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**Cross-border Structures and Europeism**

**The Borderline Impact of the *Shanghai Cooperation Organization*:  
A Non-Europeist Comparison between the EU and the SCO**

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**Abstract:** While the concept of border change is easy enough to grasp, the comparison between two regions and their historic choice as to border management raises the key question of the nature of borders. Border change means, in essence, a change in that nature associated with a change in the perception of the border and of “the Other” as well as a change in the identity of the nations that make up a multi-border region. Europe and Central Asia are examined with no particularly exclusive focus but as illustrations of a more general purpose.

**Keywords:** region; region-building; border management; Europe; Central Asia; Asia

## **1. Introduction**

Why compare European integration and central Asian (integrative) cooperation? Two reasons motivate such a comparison between two regions that seem at first so different in their past and present histories. First, because comparisons enhance the understanding of human constructs and regions are man-made, that is to say they are created in order to alter the course of history. Second because, especially from a cross-border and trans-border perspective, borders in Europe have become mere functional crossings and borders in Central Asia since 1991 have become a particularly rich substance in search of, not of a model, but of inspirations.

Central Asians do not need Europe. Europe can at best be one of several sources of inspiration and perhaps an element of caution as to mistakes made in one case and to be avoided in another case. And so, this paper does not purport to provide an Europeist perspective but simply to suggest a comparison notably between legitimate questions to be asked. Has the EU abolished borders? Can the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) change the nature of borders, from nationalist to functional ones? There is a particular relevance in looking jointly at the (possibly) oldest or more advanced (?) regional process (in Europe) and the newest, most innovative (?) process (in Central Asia).

This paper covers two points, first the process of transformation of the substance of borders (I), second the resistance to that process, notably at the national level (II).

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## **2. The Transformation Process of Borders**

### **2.1. Questioning the Nature of Borders as Vectors of War**

#### **2.1.1. Especially in Europe over History**

The European setting illustrates rather well the fact that, on either side of borders, is located neighbors as natural dissenters and fighters. The history of borders is, to a large extent, the history of war, over the long-term too. After the imperial borders dissolved into those of the localized fiefdoms of the Middle Ages, lines of demarcation were imagined as borders of nation-kingdoms. The *Renaissance* was a rebirth of scientific and artistic creation but at the same time the birth of separate royal entities, that soon turned nations into nationalist contenders. The regime-changes to Republics in some national entities did not alter this aspect of things.

During four centuries, cross-border wars have raged in Europe, until a legally constraining form of integration was invented in 1950. Before that, despite the Westphalian peace invented in 1648, Europeans fought, destroyed and assured themselves of a mutual disintegration. The reasons for the wars were, by and large, always border-changes, sometimes associated with a royal wedding and a land-merger. Whether for the purpose of enlarging a kingdom, or to unify a linguistic community, or to resort to former lines of demarcation, Europeans have contested borders for as long as borders remained absolute values *per se*. The nature of borders as vectors of absolute power resulted in a status of borders as “triggerers” of war.

#### **2.1.2. The Intra-Communist Borders after 1956**

Certainly an outdated vision of the cold war is that of homogeneous blocs. Relevant enough to the nuanced suggestion is the fact that borders can be a vector of tension and of war even among allies. Internal borders within the USSR and within China are a case in point. And, with a particularly obvious relevance, one remembers the cross-border tension between the USSR and China as from the late 50s. This was the result not just of a misunderstanding or disagreement as to the nuclear issue in the 1950 Treaty of friendship but a question of deploying several divisions along the China, Mongolia border, in a gesture of hostility from the USSR vis-à-vis China, in the context of “big-brotherly interventions in Eastern Europe.

Other examples can indeed be mobilized. Political distinctions among allies have had a concrete consequence: cross-border intervention in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968. These marked the true nature of the Eastern bloc, as a vertical dynamic lead by the USSR among dominated satellites. Interestingly enough, in the West, this verticality also existed but in the form of US military bases opened and maintained in a number of allies. In this sense, the cold war did not directly result in a crossing of borders among enemies, except in Korea and Vietnam, but among allies and ideological partners. Physical borders already at the time of the cold war had begun to lose their role as lines of absolute sovereign divisions.

## **2.2. Advancing Regionalization as Border-Change**

### **2.2.1. The Starting Point of the Shanghai Dynamic**

The intricacy between a change in the very conception of borders and the emergence of regions is obvious. In the case of (central) Asia, this intricacy lies at the heart of the emergence of the Shanghai spirit of “good neighborhood”. The agenda after 1991 was, first, bilateral settlements of border-

demarcation between China and her new neighborhood, and, second, in 1996 the creation of the Shanghai Five as a conclusion of the good advancement of these settlements. The pace of change was rapid and, even more relevant, the risk of border war not just avoided but subsumed into a superior common interest: to emerge from the demise of the cold war in a constructive manner.

