The Razor's Edge: A Review of Contiguity in Conflict Studies and an Argument for Redefining Neighbors

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ABSTRACT

Political scientists generally agree that contiguity is a significant predictor of interstate conflict; that is, they observe that it is neighbors that most frequently fight one another. Defining contiguity, however, is an unsettled matter. Still dominating conflict studies is the view that neighbors are those who share physical borders, or spatial delineations, between one sovereign territory and another. Yet an increasingly integrated international system, accompanied with shifting political identities and technological advances in communication and transport, suggest that power relations are more than a function of sheer corporeal distance. To anticipate contemporary interstate relations, therefore, we might tap the potential of constructivist theory to derive new understanding of what it means to be a neighbor.

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Introduction

The contemporary international system, still dubbed generally and most simply as the post-cold war world, challenges scholars to reconstruct appropriate frameworks for organizing, understanding, and predicting international relations. There is an almost slap-happy attempt to coin an appropriate name to this new system as well. With focus on the integration of states, free markets, and shared information technologies, one observer suggests that the new system with its own logic, rules, structures and characteristics be called an era of "globalution" (Friedman 1999). Another describes the international system as "uni-multipolar," consisting of one superpower and several major powers, all of which are locked in to inevitable clashes or coalescence of cultures (Huntington 1999). Still others propose "zones of peace and turmoil" or a "world of tiers" in which a common worldview and preference for market democracy sets one group of states apart from another (Singer and Wildavsky 1996; Snow 1999). Further, to capture the paradoxical effects of fragmentation and integration wrought by the process of globalization, one scholar develops the concept of "fragmegration" (Rosenau 2003). There are scores of other labels and analyses.

Regardless of the nomenclature and the distinctions between various frameworks, most observers agree that while division marked the cold-war system, integration does characterize many of the changes we find in the new world. Although varying in degree and alacrity, integration is visible in a multitude of economic, political and social spheres. The implications of global integration are subject to much study and speculation; for example, the very definition of state sovereignty is being reevaluated and the existence of a true hegemon being queried. For purposes of this study, we are asking what it now means to be a "neighbor" in this new international system, paying close attention to the issue and significance of proximity. We first briefly review the literature on geography and war, and then make recommendations for refining the concept and measures of contiguity.

Appreciably resurfacing in political science research are multidisciplinary approaches to studying state behavior and in particular international conflict. Empirical studies focusing on the nature of war are, with few exceptions, now routinely incorporating geography concerns with political

science observations. For example, who fights who is frequently explained in part by ascertaining the physical proximity of the players. Thus contiguity has come to predict conflict. To put it quite simply, we find that it is neighbors who fight each other. As early as the turn of the twentieth century scholars carefully scrutinized this relationship between geography and international relations. A British statesman of the time eloquently observed that borders were "the razor's edge on which hang suspended the modern issues of war or peace, of life or death to nations" (Curzon 1908: 7).

While a consensus of sorts has been reached today about the import of borders on interstate conflict, it is not clear that political scientists have learned two fundamental geography lessons: first, borders and systems are a mélange of both physical and social constructs, and second, they are not static. Indeed, despite the fact that the numbers of and the sizes of states and their neighborhoods contract and expand over time, political studies for the most part do not take into account the changing scope and significance of the contiguity-conflict relationship. Dominating political science research is the view that borders are merely spatial delineations between one sovereign territory and another, with the argument following that neighbors are those who share such demarcations. Conflict between two or more states is therefore associated with being adjacent in this respect. But alternative perspectives of what it means to be adjoined may provide new insights into the nature of war and peace. Aside from spatial considerations, temporal and contextual aspects may better determine who our neighbors are; for example, in light of new technologies that quickly and effectively facilitate exchange, neighbors might now be more than simply a stone's throw away.

Predicting and explaining conflict by taking into account the magnitude of geographical attributes has come full circle, as Diehl observes (1991). From Mahan, Mackinder, and Spykman's pre-World War II theories to those of the Sprouts, Starr, and O'Loughlin of more contemporary times, the study of geography and world politics reflects a decidedly cyclical approach to the treatment of international conflict. Attempts to explain state behavior in terms of geographic attributes clearly dominated the early part of the twentieth century. Then, following the Second World War and dawning of the nuclear age, a shift towards economic and psychological models and a minimizing of geographical dimensions characterized the study. Of late, however, there has been renewed attention paid to the discipline of geography as a substantial and integral part of international relations.

