



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



DPG POLICY BRIEF

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The Relevance of Boundaries*

by
Sanjay Pulipaka

There has been considerable discussion over the past three decades on the need to make borders between nation-states irrelevant.¹ While these demands for open borders between nation-states have a long history, there has been a renewed vigour to such arguments after the Maastricht treaty and the emergence of the European Union (EU).²

The dilution of the borders in Europe was the consequence of the reconciliation among European nation-states following two devastating world wars. Furthermore, the EU member states shared similar political systems, and several among them were part of the NATO security pact. While the EU has softened borders between member states, it has also created a rigid EU border, which is not easy to breach. Refugees from North Africa and the Middle East perish in large numbers in the Mediterranean Sea trying to enter Europe.³ The EU has not obliterated the idea of 'boundary'. Instead, the EU has merely shifted its location and created a new boundary between itself and the rest of the world.⁴ The EU's example of pooled sovereignty has not been emulated elsewhere, not least in Asia where regional institutions like ASEAN comprise sovereign nation states on whose internal affairs ASEAN does not exercise any jurisdiction.

In South Asia, India has a boundary with all neighbouring countries and none of the other countries share borders with each other (except Afghanistan/Pakistan). Consequently, making the boundary irrelevant, as some commentators have recently suggested, implies that India should be opening up borders with all the countries in the region. In fact, India, despite the horrors of partition and expansionist designs of some neighbours, has adopted a very liberal approach to its borders.

The India-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship (1950) mandated that both countries will "grant, on a reciprocal basis, to the nationals of one country in the territories of the other the same privileges in the matter of residence, ownership of property, participation in trade and commerce, movement and other privileges of a similar nature."⁵

* In this article, the concepts 'borders' and 'boundaries' have been used interchangeably and as distinct from 'frontier,' which tends to be a zone of fluid interactions without clear demarcations

¹ Kenichi Ohmae, "Beyond the Nation State", *The Globalist*, June 13, 2005

² "Treaty on European Union," *Office for Official Publications of the European Communities*, 1992,

³ "Six people died each day attempting to cross Mediterranean in 2018 - UNHCR report", [UNHCR](#), January 30, 2019

⁴ James Mayall, "*Values in European Foreign Policies: Defending the Enlightenment in Trouble Times*," in Krishnan Srinivasan, James Mayall and Sanjay Pulipaka (Edt.), *Values in Foreign Policy: Investigating Ideals and Interests*, (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019)

⁵ "Treaty of Peace and Friendship", [Ministry of External Affairs](#), July 31, 1950



India-Nepal border at Sonauli. Source: Global voices/ Flickr.

On the India-Myanmar border, prevalent regulations allow people to move across the boundary up to "16 km into the other side and stay there up to 14 days without visas" and other rigid administrative formalities.⁶

Even with Bhutan, in relative terms, the border is not rigid⁷, even though it does not witness a substantial movement of people due to cultural and environmental concerns of the Bhutanese government.

The partition's long shadow, the 1965 India-Pakistan war, the events that preceded the birth of Bangladesh in 1971, and subsequent geopolitical dynamics have ensured that India and Bangladesh have been unable to build on their geographic contiguity. Informal movement of people due to the natural porosity of the border has often been a subject of intense and acrimonious political debate on both sides of the border. And yet, in the recent past, efforts to increase cross-border connectivity with Bangladesh have gained momentum.⁸

⁶ Munmun Majumdar, "India-Myanmar Border Fencing and India's Act East Policy", *India Quarterly*, 76(1), 2020, pg. 58-72

⁷ "Indians traveling to Bhutan", *Embassy of India in Thimphu*

⁸ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "India-Bangladesh launch new rail link to push cross-border trade", *The Economic Times*, August 1, 2021

Indeed, India has rigid borders with Pakistan and China, due primarily to their territorial designs, which have in the past resulted in full-scale wars. Other elements, such as cross-border support for terrorism, and regimes which nurture extremist political, religious or secessionist forces, have created challenging conditions to advocate for open borders. Therefore, the consideration of open borders with Pakistan and China would imply a call for India to move beyond even the EU ideal in a hostile geopolitical context. Moreover, there is no empirical evidence to argue that open borders reduce terrorism and cross-border insurgencies, not least when these are state sponsored. Of course, some may well like to "imagine" the possibility of India having open borders with China and Pakistan. However, such an exercise would amount to dreaming about John Lennon's famous ditty but would be entirely divorced from hard geopolitical reality.

The idea of 'boundary' was originally consolidated in Europe, and later followed in other regions of the world. What explains the continued salience of boundaries in international politics? The boundaries of the world's nation-states have evolved based on identities such as ethnicity, language, culture and religion, which have a powerful emotional appeal. Further, for many democracies, a boundary defines the physical limits of the representative political process, accountable governance, and a demonstrated commitment of the state to constitutional and universal rights. Therefore, concerns regarding the easy movement of people across open boundaries are not always about ethnic identities. These concerns are also about the transmission of regressive political and social ideas which show disregard for the principles of liberal and secular democracy. It is indeed true that such transmission is happening through social media with remarkable ease. However, experience across the world suggests that the movement of people sometimes may result in the emergence of institutional frameworks that tend to alter social norms based on regressive ideas, even in open and pluralist societies. It is evident that the spread of such ideas has constrained the space for human rights, social equality and democratic processes in India's immediate neighbourhood.

The idea of an open border should also factor in the power asymmetry that exists between nation-states. The border between China and Myanmar is clearly demarcated. Till recently, people could easily move across the border without much difficulty. However, given the economic and political asymmetries between the two countries, many Chinese firms and businesspersons benefitted from the illegitimate economic exploitation of Myanmar's natural resources.⁹ The Myanmar-China experience demonstrates that asymmetrical power relationships will consolidate exploitative practices when boundaries between nation-states become soft.

Prescriptions regarding open borders should also factor in the consequences of possible demographic shifts. For instance, it has often been argued that social/cultural interactions of people belonging to the same ethnic group who live on either side of a

⁹ "Commerce and Conflict: Navigating Myanmar's China Relationship," [International Crisis Group](#), March 30, 2020; Lex Rieffel, "The Moment" in "Myanmar/Burma: Inside Challenges, Outside Interests", [Brookings Institution Press](#), 2010

border are disrupted due to international boundaries. Quite often, these boundaries also cut through complex multi-ethnic landscapes. For instance, the India-Myanmar border region is dotted with various ethnic groups such as Nagas, Kukis, Mizos and others. The benefits of improved connectivity networks and open borders should produce an equitable outcome for all ethnic groups; they should not result in a significant demographic shift to the advantage of a particular ethnic group, which can give rise to instability.

India is still a relatively young nation-state in the process of achieving national cohesion, consolidation and development. For many in India, the hesitation to make borders irrelevant stems not from hyper-nationalism but from a set of multiple factors and concerns. Open borders are certainly not the solution to the complex geopolitical problems confronting India and its neighbourhood. In India's specific historical context, alluding to making borders irrelevant with countries such as Pakistan and China is a case of the cure being more dangerous than the disease.



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