

The Coronavirus Closes Borders

by George Friedman - March 31, 2020

The border between the United States and Canada has been closed. I don't recall that ever happening before; I'm not sure what it is supposed to achieve, given that the coronavirus is rampant in both countries, and I don't know how to close a border that is wide open for miles and miles. I only know that Ottawa and Washington are satisfied with the arrangement.

One of the most important consequences of the pandemic is that borders have been becoming barriers. Borders have always mattered, of course, but as international trade intensified, they were in some cases more checkpoints than barriers, and in other cases more mile markers than checkpoints. By no means was this universal or universally accepted, but the principles of unhindered international trade, what some called globalism, were pressing toward the kind of border the U.S.-Canada frontier typified.

Nowhere was this principle embraced more than in Europe. As Europe recovered from World War II, the notion of economic integration became more powerful and, with it, so too did the idea that borders were not to be barriers. In 1991, the Maastricht treaty was signed, institutionalizing the idea of open borders. The European Union embraced four freedoms: the free movement of goods, the free movement of capital, freedom to establish and provide services, and the free movement of people. Europe also established the Schengen zone, which allowed citizens to move between nations as if they were actually a single country. Nations continued to exist, and national governments were elected, but at the same time the borders became markers. That movement has now been interrupted and national borders have once again become barriers.

Each nation is responsible for the well-being of its population. Leaders are selected according to their nation's political process and are responsible to their own public. The EU in Brussels is not responsible for managing the current crisis, nor would publics accept the practical implications of a pan-European solution. Germans were Germans and Poles were Poles, and in a moment of crisis, national identity and autonomy mattered more. Put differently, economic well-being depends on managing the pandemic. Without success in that, the Europeans feel that the economic issues are trivial. The key decisions are being made by nation-states, not a transnational entity.

There is, as we have seen, little to be done beyond maintaining unprecedented separation between citizens of a country. The disease is spreading through contact with people, so minimizing contact is

the willingness of Europeans, particularly Germans, Europe's wealthiest, to come to Italy's material assistance was extremely limited. As the pressure of being bound together by the EU confronted the obligation of states to protect their own, support became more generous. But at no time was the "European identity" the governing principle. The assistance was from one nation to another nation, but not from one part of a single entity to another part.

It is not clear what effect this will have on the European Union. I think it will come to realize that in extremis, or at least the illusion of extremis, the nation will take precedence over the union. The nature of a marriage is not measured by the good times but the times of sacrifice. In the time of sacrifice in Europe, each nation looked to itself first and then considered others. This is not a surprise. As I have written, we love our own, those who share our language, our history and our Gods. The EU sought to transcend that. This is in many ways another test of the EU.

All of this is not, of course, unique to the EU. Russia closed its border with China early on. The closure of borders and the sequestering of supplies along with people is inevitable. There are already some reports of nations hoarding food that would normally be shipped elsewhere.

The governor of Texas has imposed restrictions on some travelers coming from Louisiana, whose infections dwarf those of Texas. But Texas also has many infected, and the numbers will most likely go up, even without Louisiana's help. Still, there is a sense that those who come from a place where the virus has struck intensely are more infectious than the neighbor who is infected but doesn't know it yet. In times like these, fear runs deep, and governors must placate their frightened citizens, if only by gestures since no other solution is yet available.

This is not therefore a European phenomenon, but in Europe there is history, and that history is of war and fear between nations that are now joined in a union. Relations between Louisiana and Texas will likely return to a distrust between UT and LSU football fans, but while intense, it pales in comparison to European malice or to the general mistrust in the U.S. for the rest of the world.

In the meantime, the walls built within the United States will come down as the pandemic eventually goes away. Whether the European walls will come down is another question. What's clear is that for now Italians are Italians, Germans are Germans, and the European identity that transcends nations is not nearly as solid as hoped.

The institutions might return to what they were, but the trust that has been slowly emerging may seem to have been misplaced. And that will change the world.

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