

**Report on the 2nd GCOE-SRC Border Studies Summer School:
“Eurasia Border Review: from Northeast Asia to Middle East”
PART 1**

Over the first week of August, to the backdrop of summer weather, festivals and cold flowing beer, there occurred the Second Summer School for Young Researcher's organized by the Global COE program of the Slavic Research Center at Hokkaido University. This year 12 young researchers from other institutions were joined by one participant from the host SRC in a series of lectures, a trip to the border site, and in the opportunity to present their own research to colleagues. Having myself been fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to nervously present my own research at the previous year's summer school, I can attest to the value and enjoyment of the experience. It was very interesting to observe the dynamics of the program in its second year, as it settles into its stride, although unfortunately due to other commitments I was unable to attend all of the lectures offered. This report shall therefore concentrate on those pieces of the program that I was able to attend.

The scope of lectures this year extended across the entirety of the Eurasian continent, looking at everything from the status of borders within the EU to a timely focus on maritime boundary issues in East Asia. Such an approach of course fits in neatly with the perception of the importance of borders and their study as has been outlined by the head of the project, Professor Akihiro Iwashita. As he has repeatedly emphasized, there is now recognition of a great diversity of approaches that now come under the heading of 'border studies', a recognition that serves to highlight a growing salience of border issues within the world today. The manner in which the remit of the SRC has moved from its studying the stark binary division of the world into capitalist and communist spheres and its exclusive focus on the latter, whatever the subtleties present beneath such a broad outline, to the current mission of the department to dramatically broaden its outlook nicely seems to mirror a wider process. What is clear, and was highlighted in Professor Iwashita's speech, was the manner in which old certainties which appeared to pertain a mere twenty or so years ago are being undermined. As is well documented, the growing extension of finance capital and what some perceive as the retreat of the state have encouraged a view of globalisation as a newly revitalised force ready to sweep away traditional notions of state sovereignty, whether merely through the efforts of transnational corporations and international finance or the growing trend towards regional blocs exemplified by the EU. In such an environment, when the traditional reified borders between states, between ideologies, and even at a wider level between gender and race become much less binary, the area subsumed under the rubric of 'borderland' is massively expanded, and it is in reflecting such a tendency that the SRC's programme has arrived at such an opportune time.

With that in mind, however, the second lecture by Professor David Wolff of the Slavic Research Center, focussing on the emergence of borders and borderlands at the outset of the Cold War, served to show how the SRC's pre-existing experience of dealing with Soviet and Eastern European border issues qualified it to extend its research remit wider in these post-Soviet times. Focussing particularly upon the figure of Stalin, it emphasised the personal attention that was lavished on the question of 'correct' borders by the Soviet leader. As is abundantly clear from his famous essay on nations, Stalin held a particularly reified vision of nations as both self-

evident and the importance of the 'appropriate' links between the people of a nation and 'its' territory. Professor Wolff looked to emphasise how in the Soviet case foreign policy was literally that, a policy with essentially no domestic referents whatsoever, merely reflecting the dominating will of Stalin. The resulting perspective was very much one of Great Power classical geopolitics, with peoples and territories being largely rearranged at will from a panoptic center or through the negotiations between the major locuses of power, with barely a reference to the people concerned. That such issues remain live long after the passing of both Stalin and the political system he was associated with is testimony to the importance of our renewed attention to border issues.

Indeed, the contemporary results, as it were, of a Soviet nationality policy largely associated with Stalin's vision were made clear in the lectures of Professor Kimitaka Matsuzato, also of the SRC, whose talk introduced the theoretical perspective of 'Cultural Geopolitics' and its application to the former Georgian SSR. The talk focussed on the transnational linkages emphasized by the cultural geopolitical perspective, but it is clear to the current author at least that the current struggles of the Georgian state with its 'integral' regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as Adjara, are a direct result of particular Soviet policy decisions and methods of rule. This was an absolutely fascinating presentation that detailed the sub-state religious links between various groups within and outside Abkhazia; for example, Muslims with the Turkish Diyanet (Presidency for Religious Affairs) or Armenians with the Apostolic Church. Not only are these relations outside of state channels, but are frequently in opposition to those of the host state, with the Diyanet's engagement with Abkhazia largely opposed to the governments generally good relations with Georgia, or the Russian Orthodox Church's support of Georgian Orthodox primacy in the region as a quid pro quo for Georgian non-recognition of the Kievan Patriarchate. Such a focus on transnational linkages provided a timely reminder of the importance of non-state actors in our understanding of the notion of borderlands, and the manner in which the border serves to condition the nature of such linkages.

Such a broadly geopolitical perspective, whether classical or cultural, served as a crucial introduction for the lectures of day 4, which focussed on the obviously topical issue of borders in the Middle East. This is clearly an area where the classic geopolitical issues of Imperial competition and boundary creation continue to play out on a fractured social and religious terrain that remains seemingly impervious to change. Despite widespread agreement that the borders of the region are artificial colonial creations, there seems little possibility of drastic revision, and indeed while the 'Arab Spring' speaks of a certain trans-national solidarity, it remains the case that each incidence remains locked within its own state borders, and that rather than being overcome, the only possibility is for the increasing fracture of territory and hence the increasing salience of borders, as can be seen to the north of the region, in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, to the south, with the recent creation of South Sudan, and indeed has been clear in the cases of both Libya and Iraq, where there is open discussion of dividing the territory on religious, ethnic, political or historical grounds into two or three pieces respectively. That is to say, while everyone agrees that the borders are artificial constructs, the only solution that seems conceivable is to create more and more of these binary constructs, not to find some manner of overcoming them.