Diplomacy was much involved, naturally, but also physical confirmation of national territories and explicit and concrete military disengagement over a meaning stretch of land: 100 km on either side of the borders. In this sense, cross-border management changes the conception and the substance of borders. Borders are no longer absolute (enemy) lines but become interfaces among nearing partnerships. Despite the critical view that these settlements were in the interest and to the advantage of China, which gained some tens of thousands of square kilometers, the process did not stop at border-management and is today becoming a regional construction with sectoral ambitions.

Furthermore, such a change is of lasting nature, this time-dimension being on second thoughts more attention-worthy even than the immediate escalation of tension.

### **2.2.2. The Irreversible Substance of Europe?**

And so, neighbors become partners, against the grain of spontaneous international behaviors. History usually made neighbors enemies. New border-management turns neighbors not just into partners but into, first, natural partners, and, second, lasting partners, nay irreversible partners. This open-ended time-dimension is not sufficiently underlined in regional analyses. In the European construction in particular, but also in other regions, provisions for leaving the constructions (Community or Union) are blurring or absent. Partner-neighbors may have criteria for welcoming new members but do not envisage a falling-apart of their efforts.

This is logical as regional constructions are inspired, willing or not, by a need to overcome history. And so, whether slow or fast, the cross-border *rapprochement* among neighbors, the over-border exchanges among partners are meaningful in that they are conceived of as lasting. This is the crux of the difference with the alliances of the past until World War II. In the European case, probably the only exception is the 2005 Treaty over a European constitution that was not adopted. The SCO Charter also is an exception in the sense that it provided for the possibility of expelling a member or for a member to leave the Organization. But, to date, no example exists in the world of member-state leaving a region. Today's regions are built to last forever and maybe they will.<sup>1</sup> That is not to say that they are in the making without raising opposition or at least resistance.

## **3. The National Resistances to the Process**

### **3.1. The Shifting Evolution of Borders**

#### **3.1.1. From “Sovereignist” to Customs, Fiscal, Eventually, *with Time***

These time processes are also part of stages. Whether linear or cyclical, history unfolds phase after phase. Europeans needed at least three centuries to make peace. Time matters, although time was not all. Europeans were unable to make peace until they accepted to face this incapability and turned nation-states into a region. Already in 1618 they launched a large-scale war that lasted thirty years.

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<sup>1</sup> Even NATO as sectoral, non regional entity, relies on an open-ended duration having survived the demise of its “counterpart” the Warsaw Pact.

The 1648 treaties of Westphalia invented a concept - sovereignty of the state -, meaning legal equality of all states, and its consequence: territorial integrity. By 1870, reality became again that of aggressiveness, not surprisingly by newly-born nation-states, Germany, as if birth required assertive expansionism. Then, 1914 and 1939 were just larger-scale manifestations of this European incapacity to implement border-peace among nations.

Only constraints lead Europeans to peace, in other words to a system by which they forcefully evolved towards constructivism. First, the constraint to realize that only peace could save Europe from a mutually-assured destruction. Then, the constraint of supra-sovereign law and law-enforcement courts vis-à-vis sovereign states empowered by Treaty with the capacity to sanction States – quite a violent blow to absolute sovereignty. This was a brutal breach of Westphalian authority but there was no choice. To save themselves from falling into post-war and post-colonial oblivion, in sixty years, European states have realized a *tour de force*: losing sovereignty for the benefit of mutually conducted stability and world-states maintenance.

This is what regionalization truly means, beyond politics and through the small steps advocated by Robert Schuman.

### **3.1.2. The *Slow* Impact of Borders as Conscience and Identity**

So basic does this pattern seem to be - that “new” regions also undergo phases - that the issue for discussion is the pace of change rather than change itself. However, with regard to history, this can happen slower or faster. When Central Asian nations found themselves, in 1991, free to decide for themselves as post-soviet states, they managed to “skip” the trend of war for the benefit of the trend of constructivism. Yet, seeds of tension, notably interethnic, and grapes of war, notably anti-Russian, existed. But, resolutely, the fact that “there was no choice” - no other option but peace in order to avoid instability – led, within 5 years only, to the Shanghai Five in 1996, then the SCO Six in 2001 and today’s SCO’s Fifteen (six members, five observers, three partners, one guest).

In the meantime, in 2004 and 2005, special programmes were adopted by the SCO to fight against terrorism and to engage Afghanistan. The same years, the category of Observers to the SCO was created, in which first Mongolia (2004), and then India, Pakistan and Iran (2005) engulfed themselves. By 2009, the category of Dialogue Partner was also created, with soon Belarus and Sri Lanka in such a category. So, in all, between 2001 and 2009, that is in less than ten years, the region of Central Asia at large, with also South Asia and West Asia and China in East Asia was construed into an entity that makes sense. Even if integration in the European sense is still far ahead, the least one can say is that not only post cold war tensions were avoided but, quite clearly, Asian cooperationism is well under way.