Pre-World War II Approaches to Assessing Geography and Conflict

Beginning with the observations of early political geographers such as Ratzel, international behavior was clearly tied to spatial relations. During a time when intergovernmental or nongovernmental organizations were fairly nonexistent, it was only the sovereign state that assumed the role of political player in the world arena. State political and military actions were seen influenced by technological constraints on distance; communications, weaponry, and transport determined state strategies and relations. A German natural scientist, Ratzel likened the state to a living organism attached to the earth and competing with other states for living space. His *Politische Geographie* published in 1897 organized spatial political data in a systematic framework. A state's frontier or border should not be considered a line, he argued, but rather as a shifting zone of assimilation. Ratzel's ideas subsequently influenced Nazi nationalists and military geographers bent on justifying German territorial expansion. At a time when earlier Darwinian theories spawned similar analogies, Ratzel's organic theory logically extended to state survival and illustrated how states might be strengthened by seizing key resources and occupying strategic locations.

A contemporary of Ratzel and an American admiral, Mahan was also intrigued with parallels between the natural world and the political state. In *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*, Mahan (1890) emphasized that world economic domination rests with control of the seas and that the development of sea power incorporates a number of factors including geographical position, physical geography, and maritime boundaries. Technology to transport armies and supplies by sea was superior to that available to move them over land. Equating power and world hegemony then on naval capabilities, Mahan urged the United States to adopt maritime policies conducive to controlling the oceans. Pioneering the concept of "shatterbelts," later upon which other geographers elaborated, Mahan also noted the strategic importance of certain zones of instability. Shatterbelts are fragmented areas of political competition between the continental and maritime realms. They and their boundaries are fluid.

Derived in part from Ratzel's organic theory as well, Mackinder's influence in geopolitical thought is legendary. Mackinder's aim in *The Geographic Pivot of History* (1904: 421) was to "exhibit human history as part of the life of the world organism". The British geographer and member of Parliament observed that while sea power had been the key to establishing world power, technological advanced required spatial concepts be reevaluated. Mackinder wrote at a time when vast colonial empires were ruled by Western powers and when the focus of warfare had been on the seas. Noting that naval mobility had provided the means to dominate crucial waterways—it was the case of ruling the world by ruling the waves—

Mackinder (1919) also recognized the need to maintain power on land. The significance of land power became the more obvious with the development of transcontinental railways with an inevitable shift to the "heartland" as a power center or land fortress. A strategic mass or core of human and physical resources, the heartland focuses on the interior continental periphery. Accordingly, survival of a state rests on defense of this geopolitical region. Thus power and influence are equated with the area of a state and so we find Mackinder's footprint on subsequent containment and domino theories in political science. For example, extending on the concept of the heartland decades later, Spykman in *The Geography of the Peace* (1944) identified relevant land areas around the edges of the heartland that he called the "rimland." By controlling another state's rimland, a neighbor could increase its own opportunities for expansion while preventing the other from expanding its interior power core.

We find that these early theoretical frameworks for understanding international conflict rest entirely on spatial constraints and the available technology to overcome those restraints. Power relations were based on distance and on the size of armies or navies to transport weapons, personnel and supplies. Early realist analyses are characterized as geographically deterministic or absolutist, indicating that location, resources and climate dictate political action, and no longer dominate the study of international behavior.

Post-World War II Approaches to Assessing Geography and Conflict

While the roles of distance and space have not been vanquished altogether in contemporary times, new tools of power have introduced different variables in the contiguity-conflict relationship. For example, advanced telecommunications can unite states that are relatively far apart, weapons of mass destruction can be deployed instantaneously to distant targets, and transnational organizations can complicate the identity and autonomy of states. In other words, in an open world system wherein states and regions are at different stages of development and relationships are increasingly complex, our neighbors are no longer just those states next door.

