

Longer Times, Wider Geographies (Newcastle 5th October 2011)

Like many of you, I watched the first few years of the 'war on terror' with a mixture of anger and disbelief. While I certainly felt a personal engagement with the issues, and discussed these topics in the classroom from the outset, it took me some time before they became the topic of my academic research.

I have a background in politics and history, with a PhD in political theory, and when I moved into geography as a discipline the key project was to write a history of the concept of territory.

But the 2004 US presidential election coincided with my finishing a book on Heidegger's politics, and as I was about to turn to the historical project, I felt a need to show how all the conceptual and historical work I'd done on territory helped to explain what was going on today. So in early 2005 I wrote a piece on this, which led to another, and some further invitations. Over the next two to three years I alternated historical work and political work on territory.

This led to the 2009 book *Terror and Territory: The Spatial Extent of Sovereignty*. Since completing that I turned full-time to the historical work, for a entitled *The Birth of Territory* which should be out next year.

But it is the first I want to talk about tonight, to suggest that ten years of war in Afghanistan need to be understood within a wider context of the changes that have been occurring, in a post-Cold War world, to the international legal notion of territorial integrity.

This term is enshrined in the UN charter and appears in almost all UN Security Council resolutions. Territorial integrity comprises two distinct, but interrelated notions: territorial preservation and territorial sovereignty.

Effectively states should have their existing borders preserved and have exclusive sovereignty within them. Within its territory a state is sovereign, and its borders provide the limits to that sovereignty. The term can therefore be described as the spatial extent of sovereignty.

One of the things that has characterised the post-Cold War period has been a significant separation of territorial sovereignty from territorial preservation.

Territorial sovereignty has been fundamentally challenged – in part through arguments concerning humanitarian intervention or the ‘responsibility to protect’. This argument was used in Kosovo, for instance. But then something similar was relabelled as ‘contingent sovereignty’.

This takes the logic of humanitarian intervention or the responsibility to protect civilian populations and broadens it to include ‘legitimate’ intervention on the grounds of pursuit of weapons of mass destruction or the harbouring of terrorists. If a state fails to live up to the responsibilities that the ‘international community’ or the US and its allies deem appropriate, then it must be reformed. Governments may need to be persuaded or cajoled into changing behaviour – Libya under Blair – or, ultimately, they may be removed – Libya more recently. One of the key assumptions behind the post-World War II settlement, a founding principle of the United Nations, is effectively rejected. In sum, the idea that states should hold a monopoly of power, of sovereignty, within their territories is no longer assumed.

Tony Blair was significant here in that his arguments bridged the gap between humanitarian intervention and contingent sovereignty arguments. Gordon Brown effectively supported both Kosovo and Iraq; and Cameron, Hague and the British

Neoconservatives of the Henry Jackson Society—who call for a ‘democratic geopolitics’—have made similar arguments.

When they invoke territorial integrity it is clear they understand it as territorial preservation, the maintenance of the territorial status quo. This is conceived as almost an absolute, because of the perceived dangers to stability of secession or fragmentation.

Territorial preservation has long been asserted as a stabilising factor, where it allowed the decolonisation of a region with a degree of normalcy remaining. In other words, trading upon the idea of *uti possidetis*, states would inherit the boundaries of colonies or internal jurisdictions on independence. The *status quo*, for all its flaws, was preferred over the disorder that would likely result from a wholesale redrawing of boundaries. This can be seen in South America; in Africa; and in the breakup of Yugoslavia and the USSR initially along the lines of the constituent republics of these federal states.

Blair made the importance and the tension explicit. A key formulation was delivered at the George Bush Senior Presidential Library on April 8th 2002:

The struggle is for stability, for the security within which progress can be made. Of course, countries want to protect their territorial integrity but few are into empire building. This is especially true of democracies whose people vote for higher living standards and punish governments who don’t deliver on them. For 2,000 years Europe fought over territory.

Today boundaries are virtually fixed. Governments and people know that any territorial ambition threatens stability, and instability threatens prosperity.

What is striking here is how, for Blair, stability and prosperity are linked to territorial changes. Territorial preservation and control is part of a much larger concern with stability, now linked explicitly to prosperity and the successful working of the global market.

Yet territorial integrity cannot simply be the preservation of territorial extent, but also includes the sovereignty within it. The two meanings of the term—that borders are fixed and territory should not be seized or secession encouraged; and within its own borders, within its territory, a state is sovereign—are central to an understanding of the 'war on terror' and show how it is part of a wider challenge. Territorial sovereignty is now held to be contingent, for humanitarian reasons, the harbouring of terrorists, or the production of weapons of mass destruction. It is the clumsy equivalence of these that is the key today.

Afghanistan is, on this reading, unfortunately simply one element of a wider challenge. There are longer times and wider geographies. The war on terror includes Iraq and Afghanistan, but we should also take into account wider geographies of Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Lebanon, Palestine, the Maghreb and events going on in Libya and I'd suggest somewhat below the radar in Nigeria. It links to earlier events in Kosovo, Sierra Leone and Panama. Its logic has been appropriated by China in Xinjiang and Tibet; Russia in Chechnya and also the war in Georgia; and Israel in Palestine.

