


**Presentation****Framing border security trends in the 21<sup>st</sup> century****Evolución y tendencias de la seguridad fronteriza en el siglo XXI**

Guest editor

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Since, 2001, largely due to the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, there has been an explosion in studies investigating border security. This trend in the academic world responds to the actions undertaken by national governments around the world to “secure” their borderlines against the real and perceived negative effects of globalization. In effect, border security, as a subject of interest within the metadisciplina of border studies, has drawn attention from many different disciplines and numerous scholars around the world. Some studies have focused on crossborder flows, such as irregular migration, illegalized drugs, contraband, and more recently pandemics; others have delved into the security scaffolding around legitimate trade and travel and the state of crossborder infrastructure; quite a few have centered on governance issues and the politics of borders; an additional number of studies have examined the physical barriers cropping up around the globe, including walls and fences; and a growing amount of studies have scrutinized the changing functions, evolving processes, and deployment of technology for border security as well as the bordering processes taking place in interior spaces. A quick review of the literature on border security also shows that this bibliography is global in scope. In fact, the number of conferences and workshops on borders and border security has increased across all continents. Consequently, in many ways, border security studies resemble a potpourri of concepts, approaches, and methods, with abundant reflections on the ways, directions, and places where the phenomenon is evolving. This richness of academic work on border security is what inspired the call for papers for integrating a dossier on the subject.

The texts in this dossier were chosen to provide a more critical insight into the deeper aspects of border security in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Beyond the theoretical reflections and the specific case studies, the selected essays jointly shed light on key practices and narratives of border security today. Rather than reducing border security to one theme, these texts, together, provide the reader with a number of useful conceptual tools that help capture and understand border security's trends and transformations in the century on course. They delve into

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some of the most crucial tensions and contradictions that the modern Nation-state faces as it seeks to navigate the multiple centripetal and centrifugal forces pulling on its outer edges, the oft-futile efforts to control them, as well as the resistances governments confront from other actors who demand crossborder access. When read together, the essays in the dossier give the reader a number of useful concepts to understand the evolution and current state of border security. Overall, this thematic section of the *Estudios Fronterizos* journal aims at discussing some of the central threads running through the border security today in order to engage the most visible aspects of what it reveals currently—insecure Nation-states, the militarization of border security, the rhetorical constructions of threats and enemies, the dystopic use of technology in liminal spaces, and the inevitable anomie that comes with a game of control, repression, and resistance.

Following that order of subjects of interest, the special dossier starts with the piece “Russian border security: trends in post-Soviet transformation”, written by Serghei Golunov. This piece illustrates the baffling insecurity of the Nation-state today by taking the reader through the process by which border security practices and narratives are quickly embraced by states—even newly created Nation-states. The text shows how the modern Nation-state quickly thickens its borders and adopts common strategies and structures in border control. It also establishes that there is nearly always a tendency to centralize control and eliminate the perspective of borderlanders and border crossers in designing and implementing border security policies and instruments. This is true nearly everywhere. Paradoxically, the actions of a state to secure its borders sometimes only increases the insecurity of the Nation-state—in a kind of security dilemma—. Thus, although the case in this text is unique, Russia’s border security agenda quickly reveals that, despite all efforts to “secure” a country’s borders, there remains a disconnect, and a degree of awkwardness, between the modern state’s sense of security and its ability to control its borders. Consequently, border control grows by accretion. Old forms of border control, policing, for example, never go away, but other forms of border control are quickly added, such as fencing and technological gadgets. Moreover, the border zone also thickens, as areas of exception are created further and further from the borderline. (Witness also the case of the United States, where this state of exception in border control has practically been projected inward).

Thus, the Russian case shows that border security in the modern nation state is hardly directly correlated to State security. Even the most powerful nation states—such as Russia, and even the United States and the European Union—always feel insecure at the edges no matter what they do along them to feel more secure. Worse, the perceived challenges to border security are also multiplied over time—as states begin to conflate real risks with imagined threats. Consequently, even legitimate trade and travel, for example, quickly becomes a matter of national security. In extreme cases, such as the Russian case, a defensive posture at the border can quickly become offensive, precisely because fencing off, fortification, and policing are never enough. This study reveals in some ways that border security is a beast that eats itself. The Russian pattern is evident elsewhere around the world—and even open borders can quickly retrench to old practices, as became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To illustrate how border security as praxis turns the world on its head, the next piece of Roxana Rodríguez Ortiz, “From border security to borderization of security in the mapping of global space”, takes the awkward relationship between State insecurity and border security further. This essay highlights the insecurity of the Nation-state in the

21<sup>st</sup> century but contextualizes it in the gravitational pull of unstoppable globalization forces. In doing so, it draws consideration to the tensions and contradictions imposed on the Nation-state by these very forces of globalization. To conceptualize this, the text uses the word *aporia*—an insolvable internal contradiction or logical disjunction which is not easy, or even impossible, to untangle—. The Nation-state is caught between its self-preservation instinct, manifest in enhanced border security, and the pull of the “global state,” e.g., globalization as an unrelenting process, which pushes against national borders, not just in the form of legal and legitimate cross border flows such as trade, investment or tourism, for example, but also in the form of unwanted flows such as irregular human mobility and human trafficking, trade in illegalized psychotropic substances, terrorism, pandemics, etcetera.