Maintaining that conflict between the two states is not dictated by geography but conditioned by an environment with many concerns, Harold and Margaret Sprout were among the first to effectively counteract prevailing deterministic theories. Publication of their *The Ecological Perspective on Human Affairs* (1965) reintroduced the notion that influences such as technology, demography, resources and geography all formed a

mileu or environment within which states responded. The Sprouts' environmental model, a triad of actor, environment and actor-environment nexus, suggests a variety of opportunities and constraints upon the decision makers in a state. Borrowing from the early 1900s French school of environmental possibilism, the Sprouts argue that such possibilism does not dictate that a state will act in a certain manner but merely indicates how environment can influence state behavior. The milieu, they state, is not a directive or compulsion for a specific action but simply a set of opportunities and limitations that provides cues as to the likelihood of particular outcomes. The possibilities for conflict then are influenced as easily by geography as by other factors. Later expanding upon this model, the Sprouts (1969) proffer cognitive behaviorism as an alternative to determinism. They describe a psychological milieu in which the decision maker's past experience, assumptions and perceptions about his environment contribute to the choices he makes. The structure of opportunities and constraints as described by the Sprouts illustrates a linkage between geography and international relations. It is a relationship that deals with contexts in which geopolitical factors in the environment assume multifaceted dimensions of behavioral patterns and distribution of people and resources.

A unique geographical theory of proximity began to materialize during the period in which the Sprouts wrote and built upon studies of opportunity and willingness. Boulding in *Conflict and Defense* (1962) considered threat perception and the role of uncertainty as geographical components of his "loss-of-strength gradient." States vary in their political or military ability to influence events in certain areas. These areas are zones of viability and are primarily a function of geography. Where states can exercise more sovereignty and power they are more viable; as their degree of influence diminishes further away from home base, state viability becomes more constrained or nonexistent. The loss-of-strength gradient suggests that distance may entail decision makers to reevaluate risks and so can affect the desirability or likelihood to engage in conflict. In as much as this distance decay imposes constraints on decision makers by illuminating logistic possibilities posed by geography, the theory is consistent with the environmental possibilism of the Sprouts.

The importance of choice is highlighted in subsequent studies by colleagues Starr and Most. How humans see their environment affects future choices. Developing his concepts of opportunity and willingness from the Sprouts and Boulding, Starr forged a frequently utilized framework for explaining international behavior. The first component of this model — opportunity — is closely aligned with the concept of environmental possibilism. Starr says opportunity is the "possibility of interaction between entities or behavioral

units of some kind" with the implication that an event will most likely occur if its chances to occur are great (Starr 1978). Opportunities or possibilities vary at any given time due to technology, social institutions, religion, ideology and a host of other variables, and are distributed in the international system differently as well (Most and Starr 1989). The second element in the framework—willingness—also traces back the Sprouts' reference to perception and refers to the processes by which opportunities are recognized and conflict then chosen (Starr 1978). But in reviewing this theoretical structure, political scientist Diehl (1991) is careful to note that while both opportunity and willingness must be present before a decision maker elects to go to war, they do not appear sufficient conditions for conflict. Nevertheless, geopolitical factors do provide for the structure and serve to link the environment with political behavior. Starr and others illustrate this by building upon the behavioral model to include interaction and diffusion effects, specifically looking for groups that are salient or important to each other (Most and Starr 1989; Siverson and Starr 1990). Proximity is a consideration in the study of conflict between states but geographical proximity is just one way of measuring distance and determining ease of interaction. Boulding's loss-of-strength gradient resurfaces in Starr's discussion of salience when assessing the ease of interaction between states. Here, in terms of location, neighbors have the opportunity, willingness and ability to interact more viably than states separated by great distances. Earlier studies demonstrate, in fact, that the interaction between neighboring states is greater than for others (Cobb and Elder 1971). The focus in this observation is on physical borders or geographic space, but as Starr (1991) argues, proximity is not always measured so narrowly. Sometimes it may refer to attribute or behavioral space. For example, distributional patterns in alliances, institutions and resources could also determine the distance between states and thus explain more fully salience and the ease of interaction in the world system. Further, he adds, spatial and temporal constraints of topography or physical barriers can be overcome by technology so that the meaning of the geographic environment is changed.

Among contemporary studies in political geography correlating spatial variables to international relations, O'Loughlin and Anselin (1991) present a unique methodology for relinking the two disciplines. Applying spatial econometric models to the study of conflict, they find that space is as important an explanation for war as are the traditional military, political and socioeconomic reasons extolled by others. For example, powerful states with a global reach will exhibit less spatial dependence in interstate relations; that is, borders will not be as constraining to them. Decisions to war will be reached differently for these states than for others. Thus social relations must

also be examined in spatial contexts, they note. Explaining levels of conflict and cooperation among states and regions then requires careful specification of all attributes including spatial variables such as dependence and heterogeneity. Despite their efforts, however, O'Loughlin and Anselin find that their analyses explain the total level of cooperation or conflict of individual states adequately but suffer in explaining actual patterns of interactions between neighbors. The challenge to do so has recently been undertaken by other quantitative researchers, such as Braithwaite, who maps geographical distributions of "hot spots" of international conflict occurring from 1816 to 2001 (2005; 2006). He suggests that these non-random concentrations of armed violence may support the opportunity-willingness hypothesis of earlier studies focusing on spatial contiguity.