The difficulties present in these border issues was highlighted by all three presenters. That of Professor Keiko Sakai, of the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, looked at Iraq and particularly focussed on the post-Saddam situation. What emerged perhaps most strongly is how the borders perceived both within the region by the inhabitants and by people from outside are very difficult to define correctly, and that various perceived borders both overlap and interact with each other. For example, both the south and the Shi'a were largely marginalized under Saddam's regime, but to the extent that these categories largely overlap, it remains very unclear how such a distinction should be made. Professor Sakai made a very strong case for understanding the 'constructedness' of modern state borders, but the borders that occur within state territory, between geographical regions or between different ethnicities, are similarly constructed. It was very obvious from her presentation how the possibility exists for such divisions to be institutionalised and subsequently reified in exactly the same manner as the internally-homogenizing character of the modern state boundary. This character of borders was emphasised with the lecture on Syria and Lebanon given by Professor Hidemitsu Kuroki, also of Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, whose work emphasised the historical mobilization and institutionalization of such identities in both Syria and particularly Lebanon, where it obviously plays a part in the massive political demonstrations in the former and continued political paralysis of the latter. It is easy in this region to emphasise such identity politics within the region over those of state borders, whether speaking of the porousness of the Syria/Lebanese boundary, the vexed issue of Kurdish links across state borders in the north, and the continued Israel control of the Golan Heights that is itself then disputed between Syria and Lebanon. However, the recent demonstrations and the crackdown of the Assad regime serves to remind us how state borders, no matter their practical permeability, sever as a container within which the Baath state attempts to isolate Syrian society from the effects of the Arab Spring visible elsewhere.

The continued salience of classic geopolitical border issues to the region was subsequently emphasised by Professor Mohammad Hassan Khani of the Imam Sadiq University in Tehran, Iran. The presentation spoke particularly to classical statist concerns with borders, while also noting how the issue of borders has a direct effect on the society it contains when dealing with issues such as the heroin trade, and the effect that being a primary conduit of the trade to Europe has on Western Society. Despite the highly militarised character and rhetoric of the Iranian state, concerned as it is to defend both its sovereignty and the Revolution, it seems powerless in these face of such massive transnational pressure from the highly lucrative international narcotics trade. That the issue of the 'War on Drugs' is not a merely American concern was also brought home on the last day in the lecture of Professor Amporn Jirattikorn of Chiang Mai University in Thailand, whose research focussed on the insurgency of the Shan against the Burmese and its cross border links with both Shan migrants and Thai society in general. While the prevalent zero tolerance approach of the Thai state has had its effect in the pious denunciations by the Shan State Army (SSA, as of the late-1990's the foremost insurgent group), these suspicion remains that the taxing of narcotics as well as other contraband serves to fund the group, and support its extensive media and propaganda activities directed at both their Thai 'brothers' and fellow Shan migrants now forming an extensive, if largely undocumented, minority in the regions of Thailand near the Burmese border. Given the manner in which both the SSA operate on both sides of the border while their fellow Shan ethnics flee into Thailand,

the border itself, so clearly demarcated both on the map, seems to rather fade into insignificance or irrelevance.

In complete contrast, the other lecture on the final day, that of Professor Ken'ichi Nakamura, was focused on the possible differences in the notion of borders in different cultures, and particularly a specific, Japanese understanding of the world that has underlain all the later Japanese importations from China and the West, one characterized by a lack of dichotomy, the lack of a border, between the ideal and the real. How to connect such an understanding into contemporary border studies is a question for another occasion, but certainly the issue of cultural understanding of borders, as demonstrated throughout these lectures, is one that continues to have great salience. What emerged particularly strongly is the manner in which the 'constructedness' of such borders in no way diminishes their impact, and that merely historically teasing out the process of bordering does not in itself provide the means to solve border issues. This is an insight that is particularly important in my own work, where such historical cases can often serve as no more than points of antiquarian interest. It is not merely the construction of the border, but its actual operation, that is at issue. This was strongly supported by the particularly varied and apposite concerns of the young scholars themselves, whose presentations in the Workshop showed collectively the value of the border approach. While unfortunately space permits dealing with all of these in detail, I would like to both emphasize the excellence of the contributions, while noting that the vast majority of participants tended to emphasize a traditional statist-territorial understanding of borders, in a manner which contrasted slightly with the variety of perspectives visible in those of the visiting Professors.

This series of lectures undertaken by the SRC was a wide-ranging view of what we can mean by border studies in 21st century, and it can only benefit academia in Japan and worldwide to attempt to extend our conceptual understandings in such a manner. It was a pleasure to participate in this seminar series; I would finally like to extend my thanks to everyone involved.

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