These tensions and contradictions are most evident in border zones, where irregular migrants for example push against the attempts to control the borderline by governments that feel ever more under siege—whether it be the Schengen area in Europe or the United States-Mexico border—. In examining these tensions and contradictions, the author goes even further, turning the concept of border security on its head and proposing that the concept of border security as such does not fully capture reality on the ground. She proposes that in the binomial border security, the second concept does not settle the first but the first prevails over the second, resulting in what she calls the borderization of security, as opposed to the more linear concept of securitization of borders. In essence, this means that in setting up its border security apparatus, the Nation-state is not enhancing its own security—it cannot do so completely successfully in today’s world—but focusing on security and bordering everything else around it. In border security, “security” of course continues to be the central concept; but in the borderization of security, it is the borderization of everything else in the name of security what really matters. And our very lives become fragmented, segregated, divided—in effect, bordered—perhaps exacerbating other social problems of postmodernity—generalized mistrust, isolation, suspicion, and even violence. Yet, precisely because the global state is still an entity in the making, it cannot be held accountable. Thus, this amorphous entity provides for its own immunity. It cannot be held responsible for the horrors of what happens to migrants, for example. In that sense, border security as deployed by the Nation-state becomes the repository of our conversation, when it is the securitization of our lives what should really draw our attention.

As if to expand the debate, “The militarization of Mexico’s migration deterrence policy”, by Nuty Cárdenas Alaminos, and “Militarization of borders: migration flows and the Schengen regime”, by Marta Zorko, Robert Mikac and Rory Yoder, takes us into the progression of bordering processes—at a more material level—. This first of the two essays in this dossier that focus on militarization refocus the reader’s attention toward the evolution of border security. Interestingly, and perhaps inevitably, militarization is the route chosen by most States to reinforce their sense of security. The consequences, however, are nefarious. In this text, the author intuits that there is a progression to border security—from an earlier administrative and largely discretionary control to a material manifestation of border security, which includes physical barriers, and then onto militarization processes with a territorial expansion of border functions to all areas and spaces—as suggested by the previous essay to the securitization of everything, and as will be suggested further in the next study.

In this progression, militarization deserves special attention because its consequences for freedom and democracy are negative. Borders cease to be lines on the sand to be patrolled. Instead, they are infused with repressive control, hyper-surveillance, and a new culture where all freedoms and rights become secondary and subsumed by the security concerns of the Nation-state. Correctly, the author suggests that militarization in fact is not linear; it is not a static process either. Much like security, it is a dynamic progression going from its deployment at border zones to deter the undesirables to internal control through strategies, tactics, and weapons that were otherwise purely military in nature to the establishment of hegemonic military control of all civil institutions and social life. Unfortunately, this risks the end of both freedom and democracy, of discretion and accountability.

The author makes the case that such has been the case in Mexico under the Andrés Manuel López Obrador administration (2018-2024), partly by pressure from the United States but also willingly and gladly by the Mexican government itself. In more recent years, nowhere is this escalation more evident than in regard to the issue of immigration. Mexico, the case explored in this text, has effectively placed its trust in the military, distorting the role of civil public administration, the role of society, and the balance of political power—all pernicious consequences of border pressures on the Mexican State and its response choices.

However, even militarization processes at borders are not all the same. Introducing a degree of nuance to this discussion, the authors of “Militarization of borders: migration flows and the Schengen regime” show that not all states respond the same way to perceived border threats—even when militarization is chosen as the path to assuage a Nation-state’s insecurity—. In this essay, for example, the two cases examined, Croatia and Poland, show two variations of the process. When faced with the forces of globalization pushing against its limits, for example, irregular migration, some Nation-states escalate their militarization—Poland—while others choose a softer approach—Croatia—. Along the militarization spectrum, the study proposes that a Nation-state often goes from the mere presence of military forces at border spaces (as a deterrent presence) to the use of military equipment and surveillance (technical militarization) to the deployment of military forces in interior spaces and the handover of border functions to military forces, utilizing various events and crises to escalate the militarization of life in general. But again, even so, different states respond differently—Croatia did not militarize or securitize its approach to irregular migration whereas Poland went for a much harder process of militarization.