Evaluating Geography as a Condition or Cause for Conflict

Even while looking at neighbors in the narrowest of terms there is not agreement on the extent to which contiguity affects conflict. Starr and Most (1980) argue that while geographic space is a relevant component of conflict, it is not a sufficient cause. However, they do note that there is a spatial diffusion effect of war in which the prospect of conflict in one state is affected by the presence of conflict in another. Due to increased uncertainty and among other reasons, warring borders can increase the likelihood of conflict. Borders nevertheless do not cause war, they warn. Bremer (1982) observes that wars generally spread within regions and not from region to region. He also considers these effects of diffusion and agrees that while the spatial dimension of international conflict is of considerable import, it is not causal. Further addressing geographic proximity issues, Diehl (1985) suggests it is not the sharing of borders that induce one state to fight another but simply being close to a particular area in dispute. Also approaching the diffusion of war from a spatial perspective, Houweling and Siccama (1985) put a temporal twist to the argument. They maintain that it is not interaction opportunities but power distributions among states that affect the likelihood of conflict spreading. Power distribution is generally affected at the local or regional level instead of a worldwide level and conflict does seem to center in particular geographic regions. But they note that over time different regions experience different patterns of diffusion. The arguments for geography as a facilitator for conflict differ to some degree. Some studies find that shared borders increase interaction opportunities and so geographic proximity can structure a state's risks and opportunities. Others find that proximity or shared borders contribute to the diffusion of conflict to another state or throughout a region. Despite the role that geographic spatial considerations play, the conclusions reached by these scholars are unanimous—contiguity or proximity is not a sole determining factor in war.

Some researchers, however, look at geography as more than a facilitating condition for conflict. Certainly territorial squabbles throughout time suggest that strong geographic interests drive conflict. Diehl (1991) astutely observes that most conflict studies have not focused on what states are truly fighting about. Instead of the actual stakes involved, research has concentrated on other factors to predict and explain war such as arms races, alliances, power distributions and other state or system attributes. Carefully sidestepping early geographical determinism theories, however, there are a number of scholars who do focus on geography as a source of conflict. Richardson (1960) early argues that the number of borders possessed by a state determines its chances for war, and that high level of interaction inevitably leads to conflict. The frequency of border disputes is observed by Mandel (1980) to reflect a power distribution among the participants; the parity argument points to the more conflictual behavior among less-developed and weaker states. Alternatively, power transition theorists such as Prescott (1965) argue that a better predictor of conflict is the change in the participants' relative strength. Prescott notes, too, that it is the geographic importance of disputed territory that determines a state's willingness to use military force. Less of an emphasis on opportunity and a greater emphasis upon willingness to go to war appear to characterize these studies as a source of conflict.

Vasquez (1995) offers three major explanations why neighbors fight amongst themselves: proximity, interaction or territoriality. It is territoriality that best explains contiguity and conflict, he says. Proximity arguments suggest that only among states that can reach each other can conflict occur. This encompasses the aforementioned discussions of distance and opportunity. But as Vasquez himself wonders, how can proximity itself cause war when most states are contiguous to one or more other states for long periods of time and yet do not fight all the time, if at all? Even if proximity serves as a necessary rather than sufficient condition, it is only in a trivial sense, he argues. As technology enables states to extend their military reach and overcome constraints of distance, the proximity explanation suggests that wars may become more frequent. The interaction explanations suggest that the number of conflicts will increase as states interact more frequently with each other. Contiguity comes into play because it promotes these interactions. This argument, however, overlooks the possibility that greater interaction across borders may lead some states to become more cooperative instead. Indeed, multivariate analyses support casual observations of this phenomenon. Dyads experiencing high levels of economic interdependence, for example, have fewer propensities to war (Oneal and Russett 1997). We should see more interactions occurring between non-contiguous states as economic interdependence and technology shrink the world,

