

Investigating the Urban Response to Border Closure in a Transnational Metropolitan System

The case of the Gibraltar/Algeciras Bay

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Abstract

Border regions tend to be the cradle of dense metropolitan areas shaped by the (socio-economic, governance, and planning) differentials intrinsic to borders. However, the border permeability variations have historically exposed such systems' fragility. The paper aims to investigate the spatial repercussions of border closures in cross-border metropolitan regions characterised by strong socio-spatial inequalities. It takes the Bay of Gibraltar/Algeciras cross-border area as an analytical framework, focusing on two instances of abrupt border closure. The first is historical (1969-85) and was caused by the Francoist dictatorship's expansionist policies, while the second is recent, caused by the overlap of the Brexit process and the Covid-19 pandemic. These crises shed light on the vulnerability of strongly asymmetrical cross-border urban agglomerations. They act as cautionary tales and testing grounds, proving the necessity of a robust endogenous collaboration on the local cross-border level to create a more resilient, equitable, and polycentric socio-spatial development.

Keywords

cross-border, metropolitan, border permeability, Covid-19, polycentric, resilience, Gibraltar Bay.

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INTRODUCTION

The socio-spatial development of European border regions is chiefly driven by differential benefit, which leads to a functional division between the two sides of the border based on the most advantageous normative and economic situation.¹ The stronger the degree of socio-economic disparity, the stronger the push for this functional division. Yet, if left unchecked, such phenomenon gives rise to an exacerbated unequal territorial development, which, by pooling (human) resources, perpetuates and entrenches socio-economic inequalities. In addition, it makes the economic viability of both sides overly dependent on the continued permeability of the border, something that recent political, migratory and health crises, in primis the Covid-19 pandemic, have put into question. This paper aims to investigate the spatial repercussions of border closures in highly asymmetrical cross-border regions. It takes as analytical framework the Bay of Gibraltar/Algeciras, a cross-border metropolitan system encompassing five municipalities across the Spanish - Gibraltar border. The latter is a British Overseas Territory nearly completely self-governed.² The paper will focus on two periods of sudden and prolonged border closure in the territory's recent History. The first (1969-85) was caused by the Francoist dictatorship's expansionist policies. It constituted a critical dividing line for the economic and spatial development of the region, dictating its contemporary highly industrialised nature. The second is recent, caused by the overlap of the ongoing Brexit process and the Covid-19 pandemic. This prolonged uncertainty has shaken the foundations of a system based on border permeability and spurred the Spanish part of the Bay to take concrete actions to decrease its economic over-reliance on Gibraltar. A change which is being enacted notably through spatial planning tools.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE GIBALTARIAN-SPANISH BORDER FORMATION

The historical urbanisation of the Bay of Gibraltar/Algeciras is a direct consequence of its liminal and contested nature. Throughout the Middle Ages, it is contested between competing Christian and Muslim powers, as born witness by a relatively well-preserved built heritage.³ The end of the Spanish Reconquista and the European discovery of the Americas mark a period of peace and prosperity. With the British conquest of Gibraltar during the Spanish Succession War, ratified with the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht, the area becomes once again a strategic pawn disputed between global powers. Following the invasion, virtually all of Gibraltar's population flees to the surrounding hinterland, re-founding Algeciras (which had been destroyed in the late 14th century) and developing two rural towns – Los Barrios and San Roque – into proper cities. Through the 18th century, Spain actively tries to regain control of the peninsula, with a constant military presence and several sieges. This entails a heavy militarization on both sides of the border. The first extended period of complete border closure commences in 1730 with the construction of a fortified line with two bastions (the Contravallation Line) sealing the isthmus separating Gibraltar from Spain. The territory comprised between the two opposing fortification lines becomes the Neutral Zone. The Contravallation Line construction



Fig. 1. Map of the Contravallation Line and Gibraltar's northern defences in 1782.

and garrison give birth to the eponymous town, La Línea de la Concepción.^{4,5} Hence, the birth of all four cities on the Spanish part of the Bay can be directly linked to the establishment of the Gibraltarian border.