The two meanings of the term territorial integrity are thus increasingly in tension. Blair repeatedly stressed the territorial integrity of countries that were targeted: Yugoslavia, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, and Iraq. He intended to intervene in Sudan even as he stressed the importance of the preservation of its existing territorial boundaries, rather than any other settlement. Lebanon and Somalia's territorial integrity are repeatedly underscored, even though the idea of territorial sovereignty is clearly a fiction. Territorial integrity in the sense of

protection of existing boundaries is often the partner to the violation of territorial integrity in the sense of territorial sovereignty or internal competence.

Take the example of Libya. UNSC resolution 1973 and 1970 both claim that the Security Council makes all its judgments:

Reaffirming its strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and national unity of the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya.

Sovereignty of whom; independence of what? – the people, the state, the government? Territorial integrity of what? A no-fly zone would prevent Libya from exercising its sovereignty throughout the whole of its territory, and thereby compromise its territorial integrity. Not the latter in terms of its territorial preservation – I don't think anyone is suggesting Libya's borders be redrawn, and the national unity claim reinforces this – but certainly in terms of its territorial sovereignty.

Those four things can be of the state or of the government. Gaddafi's sovereignty was challenged; Libya's independence is compromised; its territorial integrity is at risk; and there is no national unity – this is a civil war.

Territorial integrity is *always* challenged through intervention, even if there is an attempt to preserve the territorial settlement. The idea that the boundaries of Iraq or Afghanistan might be changed along tribal or ethnic lines was never countenanced. One of the reasons US and allied involvement in Iraq and arguably Afghanistan/Pakistan has continued for so long is because of this wish to preserve. Territorial integrity as preservation wins out over territorial integrity as sovereignty.

While the idea of territorial integrity was never really accepted by dominant powers, the difference now is that they are being explicit about the challenge to internal competence or territorial sovereignty while simultaneously stressing the importance of territorial inviolability. Numerous examples could be given where the US or other dominant powers have violated the territorial integrity of other states, but the current moment is somewhat different. It is one where territorial preservation is seemingly paramount and yet at the same time there is a concerted *argument* against territorial sovereignty, rather than simply its practical violation.

Those who have sovereignty--recognised states--are able to exercise a violence that they claim is legitimate within their territory. Those who are deemed not to have sovereign power—non-state organisations, national self-determination movements and individuals—are in a different position. Their violence or resistance is seen as necessarily illegitimate, as 'terror.' They can therefore be labelled as 'terrorists,' a strategy which immediately shapes the way their actions are perceived. Almost all the groups on the US state department's list of terrorist organizations are self-determination movements: that is, they seek control of a territory currently held by a state. The secessionist/terrorist identification comes about because any challenge to the territorial integrity of a state—in the sense of its territorial preservation—acts as a limit to that state's spatial extent and therefore as a potential limit to the exercise of its violence. It is therefore seen as a necessarily illegitimate act, and in itself violent. Challenges to Israel's continuing occupations have certainly been coded in that way both by the Israeli state and US advocates.

Yet on the other hand, those states that claim a legitimacy for themselves also claim the right to render territorial integrity, as territorial sovereignty, contingent in places that do not meet their particular norms of behaviour. These state's violence regularly exceeds their borders: the US and British can limit the spatial

extent of Iraq's sovereignty with the no-fly zones and eventually overthrow it entirely; they can intervene in Afghanistan in response to 3,000 deaths in the US, but kill many more in the process; Israel can invade south Lebanon to provide 'peace for Galilee'; Russia can launch attacks over the border with Georgia; Libya can be bombed; terrorists can be killed in Pakistan or Yemen.

While Communism provided a justification for US involvement in other countries throughout the Cold War, and the 'war on drugs' a basis for involvement at least in Central America immediately afterwards, there was a widespread difficulty in providing a reason in other areas. Kuwait, with oil security as an issue, succeeded in mobilising opinion in a way that interventions or situations in Somalia, Bosnia, Haiti or Rwanda never could. The notion of humanitarian intervention was the key rhetorical term used in the interventions in Kosovo and Sierra Leone, themselves in part reactions to perceived failures in previous events in Bosnia and Rwanda. Today the discourse of the 'war on terror' provides an apparently new language to justify what is a continuous practice. But it is the justification that is key, alongside the generalized acceptance of a need for limits on sovereign power. Humanitarian arguments for 'sovereignty as responsibility' have been appropriated by calls for 'contingent sovereignty,' which demonstrates both the continuity and that the international spatial order of territorial integrity is now challenged by a far wider, and more dangerous set of demands.

But if a state's territorial sovereignty is contingent, because of its treatment of civilian populations, why should its territorial extent be preserved in all circumstances? If a large, discrete, minority exists within its borders, why should international intervention be legitimate to protect it only within those borders, rather than redrawing the borders and changing the geography of the problem? The situation in Kosovo is a classic instance of the international community opening up a problem through the first kind of intervention without a clear sense

of how they might resolve the second issue. The supposed resolution of that problem has, as predicted, opened up issues in other places, notably Georgia.

Territorial integrity is thus fractured because while there is an insistence on the preservation of territorial extent the sovereignty within it is held to be contingent. Indeed it is often in exactly the same places in which territorial sovereignty is contingent that territorial preservation or inviolability is asserted even more forcefully. The challenge is whether they can be put back together, or if the argument is that they should not, what is put in their place? Britain holds a major responsibility here, since its foreign policy did so much to lead to the unravelling.

The tragedy of Afghanistan is that the war has destroyed a country which was already fractured – the rubble was pounded to dust. Its territorial unity is an unrealistic hope while its territorial sovereignty is utterly compromised.

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