concedesVasquez. If the interaction explanation for conflict is correct then, we should also witness more military confrontations between those states. Yet the number of conflicts is decreasing. Territorial explanations are more powerful, providing the willingness to go to war when proximity explanations fail to always explain the opportunity to do so. Vasquez argues that wars are more infrequent among non-neighbors simply because they usually do not have territorial issues over which to wrangle. Reviewing statistical evidence provided by Holsti in 1991, Vasquez finds that for nearly 350 years, territorial issues have dominated interstate conflict. Yet because he does not find that territoriality is a consistent or constant justification for war, Vasquez is hesitant about concluding those issues cause conflict. "All that is being said is that territorial issues are sources of disagreement that can, depending on how they are handled, lead to war. In that sense, they are a source of conflict that can lead to war, but they need not result in war," notes Vasquez (Vasquez 1995: 283). Nevertheless, he argues for the power of the territorial explanation and says that wars among neighbors are highly likely to be over territorial issues.

It is unclear whether geographical proximity is a condition or cause of war. What is clear, however, is its preeminence in studies analyzing the onset of interstate war. The literature does not belittle in any way the role contiguity plays in conflict. Indeed, even in multivariate analyses finding an exceedingly strong correlation between, say, trade and conflict, the effect of contiguity remains convincingly powerful. Bremer (1992) looks at the conditions characterizing war-prone dyads and finds that conflict is more likely to occur between states sharing seven features. In order of declining importance they are: geographic proximity, unallied, underdeveloped economy, undemocratic, power disparity, and presence of a major power. Bremer finds that contiguity is so overwhelmingly important in explaining interstate war that it should be included in almost all studies of conflict now.

But there is relatively little new literature being generated now clarifying the definition and effect of contiguity, an effect that is spatial, temporal and contextual in nature, on international conflict. A combination of geopolitical variables probably best describes the likelihood of conflict afforded by borders yet recognizing and measuring the impact of these variables has captured the attention of but a few political scholars.

What Constitutes the Politically Relevant Neighborhood?

With land covering about thirty percent of the planet, and almost all of that land divvied into about 200 political units, it is no wonder that boundary

lines serve a predominant role in defining states and determining relations between those states. Regardless whether political boundaries have followed natural barriers or artificial constructs, over time they have been transient and reflective of conflict and cooperation among people. Boundaries separating states are commonly understood in spatial terms, as planes in space and lines on maps, and so have generally provided ease in distinguishing one political unit from another. Further, shared borders have served to identify states as neighbors in the international system in the same sense as adjoining property lines identify two suburban homeowners as neighbors. What constitutes neighbors in this sense then is the fence or the physical boundary line between the two units. In most empirical studies of international relations examining the role of contiguity in conflict, shared geographic borders have served to identify neighboring states. Contiguity has been measured in terms of distance. The literature is replete with findings that states most often fight those closest to them. This conclusion is so universally accepted in political science studies that in tests to determine other influences upon conflict, contiguity is now automatically designated as a constant variable or a given.

Suggesting that interstate conflict differs across geographic regions, Gochman and Maoz (1984) observe that the number of sovereign states has dramatically increased since World War II with a conspicuously diverse distribution of geographic locales for dispute. Too, the capabilities of states to interact with others on a regional or global basis differ from region to region. Patterns of dispute behavior have consequently paralleled changes in the composition and size of the interstate system, they conclude. Exempting a small class of states from the rule that territorial proximity determine interaction opportunities, Gochman (1990) explains that only a few major power states have the capacity to overcome the geographic constraints imposed on political, economic and military influences. Aside from capability and other domestic power characteristics such as alliance or trade, specific geographic conditions also provide interaction opportunities. He acknowledges that issues and choices relating to war rely heavily on the decision maker's perception of the environment, as the Sprouts earlier suggested, but adds that decision making by state leaders is not always volitional. It is the geographic situation of the state that directly and significantly affects a state's international behavior, he argues. The relevance of geographic proximity given, Gochman observes that while a few major powers can extend their reach beyond the immediate neighborhood, it is nevertheless the immediate or proximate neighborhood that is the most relevant one for all other states. Looking at and modifying data gathered by Singer and Small, Gochman concludes that the relevant proximate neighborhood can also extend to the neighbor of one's neighbor, if the

neighbor's neighbor has a direct interest in the relations of his neighbor with another. An even more interesting observation is that all neighbors are not the same; Gochman adds that the potential to influence another's behavior varies from state to state. For example, small states are especially sensitive to the activities of any major power states bordering their territory. It follows then that proximity to particular types of neighbors may aggravate or constraint conflict.