The Peninsula Wars (1807 – 14), which sees the British and Spanish crowns allied against Napoleon, marks the end of military animosities and the destruction of most Spanish military infrastructure in the Bay, including the Contravallation Line.⁶ Full border permeability is hence reinstated. The 19th and 20th century witness Gibraltar's progressive territorial expansion and urbanisation of the Neutral Zone, now home to Gibraltar's airport. The British consolidate this territorial claim by building two successive border fences, in 1854 and 1908, marking the present position of the border, which is not recognised by Spain. Despite political tensions, the status quo perdures. It also perdured during the two World Wars, despite Gibraltar being turned into a major naval and aerial Allied base during WWII, with the evacuation of the civilian population. Though Spain had fallen under the dictatorship of Franco, who was close to the Axis and had prepared militarily for a hypothetical Allied invasion from Gibraltar, it maintained its neutrality, preventing any serious escalation.⁷

Parallely, the 20th century sees the consolidation of Gibraltar's economy, notably thanks to its role as strategic military base and free port. It becomes the economic motor of the wider cross-border region. Integration is not only economic, but also socio-cultural and linguistic, as testified by the diffusion of cross-border marriages and of 'Llanito' (an anglicised Spanish).⁸

1969 – 1985: FRANCOIST BORDER CLOSURE, GIBRALTARIAN AUTARCHY, AND SPANISH INDUSTRIALISATION

Following WWII, Franco's nationalist claims over Gibraltar escalate. Political pressure is exerted by restricting border transit, first limited to pedestrian use, then banned to Gibraltarians. Following repeated dead-ends in British – Spanish negotiations, a referendum is organized in 1967, in which Gibraltarians overwhelmingly vote to stay under full British rule, with 99.6% of votes. As retaliation, Franco unilaterally closes the border in 1969, leaving Gibraltar isolated for the second time in its history.⁹ The closure, which will last 16 years, has profound impacts on the economic and spatial development of the area, as both sides try to adapt to the traumatic seizure of what had been a highly integrated cross-border region.

Gibraltar finds itself cut off from its functional hinterland, its reservoir of human and natural resources. Propelled by important financial aids from London, and by a hard-earned culture of resilience, it responds by maximising endogenous resources and importing the rest. To counterbalance the loss of cross-border workers, which accounted for a third of the workforce, ca. 2,600 Moroccan workers emigrate to Gibraltar, and housewives are encouraged to enter the labour market.¹⁰ The territory's already existing autarchic infrastructure is potentialised. A new desalination plant is commissioned in 1969 to support water production (Gibraltar has no fresh water source).¹¹ The population remains stable, preventing the need for land reclamation, a tool extensively used both before and after this border closure. Yet,

the Neutral Zone – previously only occupied by sports and green infrastructure and military bases – is fully urbanised.¹² The Gibraltar economy hence manages to withstand Spain's chocking, notably thanks to its robust, outward oriented economy and infrastructure. Indeed, despite its extremely small territory (6.8km²), Gibraltar has a commercial port, a military one, and an international airport.

Not only did the Spanish isolationist policy fail to demolish Gibraltar economy and morale, it cruelly backfired. Indeed, the effects of the border closure on the Campo de Gibraltar are far more drastic and long-lasting. The local economy is brought by a griding halt by the sudden suspension of the thriving legal and illegal commerce (tobacco smuggling), and by the loss of employment of 4,600 cross-border workers, mostly residents in La Línea. This plunges the region in a deep economic crisis, from which it has never fully recovered. Half of La Línea's population is forced to migrate.¹³ Following local protest, the Francoist government intervenes, declaring the Campo de Gibraltar a Preferential Industrialization Zone. Over the span of the following decade, it invests considerably in its development. The zone around the Guadarranque river mouth witnesses an extremely rapid industrialisation. In 1970 the steel mill ACERINOX and its port is completed, quickly becoming one of the leading steel mill plants worldwide. Seven years later, the Gibraltar – San Roque refinery opens its doors, and is to this day the most important Spanish refinery. In 1985, a thermal Power Plant is inaugurated, which in turn gives rise to a new surge of industries benefitting from its energy production. Transport infrastructure is incrementally enhanced, to keep pace with the area's growth. The only unsuccessful project is the construction of an enormous shipyard, Crinavis, abandoned in 1978, and to this day partially unused.¹⁴ The creation of these new private ports slows down the growth of the port of Algeciras, which only takes off after the border re-opening.

The border closure hence sparks the development of one of the main energy nodes in Southern Europe. Yet this has not managed to counter the region's economic downfall and the parallel rise of illegality. La Línea and Algeciras are consistently among the cities with the lowest life expectancy and highest unemployment rates nationally.¹⁵ On the opposite, these large industries are responsible for dangerously elevated levels of air, water and land pollution, which compromise the wellbeing of the local ecosystem and population, subject to elevated risks of cancer.¹⁶ They have further prevented the area's touristic development, cut off from the Costa del Sol and the Atlantic coast's touristic circuits, despite being at the intersection of the two.