Although not discussed in the texts, it is possible to add an extreme case of militarization in the Mexican case, where the military is now in charge of all border functions and where the government’s administrative life is now being handed over to the armed forces. This, however, also reveals the paradox of border security and democracy today—the so-called *Schengen Paradox* in the words of the author: when Nation-states deborder their limits in pursuit of the benefits of integration, they can also be extremely reactive and quick to reborder when they see themselves under threat.

The following essay in the dossier continues exploring the odd path that border security takes and its constantly changing nature and character. In “The United States-Mexico smart border. Representations of technology and construction of irregular migrant as a threat-enemy” the author, Hugo Méndez-Fierros, explores the material and symbolic deployment of technology, resulting in hypervigilance and datafication processes, where not only are freedom and democracy undermined but also privacy is

lost and spaces previously considered cloistered from the hand of the State are invaded. Moreover, the author makes clear that this approach in the name of border security further deprives border agents from all discretionary power, which is now delegated to large computers and their algorithms, raking in information from all sources to construct threats and enemies of the State. This is the construction of the other as a threat but without the ability of the border agent to humanize the interlocutor. On the contrary, categories are conflated—migrants and asylum seekers, drug trafficker, and terrorists, victims and perpetrators, all are transformed into threats and enemies by the designation of a database—. This culminates in the utter dehumanization of the process of exclusion and the creation of reductionist categories, such as us vs. them.

The border agent can by himself no longer assess the humanity and need of the migrant, for example, but his data are collected, input into the computer, which in turn decides on the (in)admissibility of the individual. The algorithms do not create categories of deserving individuals but focus primarily on categories of admissible or inadmissible individuals. The problem is: who decides what goes into the algorithms? What is the weight that is given to the data points of each person as they show up at the border asking for refuge? In effect, it is legitimate to ask *quis custodiet ipsos custodiet?* The new surveillance and datafication system constitute the ultimate dehumanization process. And there is hardly any appeals process. Once the computer has labeled an individual inadmissible at the borderline, his fate is sealed. There is hardly ever a reconsideration. This is the culmination of everything that has come before it—from the bureaucratic and administrative management of borders to their securitization to their militarization to their final digitalization. In the end, “smart borders” are neither smart, likely reflecting the biases of those who build them, nor are they humane as they filter with no consideration to real risk. They do, however, provide the border guard with a reason not to think about the consequences of rejection on the refugee nor to the possibility that there may be a need for greater discretion as life and death decisions are made on real humans who had to leave their homelands in search of a better life or, simply, life.

This reflection takes us directly to the next piece in the dossier, “Smuggling and social anomie on the border between Colombia and Venezuela”, by Neida Alborno-Arias and Miguel Ángel Morffe Peraza. This piece engages a discussion on the counter-narratives, resistance, and activism, both good and bad, found up and against border security. Of course, much of the pushback comes from the very actors that often provoke the Nation-state to increase its security and escalate it to oppressive levels—well organized criminals. Occasionally, there may be some degree of resistance from local residents, but the Nation-state has ways to neutralize that—punitive measures against those who dare question the costs of border security to their communities. To be sure, criminal organizations, whether dedicated to drug trafficking, human smuggling, or any other kind of illegalized contraband, do not protest directly against the state. They simply find ways to skirt and even sabotage the actions of the Nation-state at its borders in pursuit of their objectives—forcing the Nation-state to respond with even greater security—. Any observer of hyper-securitized borders can see that with an increase in security measures there is also an increase in illegal practices at borders. This often results in environments plagued by anomy—a chaotic cat and mouse game—. This essay shows in fact that when the Nation-state is confronted with the need to “secure” its borders, this impetus often results in measures that feed into other actors’ need to evade these measures for their own purposes. That is one of the main reasons why

border zones are often plagued by conditions of anomy—social exclusion, crime, and even violence—. This in turn can create vicious circles, because the Nation-state often sees the need to crack down inviting further resistance, and everyone is engaged in a culture of repression and illegality which is difficult to scale down.

As the contributions in this dossier, published in volume 24, 2023, of *Estudios Fronterizos* journal, demonstrate, border security is a dynamic concept. It reveals much about the intricacies of this complex fact of modern life, one which creates its own storm: creating security dilemmas for the Nation-state of the twenty-first century, but also compromising human liberty, individual rights, and democracy by generating categories of inclusion and exclusion, undermining good governance by producing zones of exception, giving a central place to radical practices such as militarization in various expressions, and finally placing humanity in the hands of algorithms, which can only reflect the biases we build into them. Border security is, thus, a way to approach dystopic scenarios, without enhancing freedom or security.

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