Singer (1979: xxi) suggests that, just as in procreation, there is a mix of deterministic and probabilistic laws at work in explaining how states interact. Having war or not having war is analogous to that of having a child or not having a child, he says. While geneticists have a fairly sound command of the laws at work in their field, political scientists are ever searching for theoretical frameworks with which to explain and predict international conflict— frameworks whose reliability "remains somewhere between fortune telling and advice to the lovelorn". Nevertheless, he is eager to present a model as well, one in which structural, relational and behavioral dimensions describe the international system. Over time, geographic variables are used with varying emphasis and scope to explain conflict, he says. To a limited extent, though, Singer notes that similarities between states are usually associated with closeness in proximity and that differences are associated with distance.

Singer and Small's monumental Correlates of War (COW) project shows that more than 80 percent of interstate wars are among neighbors. How might we measure contiguity then? COW describes two states as being geographically proximate one of two ways: states are considered contiguous by land if they share a common land frontier or if a river demarcated the boundary; and contiguous by water if they are no more than 150 uninterrupted statute miles apart. The 1989 COW project initially identified 144 states in the international system over a period of 150 years and assigned each dyad a contiguity code; in instances where two states were contiguous by both land and water, the land/river contiguity measure took precedence and was recorded. This, because as Bremer (1995) notes, land contiguous dyads are slightly more war prone than those contiguous by sea.

The COW data set has subsequently prompted a series of studies focusing on geography and conflict, some using these measures and others slightly modifying the terms of contiguity. For example, Gochman (1991) adds to Singer's distance-by-water contiguity measures by saying proximate states are those that are separated by no more than six nautical miles. Since the origin of the COW coding reflects the average distance in one day that a

sailing ship could cover during the years of study, Gochman points out that modern ship technology raises questions about conceptual comparisons over time. Essentially, the COW schema for land and water contiguity suggests that geographic orientation is linked at the ability to "get at" another state. It is this "delineation of geographic zones" that comprises the politically relevant neighborhood for Gochman (1991: 95–108).

Lemke (1995) refines Gochman's relevant neighborhood by arguing that no all contiguous dyads are relevant to the study of war. This, despite other analyses arguing that because wars are generally few and far between, narrow spatial and/or temporal domains provide weak support for drawing conclusions about which neighbors fight. Lemke, however, incorporates Boulding's loss-of-strength gradient as adapted by de Mesquita to narrow his field of study. Here, de Mesquita's formula (1981) takes into account the affect of advances in transportation technology on the loss-of-strength gradient, or a state's power share. The relevant neighborhood of any given state is then that reachable area identified by the gradient. Lemke recognizes a need to further refine the formula: it does not consider differences in terrain type and does not measure a country's power during given periods of history, he notes. And while de Mesquita's framework defines distance as being from the "locus of power of the potential attacker and the closest point of its intended victim," Lemke on the other hand determines distance from capital city to capital city (de Mesquita 1981: 104). The most notable distinction in Lemke's analysis, however, is that he does not find all sets of contiguous dyads appropriate for study. Some states physically do not have an opportunity or prospect to go to war, regardless of their being continuous. Lemke explains that a tyranny of distance occurs when states are not able to move military resources across boundaries into other's territory. Therefore, it is valid to study only those relevant contiguous dyads that might have had a war. "Geographic distance and terrain type coupled with the resources and capabilities of states delineate who they can fight," says Lemke (1995: 32).

Measures of distance between two states have been predominantly based on land (direct) or water (indirect) data and rely on surveying common boundaries. But there are other approaches to determining who a state's neighbors are such as marking the distance between state capitals (Gleditsch and Singer 1975; Lemke 1995). The drawback to the latter measure, as noted by Gleditsch, is that large-sized states may well war over territory far from their capitals while the inter-capital proximity measure does not predict interaction opportunities as reliably as common-boundary measures. Still, nearly all measures of contiguity center on spatial attributes and clearly fit into the discussion of interaction opportunities afforded by neighboring

states. After all, as we learned from Boulding, Most and Starr, and others the opportunity and willingness to engage in war decrease with distance. Gleditsch (1995) explains that distance and interaction are linked in three different ways. First, cost, such as transportation of resources and manpower, is lower at shorter distances and so lends itself to greater interaction with neighbors. Second, time, such as that needed to communicate, is less critical for transactions over short distances and also expedites interaction. Third, opportunity, the number of alternatives available to actors, is greater if there are no intervening or buffering locations. Nevertheless, this account does not take into consideration the impact of technology and economic interdependence on those links between distance and conflict.

