frontiers: The Romanes lecture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- De Genova, N. (2012) 'Border, seen and obscene' in Wilson, T. and Hastings, D. (eds) *A Companion to Border Studies*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 492–504.
- De Lapradelle, P. (1928) *La frontiere: Étude de droit international*. Paris: Les Editions Internationales
- Dokdo website: www.en.dokdo.go.kr
- EU Borderscapes: www.euborderscapes.eu
- Fawcett, C. (1918) *Frontiers: A study in political geography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Geopolitics (2012) 'Critical border studies' (special section), 17, 4.
- Goodhand, J. (2008) 'War, peace and the places in

- between: why borderlands are central' in Pugh, M., Cooper, N. and Turner, M. (eds) *Whose Peace? Critical perspectives on the political economy of peacebuilding*. London: Palgrave, pp. 225–44.
- Hartshorne, R. (1936) 'Suggestions on the terminology of political boundaries', *Mitteilungen des Vereins der Geographen an der Universität Leipzig*, heft 14/15, pp. 181–92.
- Holdich, T. (1916) 'Geographical problems in boundary making', *Geographical Journal*, 47, 6, pp. 421–36.
- House, J. (1982) *Frontier on the Rio Grande: A political geography of development and social deprivation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Jones, S. (1945) *Boundary-making: A handbook for statesmen, treaty-editors and boundary commissioners*. New York, NY: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Kaplan, R. (2014) *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the end of a stable Pacific*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Kelly, P. (2006) 'A critique of critical geopolitics', *Geopolitics*, 11, 1, pp. 24–53.
- Kristof, L. (1959) 'The nature of frontiers and boundaries', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 49, pp. 269–82.
- Martinez, O. (1994) 'The dynamics of border interaction: new approaches to border analysis' in Schofield, C. (ed) *World Boundaries 1: Global boundaries*. London: Routledge, pp. 1–15.
- Megoran, N. (2012) 'Rethinking the study of international boundaries: a biography of the Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan boundary', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 102, 2, pp. 464–81.
- Minghi, J. (1963) 'Boundary studies in political geography: a review article', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 53, 3, pp. 407–28.
- Muller, M. (2013) 'Text, discourse, affect and things' in Dodds, K., Kuus, M. and Sharp, J. (eds) *The Ashgate Companion to Critical Geopolitics*. Farnham: Ashgate, pp. 49–68.
- Newman, D. (2006) 'The lines that continue to separate us: borders in our "borderless world"', *Progress in Human Geography*, 30, 2, pp. 143–61.
- O'Tuathail, G. (2008) 'Russia's Kosovo: a critical geopolitics of the August 2008 war over South Ossetia', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 49, 6, pp. 670–705.
- Paasi, A. (1998) 'Boundaries as social processes: territoriality in the world of flows', *Geopolitics*, 3, 1, pp. 69–88.
- Parker, N. and Vaughan-Williams, N. (2012) 'Critical border studies: broadening and deepening the "lines in the sand" agenda', *Geopolitics*, 17, 4, pp. 727–33.
- Prescott, J.R.V. (1999) 'Borders in a "borderless" world', *Geopolitics*, 4, 2, pp. 262–73.
- Rajaram, P. and Grundy-Warr, C. (2007) 'Introduction' in Rajaram, P. and Grundy-Warr, C. (eds) *Borderscapes: Hidden geographies and politics at territory's edge*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, pp. ix–xl.
- Ratzel, F. (1897) *Politische Geographie*. Berlin: Oldenbourg.
- Rumford, C. (2012) 'Towards a multiperspectival study of border geopolitics', *Geopolitics*, 17, 4, pp. 887–902.
- Schofield, R. (2007) 'Borders, regions and time: defining the Iraqi territorial state' in Visser, R. and Stansfield, G. (eds) *An Iraq of its Regions: The cornerstones of a federal democracy*. London: Hurst, pp. 167–204.
- Schofield, R. (2009) 'Introduction to 1975' in Schofield, R. (ed) *Arabian Boundaries: New documents, 1966–1975*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 16, pp. v–xii.
- Schofield, R. (2013) 'Boundary posturing'. Available online at www.worldpolicy.org/journal/spring2013/big-question (last accessed 10 July 2015).
- Schofield, R. (2014) 'States behaving badly? The unique geopolitics of island sovereignty disputes. A report prepared for the Korea Maritime Institute'. Pre-publication version available online at www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/departments/geography/research/epd/Schofieldwp65.pdf (last accessed 7 May 2015).
- Schofield, R., Schofield, C. and Grundy-Warr, C. (forthcoming) *Contested Border Geographies: History, ethnography and law*. London: IB Tauris.
- Sidaway, J. (2011) 'Review essay: the return and eclipse of border studies; charting agendas', *Geopolitics*, 16, 4, pp. 969–76.
- Spykman, N. (1938) 'Geography and foreign policy I', *American Political Science Review*, 32, 1, pp. 28–50.
- Steinberg, P. (2001) *The Social Construction of the Ocean*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Strandsbjerg, J. (2010) *Territory, Globalisation and International Relations: The cartographic reality of space*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Strandsbjerg, J. (2012) 'Cartopolitics, geopolitics and boundaries in the Arctic', *Geopolitics*, 17, 4, pp. 818–42.
- Thrift, N. (2008) *Non Representational Theory: Space/politics/affect*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- UNCLOS (1982) *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982*. Available online at www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/convention_overview_convention.htm (last accessed 31 May 2015).
- van Houtum, H. (2005) 'The geopolitics of borders and boundaries', *Geopolitics*, 10, 4, pp. 672–9.

Richard Schofield is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Geography, King's College London where he directs the MA programme in Geopolitics, Territory and Security (email: richard.schofield@kcl.ac.uk).