

SESSION 13

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Is Territorial Conquest Still Topical?

Coordinated by Christian Stoffaës

Today's world has witnessed the abatement of many of the territorial conflicts that left such a deep impact on History. Yet remnants of those conflicts are still with us, albeit in attenuated form. At the same time, new tensions have also been sparked, in particular economic and cultural, these being areas around which territorial conquest continues to have meaning. However, these are immaterial, rather than physical territories, in the traditional sense.

History has long confounded wars for territorial conquest with their symmetric counterpart - defence of countries' own territories from invasions and outside attack. Palaeolithic prehistory was shaped by wars between nomadic tribes for hunting grounds, control of food being the very core of survival, while the Neolithic period stands out for the invention of agriculture through the territorial predation of sedentary farmers by livestock-breeding warrior tribes, as in Central Asia, Mesopotamia, along the Yellow River and in Europe. Vestiges of that past can also be found in certain regions up to the agricultural age -- the oases and great lakes of Africa, for instance.

Then came the formation of Nation-States, as the Middle Ages drew to a close and wars were waged to establish borders, Europe rushing to its own death in 1914 in this effort. The colonial wars were next in line, determining how continents should be divided up between the major powers, first America, then Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Last and most recently came the economic wars and rivalry between imperialistic forces, for control over raw materials and access to trade outlets.

After 1945, the major powers, having come to their senses, unfurled their diplomacy and concluded treaties that would establish the principles of peace. Though the Society of Nations ended in failure, the United Nations delivered on their promise of a generation of nearly-universal peace -- despite the Cold War and multiple regional conflicts, thanks to arbitration mechanisms, conflict prevention and a multi-lateral peacekeeping force (the Security Council).

Yet the principle that did most to shape the era was that of free trade, intended to do away with the economic cause of territorial rivalries. Decolonisation put an end to trade empires. Free trade means peace, while protectionism means war: the liberal founding fathers of economic science proclaimed as much already in their day. Regional free trade zones have also pulled off dazzling successes, as illustrated by the Common Market, which culminated, after nearly a half-century, in the creation of an almost-federal political structure.

The aim of this introduction is to identify within contemporary geopolitics where certain traditional patterns still persist, using a handful of examples, and in so doing, to open up discussion on the still-topical nature of territorial conquest.

Appropriation of raw materials remains a major cause of territorial tension capable of resulting in armed conflict, in particular when it comes to control of oil deposits. The first Gulf War offers an illustration of this. The invasion of Kuwait in 1990-1991 was aimed at taking hold of the abundant deposits of a small country, which Iraq and its powerful army considered part of its own, unjustly partitioned off by British colonialism.

Artificial liens and border illegitimacy

More generally speaking, the somewhat artificial borders traced by the land sharing agreements that reallocated the Ottoman Empire after World War I is a source of intrinsic instability in a zone that, alone, is home to two-thirds of the world's reserves and one-third of the world's oil trade. That instability, in turn, creates an ever-brewing cause of conflict. In response, the Western powers have placed eleven military and air-naval bases there, along with permanent fleets, including the 5th American fleet. The end of Iran's isolation and Russia's return to the fore, facilitated by the Syrian conflict, add to today's tensions.

The African continent is shaped by comparable circumstances - specifically, recently-formed States not founded on secular traditions - when compared with the number of centuries needed to establish national borders in Europe. The 1885 Congress of Berlin was a diplomatic initiative intended to prevent the European powers from engaging in conflict to gain control of Africa. The founders of the African Union wisely prohibited any questioning of the borders passed down by the colonial empires, as artificial as they may have been.

The long-stagnating Israeli-Palestinian conflict took shape largely around a territorial and even micro-territorial face-off, the map drawn by the Oslo agreements generating dizzying complexities in the way the security zones are delineated.

The expansionist desires of the world's new major power, China, over its "nearby foreign lands", in particular to secure raw materials and infrastructures, and aimed at ridding the nation of the destructive legacy forced upon the Middle Kingdom by the colonialist powers, create a latent threat to border stability in the China Sea, the Far East and Central Asia, as the nation draws upon its powerful enterprises and abundant financial resources.