New ways of looking at the state, at the international system, and what constitutes a neighbor requires reevaluating the usual definitions of contiguity. After all, the realist assumption of a static interstate system has become fairly compromised in much of the recent political science literature, and contiguity proves not to be an immutable concept either. It has been the modern political geographer who has ascribed "place" an intrinsically dynamic nature. Place is important because, "it constitutes a 'context' in which political conditions interact with economic, cultural and physical conditions…geography of a place is never constant," writes Nijman (1991, 64).

Challenging the narrower definitions of geographic proximity, as they were employed in the above-mentioned conflict studies, challenges first of all the very definition of boundaries and statehood. Boundaries or borders are typically perceived as spatial delineations between distinct political territories. Too, borders between states are usually an expression and measure of state power, as Ratzel pointed out long ago. This realist perspective of a tidy compartmentalized global system, in which inviolate territorial spaces are governed autonomously, does not reflect the global fluidity of the contemporary era. Even Huntington observes severe limitations to the statist paradigm. Not all states perceive their interests and behavior alike. Despite the admonition that "states are and will remain the dominant entities in world affairs," Huntington concedes that states are also now suffering losses in power, sovereignty and functions (Huntington 1996: 34).

A Constructivist Approach to Redefining Contiguity

What scholars have also observed is a transformation in the meaning of territoriality as we have previously understood it. While not articulated as constructivism *per se*, the Sprouts' work on environmental possibilism as we have seen provides early groundwork for an alternative framework of analysis to take into account the role of social interaction in constructing political environments. The viability of physical borders to determine political space is doubly under assault since the end of the Cold War (Luke 1996; Rosenau 2003; Hebron and Stack 2009). As states lose control over their territories and populations due to massive international networks of economics, communications, labor and other across-border flows of goods, services and people, state legitimacy is arguably weakened. Political boundaries are less impermeable as those spaces become more "un-stated or dis-instated...(where) territory becomes a pluralized space that is complex, flexible and discontinuous" (Luke 1996, 504). It is important to remember, nevertheless, that spatial boundaries in this respect are themselves artificially constructed. In fact, as the history of the Roman Empire reminds us, political boundaries were not always delineated by lines but were instead marked by zones distinguishing different peoples or governing groups (Matthews and St. Germain 2007). Whether defined by lines or zones, neighborhoods may be created and destroyed. They may mutate so as to reflect varying social attributes and political practices. They are historically contingent, and subject to contextual conceptualization. To view contiguity from the lens of constructivism, then, we might consider the discursive context in which geopolitics and globalization each fall. Geopolitics has, for the realist, long referred to politically bounded territory; location is territorially framed. On the other hand, the phenomenon and process of globalization is based on openness. Power is now found in movement, and as money, goods, services, and information circulate, geopolitics increasingly shifts to an unbounded space (Cuddy-Keane 2003). Murdoch (2005) and other post-structuralists also address this shift from fixed to relational space.

The fluidity of new political spaces creates communities characterized by competition and negotiation of values, ideas, and objectives. These communities are not, as one political geographer describes, "settled terrains" (Staeheli 2008). Political identities thus reconstructed in collapsed state structures such as in northern Somalia, or cultivated by novel supranational organizations such as the European Union, defy traditional analyses of the politically relevant neighborhood. The concept of neighborhood here is one based on shared identity, in which members have common experiences, such as intermarriage or sense of kinship with others in the region or across the globe, and is not necessarily tied to state citizenship (Hohne 2006; Schaller and Abeysinghe 2006).

Thus, just as relevant to conflict as physical demarcations—if not more so—are ideology, culture, social institutions, spheres of political influence and other elements of the milieu. The constructivist sees the international system as fluid and characterized by ongoing formations of identities and interests of actors, social practices and interactions (Wendt 1992; Finnemore and Sikkink 2001; Guzzini and Leander 2006). When there are many overlapping or far-reaching influences and when that socially constructed environment is not clearly defined, it becomes more and more difficult to ascertain the neighbors of a state. Among other things, boundaries between states have become psychological phenomena (Kratochwil 1985). Telecommunications, strong trade relations and rapid transport have compressed the world; distances have shortened in the physical sense as well as in people's minds. Certainly, integration into the transnational system has become of paramount concern to states as they anticipate continued weakening of their territorial entities.

