

## **FLEXIBLE PERMEABILITIES: THE RE-DESIGNING OF THE CANADA-UNITED STATES BORDER SINCE 2001**

Wilfried von Bredow\*

### **1. Benign Border**

In their penetrating study of the Canada-U.S. border and borderlands, Victor Konrad and Heather N. Nicol call the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel “one of the most benign borders in the world”.<sup>1</sup> This begs the question: What is a benign border? Demarcating the territories of political entities like states, a border may be regarded as benign when it does not entirely separate the people of the two different entities, but in fact facilitates a fruitful exchange between them. The prerequisites for this are a constructive political climate between the two states and, predominantly, a friendly mutual understanding of the two societies. Violence and political bullying are not regarded as suitable instruments for the political exchange across the border. Conflicts are approached and ultimately solved with diplomatic means.

A benign border does not require being protected; there is a minimum of control on both sides of the border. No deep and violent conflicts between the countries on both sides of the border occur. Furthermore, if there had been such conflicts in the past, they are remembered as historic events that do not bear any consequences for the present. Inhabitants of the borderland have no difficulties in crossing the border (which in fact they do frequently). On both sides of the border, zones and mini-regions have developed, which profit from their proximity to the border. Local cross-border networks and relations “function very effectively to facilitate a variety of needs and desires including medical services, emergency support, tourism facilitation and,

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Konrad, Heather N. Nicol, *Beyond Walls: Re-Inventing the Canada-United States Borderlands*,(Aldershot: Ashgate), 2008, p. 1.

of course, trade”.<sup>2</sup> Strictly formalized exit and entrance control is mainly centered on citizens and goods in transit from or to third countries.

Robert Keohane and Joseph S. Nye have described the relations between Canada and the United States as belonging to a very successful model of an asymmetric and complex interdependence.<sup>3</sup> Many other historical, sociological and political studies on these relations support this same conclusion. The Canada-U.S. border is, indeed, a good example for a benign border. It is the longest border between two states – 3,145 miles on land with an additional 2,380 miles on water. In 1925, the U.S. and Canada created the *International Boundary Commission* which is responsible for surveying and mapping the border<sup>4</sup>. North Americans like to think of the border as “the world’s longest undefended border” – being that it needs no military defense. Border control is executed by law enforcement personnel.

The Canada-U.S. border is not the only benign border in today’s world. Nevertheless, not many borders between states can be strictly defined as benign due to the fact that, in many cases, borders are instruments for exercising tight control and impeding the flow of people, goods and at times ideas. To quote a contrastive example, it would be delusive to call the other long border of the U.S.A., the U.S.-Mexico border, a benign border.

## **2. Vanishing Borders?**

Is the status of being benign the last stage in the development of a border before it vanishes altogether? Immediately after the end of the East-West conflict, this question was often answered with a kind of cosmopolitan optimism. In this vein, borders were often regarded as relics of the political past. The ‘*end of history*’ would imply the dissolution of borders, or at least of non-benign borders. Such optimism prevailed especially in Europe where some of the least benign borders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have disappeared, probably permanently. The process of Western European integration had downgraded previously disputed political borders between nations to little more than mechanisms for

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> See Robert O. Keohane, Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*, (Boston, Little: Brown & Cie), 1977, p. 165.

<sup>4</sup> International Boundary Commission, *Boundary Facts 2009*  
<http://www.internationalboundarycommission.org/boundaryfacts.html> Accessed March 5, 2009.

administrative routine – or so it initially seemed. In addition, the tearing down of the Berlin Wall in 1989 seemed to symbolize and represent the vanishing of European borders altogether. De-bordering was regarded by many as inevitable and was mostly upheld as a positive development in international affairs (which would, in the long run, lose this status and turn into what some German political scientists called *Weltinnenpolitik* (world domestic policy)).

As far as North America is concerned, Maureen Appel Molot<sup>5</sup> and Fen Osler Hampson predicted the partial fading of the Canada-U.S. border in one volume of the renowned series “Canada among Nations” and, in doing so, asked: “Does the 49<sup>th</sup> Parallel Matter Any More?”

“The title, *Vanishing Borders*, is meant to capture not only the growing depth of the relationship since implementation of Canada-US Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in 1989, but also the larger impact of globalization, which, in commercial and financial terms, has further reduced the significance of the border. Electronic commerce and telecommunications render the conduct of much commerce borderless...Can we anticipate...an era in 25 years when the Canada-US border will be no more intrusive than that between Germany and the Netherlands? At the same time, there are more nefarious items crossing the border – drugs, guns, and illegal migrants – with the result that there is pressure to tighten border control. Borders may be vanishing in some respects, but in others they are being erected”.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. Dramatic Challenge

When *Vanishing Borders* appeared on the stacks of the bookstores, this contention seemed to convey a fair and well-balanced outlook into the new millennium. One year later, the terrorist events of September 11 changed the atmosphere in the international system and, perhaps, even the international system as a whole. Additionally, they changed the meaning of the Canada-U.S. border. As a deeply shocked David Bercuson noted on December 3, 2001:

“Yesterday was the first time in more than a century that the United States has felt sufficiently vulnerable along its northern frontier to station troops along the US-Canadian border...That could prove

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<sup>5</sup> On the cover of the book, the name of one of the editors is incorrectly spelled as Maureen Appel *Molat*.

<sup>6</sup> Maureen Appel Molot, Fen Osler Hampson (eds.), *Vanishing Borders: Canada Among Nations 2000*, (Don Mills, Ont.: Oxford University Press), 2000, p. 2.