When Empires are dismantled

The end of an Empire always sets off shock waves that sometimes do not dwindle for many years, as successor States fight for the newly-available territory. Such was the case with the European continent, which took decades to recover when the Austro-Hungarian and Czarist empires slipped into oblivion. The instability that resulted from the collapse of the Soviet Union has still not entirely settled: Russia is looking to contain the disintegration by claiming the right of intervention on former Soviet Union states; the concept of Balkanisation, born of the Eastern Question in the late 19th century, was rejuvenated by what used to be Yugoslavia.

Religious territories

The 17th century Reform gave rise to religious territories in accordance with the principle of *cujus regio ejus religio*. The Thirty Years' War and its countless local and regional emanations led to the dismantling of the Holy Empire -- which was, in reality, but a federation of principalities -- to give way to the Westphalian model of Nation-States, which itself bore the seeds of civil war for Europe.

In Muslim tradition, the world is divided into two parts: Dar al-Islam, or the domain of submission to God, in which the sharia law applies; and Dar al-Harb, or the domain of war, the countries which need to be conquered or converted. Given such principles, it is easy to understand why territorial conquest is so topical across the planet's Muslim lands, as is the case with growing intensity in the Middle East and, to a still-limited extent, in Africa. The creation of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (EIIL, or Daesh), the aspiration of which is to restore the Caliphate, and the conflicts between Shiites and Sunnites remain a very telling example of how current territorial conflict remains.

Evangelisation and religious proselytism were driving forces in Christianity's colonial conquest, first and foremost, through the Crusades.

Ideological Territories

Extending historically from the Wars of Religion are the politico-ideological territories. World War II saw confrontation not only between the traditional nationalisms from which World War I had been born, but also and most significantly, between ideological systems -- Communism and Fascism, against liberal democracies. Still today, conflicts can be waged to impose ideological principles such as liberal democracy or human rights on others, in line with the concept of the right to interfere.

These are humanitarian principles inherited from the concept of civilising so-called primitive peoples: so-called civilised countries step in uncalled to impose peace and put an end to what they deem unacceptable, whether slavery, barbaric custom, tribal warfare, raiding, etc.

Economic imperialisms

As a result of globalisation, a vast integrated area has opened, and multi-national firms have swept in to deploy their strategies, in an effort to take control of both markets and capital. The trend of the day is toward the formation of oligopolies, extremely powerful economic players that know no borders, trying to circumvent them or spurn the regulations of the few State powers that remain: tax havens are one example of this. The only item now missing from their collection is fiscal power, or simply the armed forces that remain (for the time being) the privilege of sovereign powers.

Economic warfare pits major companies against each other, buttressed by the States from which they originate, their diplomatic influence, their military intervention and intelligence capacity and outlines the traits of new geopolitics.

Cultural territories

Critics of cultural imperialism describe it as an effort to gain domination over given lifestyles to make them resemble those of the dominant culture -- an attempt to assimilate a dominated population, by forcing a specific culture, educational system, type of entertainment, mode of thinking and consumer activity on it. These factors mutually and unquestionably put the United States at the centre of debate.

Cultural imperialism is a behaviour founded on an ideology, a way of seeing the world, a sense of superiority on the part of the dominant culture and a form of disdain for the dominated culture.

the widespread use of English in the artistic, economic and scientific communities;

supremacy in the field of IT, the main computer hardware suppliers, office equipment, and software all come from California);

the prevalence of Anglo-American music, press and films from Hollywood along with television series (nearly half the films showing in theatres in Europe are American, the percentage rising to 70 to 80% in Germany and England). A sales policy that makes production profitable by marketing to the entire English-language market then makes it possible to sell at bargain prices in other countries;

and almost exaggeratedly - fast food: McDonald's, KFC, Burger King...the domination of major consumer brands at the global level Coca-Cola, such as Levi's, Nike, Microsoft, Apple...