Conclusion

Despite the number of scholars who, over at least the past several decades, join in ushering out the familiar concept of a nation-state (Touraine 1985; Booth 1991; Rosecrance 1996; Luke 1996), globalization has not resulted yet in the death of the state. Although the Westphalian concept of geographically distinct and sovereign political units is under serious challenge, the power of nationalism is still hardy, if not more so in the twenty-first century. A cautionary approach to discussing territory and spatial organization in these unsettling times is warranted, suggesting that a new geography may be emerging. An "opening up of new political space for non-state actors to interact across national borders…and new forms of social organization" may characterize a reconstitution of identity and space (Marden 1997: 39). Further, such networks of association are constructed to allow political actors and others to behave without the constraints imposed by boundaries. Politics should not be territorially defined, but instead draw a distinction between spaces of dependence and spaces of engagement (Cox 1998). A highly interdependent international system suggests that we shift our perceptions from fixed locations to the increasingly unbounded nature of human relations.

Yet to some degree, territoriality does indeed remain a strategy for control. We have only to look at Israeli and Palestinian settlements and, among other issues, the continued struggle over water rights to see that physical borders still matter (Halter 2002). Further, the international system witnessed an explosion of new states with collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent

nationalist claims to land. One might have predicted that at least on the local or regional level there would be increased conflict as new physical boundaries were drawn, and so there were. However, the pressure to integrate quickly into a transnational system for economic survival requires that states seek stable and nonviolent environments. A new sense of community or neighborhood has seemingly appeared on the horizon as a consequence. States share more than physical borders. As interdependency in production capabilities grows, for example, states joining in a larger organic unit will be less likely to fight each other (Rosecrance 1996). It will no longer be physical proximity that defines neighbors but common interests. Some observers note that space is becoming more homogeneous and less of a constraint on state action (Johnston 1994). "Everywhere now is accessible to everybody; there are no nooks, corners, or retreats left…the result is a sudden and dramatic collapse of unconditional viability," says Boulding (Boulding 1962: 272). What are the implications then for attaching less importance to geographic distance in the study of international relations? Gleditsch (1995) notes two. First, although there are only a handful of states now capable of fighting global wars, no countries are mutually inaccessible at least in respect to some form of communication. Second, Boulding's loss-of-strength gradient is flattened out by advances in technology so that there is no appreciable difference in the interaction of near and far states.

Thus the shift to globalization appears to support the claims of Vasquez (1995) that proximity and interaction are not reliable predictors of conflict, and indicates that even territoriality issues might be peacefully resolved more frequently. Contrary to the realist paradigm, this view does not consider war as inevitable and all state relations a struggle for power. The motivation for going to war is diminished by improved channels of communication and linkages within the greater international community.

Constructing a theoretical framework for understanding the role of contiguity and conflict is unquestionably a convoluted matter. Proximity cannot be defined merely in spatial terms; power relations are no longer a function of sheer distance. Nor are they a sole function of time. For example, while one might measure the time needed to span the distance between political entities in order to determine proximity, states vary in their abilities to interact over time and with available technology. The same set of criteria cannot be used to measure the power or influence or relations between members of the international system. With a review herein of various measures of contiguity and its impact on conflict studies, the suggestion is made that political scientists tap the potential of constructivist theory to derive new perspectives of what it means to be a neighbor. The neorealist

and neoliberal world views and debate have dominated much attention in international studies within the past several decades, with constructivism now more frequently presented as an alternative to these two leading theories. Assumptions held by some constructivist scholars, such as the centrality of states, may not necessarily be inconsistent with those of material or structural theorists, but with an ontological focus on the role of rhetoric in constructing social reality, the constructivist is often regarded as more optimistic about international relations, and in some camps appears to present a viable challenge to conventional assumptions about how states behave. Yet, there remains more work ahead in constructivist literature to contesting views of contiguity and geopolitics as static and material. If the maxim is true—neighbors fight each other—new measures of what it means to be a neighbor are required in light of a dynamic and open system today.

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