It seems today that borders have definitely become vectors of peace, exchanges and future sectoral programmes, at one remote from the situations of the past.

## **3.2. The Sequential Imperative: Nation-States, then Region-States**

### **3.2.1. Centuries in European Case: 1648, 1870, 1914/45, 1950: Wars then Peace**

To suggest that the nature of borders has changed is logical. In the past already, borders evolved from zones of demarcation to lines of demarcation, from buffer-space to legally-agreed thresholds of sovereignty. With regionalization, borders lose their “absolute” nature and become functional. They

no longer separate but, on the contrary, they facilitate exchanges. Because the “protective” role of borders is displaced upwards to the region’s external borders (and tariffs), inter-member borders become mere lines of administration, notably fiscal, civil and accounting borders. Free movement of goods, capital and people entails that the nature of borders becomes cooperative, integrative, “withering”, no longer real land-marks.

This takes time, at least as to the implementation of the change. The decision to alter the nature of borders can be prompt (one year between the Schuman declaration of 1950 and the launching of the ECSC in 1951). The legal, administration and petty details of free movements, non-tariff obstacles and balancing-out of balances of trade agreements need time to feed into practice in a “digestible” and timely manner. However, slowness still relates to irreversibility. In this manner, the appraisal of the pace or of the success or of the efficiency of regional dynamics ought not to be measured according to rapidity and promptness but according to the deepness of the agreement – or better put: “agreeing” - among partners. The European Union, in this sense, is above all the dynamic “uniting” of Europe.

Partners have invented a new form way to interact over time and with time, in order to last as neighbors of a new kind.

### **3.2.2. Decades in Central Asian Case: 1991, 1996, 2001, 2004, 2012: CW to Region**

Such evolutions within the very substance and meaning of borders affect minds. Citizens but also leaders start to think differently of neighbors with, first, the message that borders no longer mean obstacles, and, second, that the physical dismantling of customs barracks and officers is necessarily and logically part of it. This is echoed in a change of perception both of Self and of the Other. Again, this takes time. Especially in Europe, where fear or disdain for the neighbor has so often meant aggressive antagonism and military conquests - two of which escalated and turned into world wars - to change one’s mind and begin to turn cross-borders exchanges into institutional constructivism triggers a sense of identity-change.

Gradually, what it means to be European, Asian, African, American ... becomes a new reference. One can still retain a national (and local) identity while adding an effective level of regional identity. Naturally, this degree of perception-alteration is inter-generational; at least it takes place more easily from one generation to the next. French born in 1899 will accept less easily a friendship or marriage with a German than his or her grandson or great-grand daughter. An Englishman and a Frenchman or more generally a northern European and a southern European shall trust each other less than citizens of the same sub-region within Europe, yet with time since 1950 the perception that being European is conducive to enrichment in multi-identity has made headway.

It seems that, in the case of Europe, border-change has occurred before mentality-change. The sequence is still unclear in the case of Central Asia, where, yet, border-management is a success and multi-national societies are monitoring rather peacefully their differences.

## **4. Conclusion**

In **conclusion**, what matters is to dwell on facts and to make sense of reality. Twenty years ago, the vacuum left by the demise of the cold war suggested that the European construction offered a particularly relevant example of “what to do” henceforth. In the span of 20 years, almost as many

regional dynamics have sprung forth (reactivated or created anew). Today, in Asia, not just Central Asia, one such dynamic, the Shanghai process, is imposing itself as the dominant one.

Naturally, the Shanghai spirit - the SCO - cannot overcome overnight the reality of inter-state borders. In a way, border-controls have become extremely tight between formal Soviet Republics, also vis-à-vis China, notably with Afghanistan due to the imperative fight against traffics and terrorism. However, already something has changed, which can be conceptualized as “cross-border behavior” or even “cross-border” *habitus*.

To take but one example, the Osh peak of tension in 2010 in Kirgizstan yielded to the Shanghai principle of multilateral non-intervention. Yet, probably, the Kirgiz authorities would have considered a stabilizing influx of order-maintenance maybe from Russia, at the very time when Moscow is still contemplating playing an active role in bilateral security. The fact that, on the SCO guidelines, no intervention in domestic affairs took place (although in Kirgizstan, it was Uzbeks under violence) bears testimony to the changing, yet still ambiguous nature of cross-border influences by a regional body in Asia.

This conference in Romania, in the heart of Europe, is a wonderful occasion to air some of these impressions and hypotheses relating to a changing world for a changing Europe and a changing Asia.

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