🔒 Borders and border areas in sub–Saharan Africa: impossible to control? 2/2
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Histoire & stratégie

Due to the transnational nature of conflicts on the African continent, the securing of cross-border areas has gradually emerged as a major issue for peace and security. Although they "are rarely the cause of threats", borders are in fact perceived as "places where dangers crystallize".[109] whether they come from turbulent populations or from outside. A seemingly self-evident concept, the border, in its current acceptance, is a historical construct inseparable from the birth of the modern state. It makes its control by means of various tools and strategies, as well as relations with neighbouring states, operational. That being said, geographers distinguish several spatial effects of the border: "that of a barrier, which is its raison d'être, but also that of an interface and that of territory. In the second case, the border merely filters and channels relations between spaces that would exist more diffusely without it.

Sketch of typology

How to control the border? Three complementary approaches can be distinguished. (1) The first is to make it as airtight as possible, whether by building a wall, a ditch or by deploying border posts. It should be noted that these devices cannot be regarded as impermeable. Without even mentioning the Maginot Line, the wall between Mexico and the United States shows the limits of this approach: tunnels dug by traffickers and migrants, the use of drones or catapults to carry packages, the chartering of ships to circumvent the land border, the passage of drug traffickers through border crossings and ports using various methods to lure police officers.[138]. (2) The second aims at exercising control over the border area, either before or after the border crossing with mobile units, informants, and a presence of state representatives at crossing points such as wells and markets. (3) A third approach is to focus on active social and economic networks, i.e. a "mobile space" 139 consisting of places interconnected[by] a traffic system that can vary over time depending on the season, the political situation or economic opportunities. The control of these places and the people who animate them (as well as the use of the latter)

then makes it possible to control the border. The theme of border area management and the policies implemented by local authorities must be explored in order to understand the functioning of border areas and to avoid drawing quick conclusions about the apathy of the State," Karine Benafla reminds us about the Central African Republic. Who manages markets and transport routes, who settles daily conflicts? In reality, it seems that the management and policing of markets is rarely left to the "spontaneity" of trading groups and relies, more than we think, on the intervention of representatives of the state apparatus".[140].

Understanding borders in their plurality

This study questions the understanding of borders and border spaces, as well as the approaches that tend to consider them as lines whose crossings need to be monitored. The control of these spaces involves actors other than state representatives. It relies more on agricultural and pastoral organization, parastatal actors, market networks and local authorities linked to national ones. In this respect, talking about borders, border networks and transnational regions makes it possible to question the structuring of these areas and the flows that cross them, their relations with other territories, and their integration into larger groups. Similarly, it draws attention to the diversity of modes of control and the challenge of articulating surface logics (territories) and flow logics (networks).

Such an observation is far from being exclusively theoretical. Indeed, it echoes the conclusion of an article published in 2011 on Mali and Mauritania through the prism of the theory of "fragile and failed states". "These lines of fragility should make these countries, almost mechanically, bankrupt or collapsed states, as the states seem to struggle to influence the future of society. Yet these countries are not collapsing. ... We should therefore ask ourselves about the factors of cohesion, about the particularly high qualities of resilience, negotiation and political engineering of these two societies".[141]. If Mali and Mauritania do not have the capacity to imitate the 'Westphalian' States[142] they are not, however, powerless to face the risks of destabilisation. Following on from the first remark, we can also question the limits of the measures implemented at the instigation of external partners to strengthen border control in Africa.[143]. What resistance - corruption, non-appropriation, forms of circumvention by border actors (customs officers, police, smugglers, etc.), etc. - do these "imported" solutions generate? How can they be combined with approaches that focus on flows, nodes and dynamics of border populations?

How can we reconcile socio-spatial realities, the affirmation of State sovereignty and the exercise of sovereignty in the light of the burdens of administrations and the alternative solutions deployed? How can border control be strengthened without breaking the social dynamics of border areas?

In the end, all of this leads to a paradox and a double challenge. The paradox between the fragmentation of territories under the effect, in particular, of measures implemented in the name of the fight against terrorism and migratory flows, and the unity of border areas whose only stability lies in their capacity to be living and development areas. The Malian crisis of 2012 and the attraction for terrorist groups in the Niger regions of Diffa, Tillabéry and the islands of Lake Chad are partly the consequence of a failure by national powers to control their margins and the networks that polarize them. However, militarization and the promulgation of the state of emergency are helping to feed these centrifugal dynamics by reinforcing discontent and risking pushing, into the arms of armed groups or criminal gangs, populations whose traditional way of life can no longer be sustained and

who are attracted by promises of money. As for the challenges, they relate to the difficulty of reconciling the strengthening of the State and decompartmentalization, i.e. the surface and flow logics, and of dealing with the causes and not just the symptoms of crises on which terrorist groups rely.

138 Vanda Felbab-Brown, The Wall, Washington D.C., The Brookings, 2017. Among the methods used to focus the attention of police officers on a given area for a given period of time are the followinge include the use of an "opening vehicle" carrying drugs for arrest or the payment of false informants.

139 Denis Retaillé and Olivier Walther, "Guerre au Sahara-Sahel : la reconversion des savoirs nomades", L'Information géographique, Vol. 75, 2011/3, pp. 51-68.

140 Karine Bennafla, art. cit., p. 49.

141 Alain Antil and Sylvain Touati, "Mali and Mauritania: Fragile Sahelian Countries and Resilient States", Foreign Policy, Spring, 2011/1, pp. 59-69, p. 69.

142 Western approaches to 'stabilization' suffer from the same bias, with a tendency to involve the institutions or actors that are most familiar rather than those that populations consider to be the most legitimate and productive of a local order (Vanda Felbab-Brown et al., Militants Criminals and Warlords. The Challenge of Local Governance in an Age of Disorder, Washington D.D., Brookings Institution Press, 2018, chapter 7).

143 Philippe Mamadou Frowd, Securing Borders in West Africa: Transnational Actors, Practices, and Knowledges, PhD thesis, McMaster University (Canada), April 2015, p. 126.

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