With the end of the Francoist dictatorship in 1975 and Spain's accession to the EEC and NATO in 1986 and 1982, relations with Gibraltar are normalised, enabling the partial and then complete reopening of the border in 1982 and 1985 respectively.¹⁷ Gibraltar quickly regains its role as economic motor for the whole Bay: within one year of the border opening, tourism revenue in Gibraltar has doubled, Spaniard day-trippers have exploded, and exports thrive.¹⁸ Through an astute use of its low tax legislation and a successful branding strategy directed at international investors, Gibraltar has successfully re-oriented its economy to compensate for the progressive decrease of military and state funding in the 1980s, becoming a thriving financial centre.¹⁹

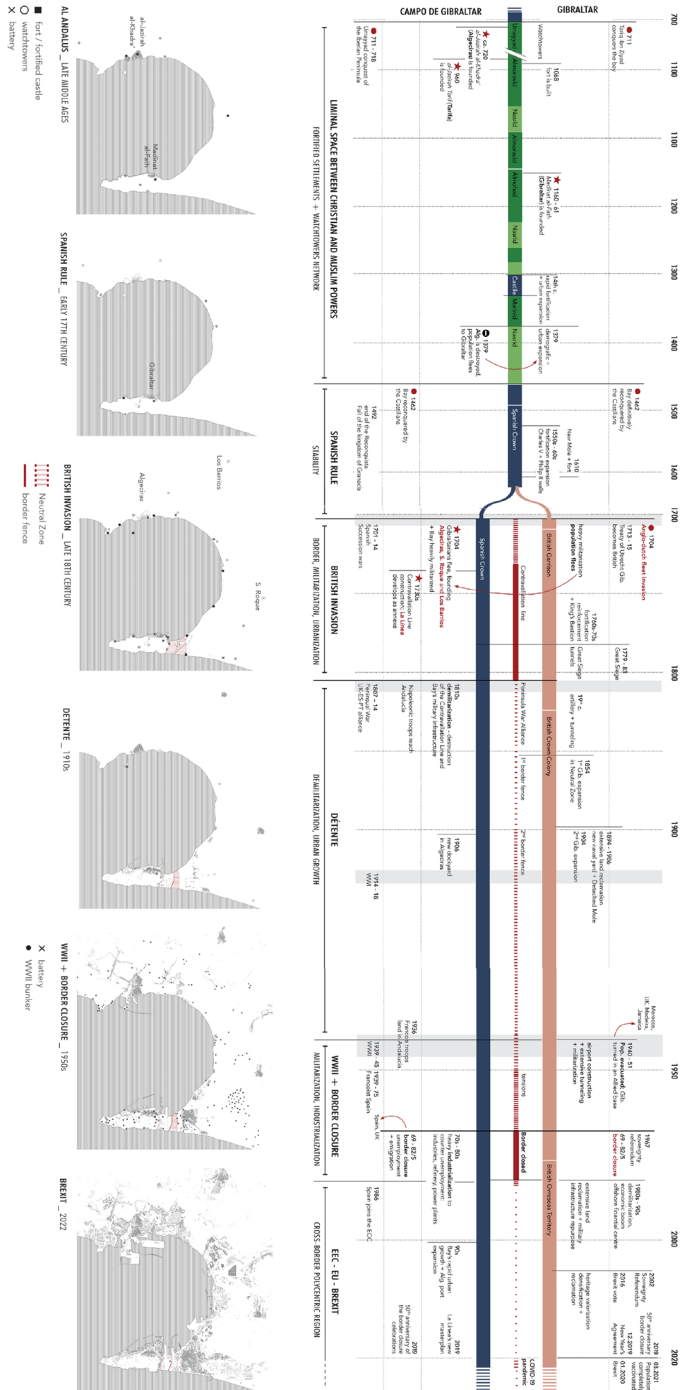


Fig. 2. Bay of Gibraltar/Algeciras's historic and urban timeline since the Early Middle Ages

CONTEMPORARY SITUATION: A CROSS-BORDER REGION SHAPED BY STRONG INEQUALITIES AND 'BORROWED-SIZE' MECHANISMS

Today, the bay of Gibraltar/Algeciras can be described as a cross-border metropolitan region which orbit around two main poles: Algeciras (the largest city and port), and Gibraltar (the main economic driver). The five municipalities (Gibraltar, La Línea, San Roque, Los Barrios and Algeciras) form a nearly uninterrupted dense urban crescent along the Bay's shores. This system is dominated by a strong economic inequality, comparable to that between the United States and Mexico. With a GDP/capita of 80,517€²⁰ and virtually no unemployment, Gibraltar benefits from a thriving and innovative economy. It has succeeded in imposing itself as hub for financial services, notably in the cryptocurrency and online gambling sectors.²¹ On the other hand, the Spanish side – Campo de Gibraltar – suffers historically from soaring unemployment, low income, and a pervasive problem of smuggling (both from Gibraltar and Morocco), narcotraffic and violence. La Línea is the most fragile municipality, with a 29,3% unemployment rate, the worst nationally. A rate that exceeded the 40% bar between 2013 and 2015, clearly indicating that the crisis is systemic, and precedes both Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic.^{22,23}

Gibraltar's economic power is made possible thanks to what the planner and economist William Alonso defines as “borrowed size”; namely that an urban area's potential is increased by drawing resources from a wider (cross- border) network.²⁴ This model is “characterised by a strange relation between jobs and residents [...], a significant volume of daily and periodical commutes, and also by dysfunctional real estate markets and, associated with this, extraordinarily high housing prices”.²⁵ Indeed, with 31,523 jobs for a population of 34,003,²⁶ Gibraltar heavily relies on cross-border workers, which make up for a staggering 49% of its workforce (2023 data).²⁷ In its 2015 Economic Impact Study, the Chamber of Commerce of Gibraltar has estimated that nearly 25% of jobs in the Bay depend on Gibraltar's economy.²⁸ These data would be even higher if non-registered jobs and smuggling activities were considered. Gibraltar's real estate market is ‘dysfunctional’ its own way: half of it is government owned and/or funded, while the other half is subject to intense speculation. It is among the most expensive in Europe, with an average price is of 4,000 €/sqm for “lower end” real estate.²⁹

At the territorial scale, ‘borrowed-size’ mechanics translate in an exacerbated centre-periphery model. The Campo de Gibraltar is relegated to the role of industrial and residential periphery. As part of its human resources, especially those with a higher education, are pooled by Gibraltar, the Campo's growth potential is impaired, with a tertiary sector which struggles to take off. Gibraltar also benefits from the proximity to the industrial pole without having to bear its environmental costs. For example, by buying oil from the CEPESA refinery (located in the Guadarranque industrial zone), and then re-selling it at very competitive prices thanks to low taxes and less restrictive port legislation, the Port of Gibraltar has imposed itself as the largest bunkering port in the Mediterranean.³⁰ La Línea is particularly vulnerable to this ‘peripheralisation’ process. It suffers from being a mere transit space for the 7,200 vehicles which cross the border daily, on average,³¹ causing intense traffic and pollution. While it benefits

from the expenditures of Gibraltarians in fresh fruit and vegetable and late-night entertainment, these flows do not generate solid local development opportunities.

CONTEMPORARY BORDER UNCERTAINTIES: 'GIBREXIT' AND COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The reciprocal interdependency entailed by this unequal functional and territorial subdivision makes the region extremely vulnerable to variations in the border's permeability, in a region subject to ongoing political tensions. Indeed, Gibraltar remains the stage of political skirmishes, mainly centred on the contested nature of Gibraltar's territorial waters, which Spain does not recognise. This culminated in 2013 when the Spanish government slowed down border checks to a near paralysis for several days as retaliation for the construction of an artificial reef in Gibraltar waters (not recognised by Spain). The political impasse was only solved when inspectors were despatched by the European Commission, upon British request. This intimidatory action backfired at the European scale, in terms of image damage; and at the local scale, as La Línea's economy was estimated to lose 30 to 40% of its revenue.³²

To some extent, the 2013 events prefigured the much more dramatic Brexit referendum and its ongoing geopolitical aftermath. Despite an overwhelming 96% of votes against, the territory had to follow its mainland in the Brexit process, with the aggravating factor of having to negotiate a separate agreement. In addition, Gibraltar did not benefit from the political and mediatic attention that the Northern Irish border had, which meant it was relegated to the background in EU-UK negotiations. This resulted in an Agreement (aptly named New Year's Agreement) being signed with barely eight hours to spare to the end of the Transition period, on the 31st of December 2020.³³ At the time of writing (May 2024) a definitive framework agreement for 'Gibrexit' has still not been reached, though it seems imminent.³⁴

Because of the Gibrexit's negotiations protraction, it has overlapped with both the 50th Anniversary of the border closure in 2019 and the Covid-19 pandemic. Both crises have given the opportunity to local communities to stage formal and informal solidarity actions, in expressed defiance to the possibility of a 'hard Brexit'.³⁵ In a blatant acknowledgement of its interdependence on cross-border workforce, Gibraltar – which was among the first territories to fully vaccinate its adult population – extended its vaccination campaign to cross-border workers.³⁶

Aware of the existential threat posed by a hard Brexit, Gibraltar undertook an extremely thorough preparation, overseen by a complex Command & Control structure, and based on focus groups working on strategic fields ranging from critical services to waste management.³⁷ The general focus was on providing the information and infrastructure (both administrative and physical) to limit the difficulties and delays entailed by the bureaucratic reframing of the territory as non-EU. For example, a new ferry dock had to be built to process the import of goods from non-EU countries (such as the UK) travelling by sea.³⁸ Nonetheless, extensive preparation did not prevent some bottlenecks. For example, when the period initially covered by the New Year's agreement finished in 2022, so did the agreement with the waste processing plant

located in Los Barrios which processes most of Gibraltar's waste. For two month, 6,000 tonnes of rubbish accumulated in Gibraltar, the time necessary for a new agreement to be signed.³⁹

Urban impacts can only be partially assessed, as 'Gibrexite' negotiations are still ongoing. Generally, the insecurity linked to Brexit, coupled with the coming into force of a taxation discouraging people working in Gibraltar from residing abroad, has led many cross-border workers, prevalently Gibraltarian and British, to seek first or second houses in Gibraltar. This has seen the surge in the offer of studio and small apartments, to be used as pied-à-terre.⁴⁰ What is certain, is that Brexit has not slowed the rate of prime and super prime real estate development aimed at 'high-net-worth individuals', one of Gibraltar's main economic catalysers⁴¹.

It hasn't stopped the development of flagship reclamation projects, generally promoted by international investment funds, such as the East side development of Victoria Keys; nor luxury reconversions, such as the old Casino, which is being transformed in The Reserve luxury condominium.⁴² The good health of the real estate sector testifies the territory's economic resilience and international exposure: it has managed, once more, to bounce back.

Brexit has had as much of an earth-shattering effect on the Spanish side of the Bay than on the British one. Suffice to consider the impact on the local economy of the pound (£)'s 16% devaluation following the Brexit vote, considering that cross-border workers spend an estimated two million pounds yearly in the Comarca de Gibraltar.⁴³ Yet, Brexit did not prompt the creation of a strong and cohesive response and investment plan neither at the local, nor regional or national scale. What could have constituted an opportunity to lessen the territory's (politic) marginality was lost.

The most tangible urban impacts can be sensed in La Línea. Following the Brexit vote, the municipality has taken matters into its own hands. It commissioned a socio-economic study of Brexit's impacts on the city⁴⁴ and, successively, a Strategic Plan of Impulse and Growth⁴⁵ aimed at creating a vital local economy less dependent on the British territory. The flagship action was to become Spain's third Autonomous City (together with Melilla and Ceuta), which would have granted preferential tax status and governmental welfare. This request has been denied by both the central Spanish government and the Supreme Court,⁴⁶ and has been criticised by the other Campo de Gibraltar municipalities for its lack of solidarity. Beyond normative tools, the Strategic Plan proposes an ambitious use of spatial planning to re-imagine the whole municipal territory. On this base, the municipality commissioned the urban firm Estudio Seguí to design its new *Plan General de Ordenación Urbana* (PGOU), in 2021.⁴⁷ The latter foresees extensive urban redevelopment, with the aim of fostering the development of the services sector. The main strategic projects include the urbanization of a vast area North of the historic centre, structured along a new axis, the *Eje Norte*; the urban renewal of the Zabal area, an agricultural area extensively occupied by illegal construction over the years; and the redevelopment of the zone near the border. Through the valorisation and environmental protection of the territory's two coasts, the PGOU also aims to increase the area's attractivity for naturalistic tourism. At the time of writing, the PGOU is in the process of being approved definitively by the Andalusian region. In the meantime, the municipality has proceeded with smaller independent projects, such as the construction of a new football stadium near the border.⁴⁸

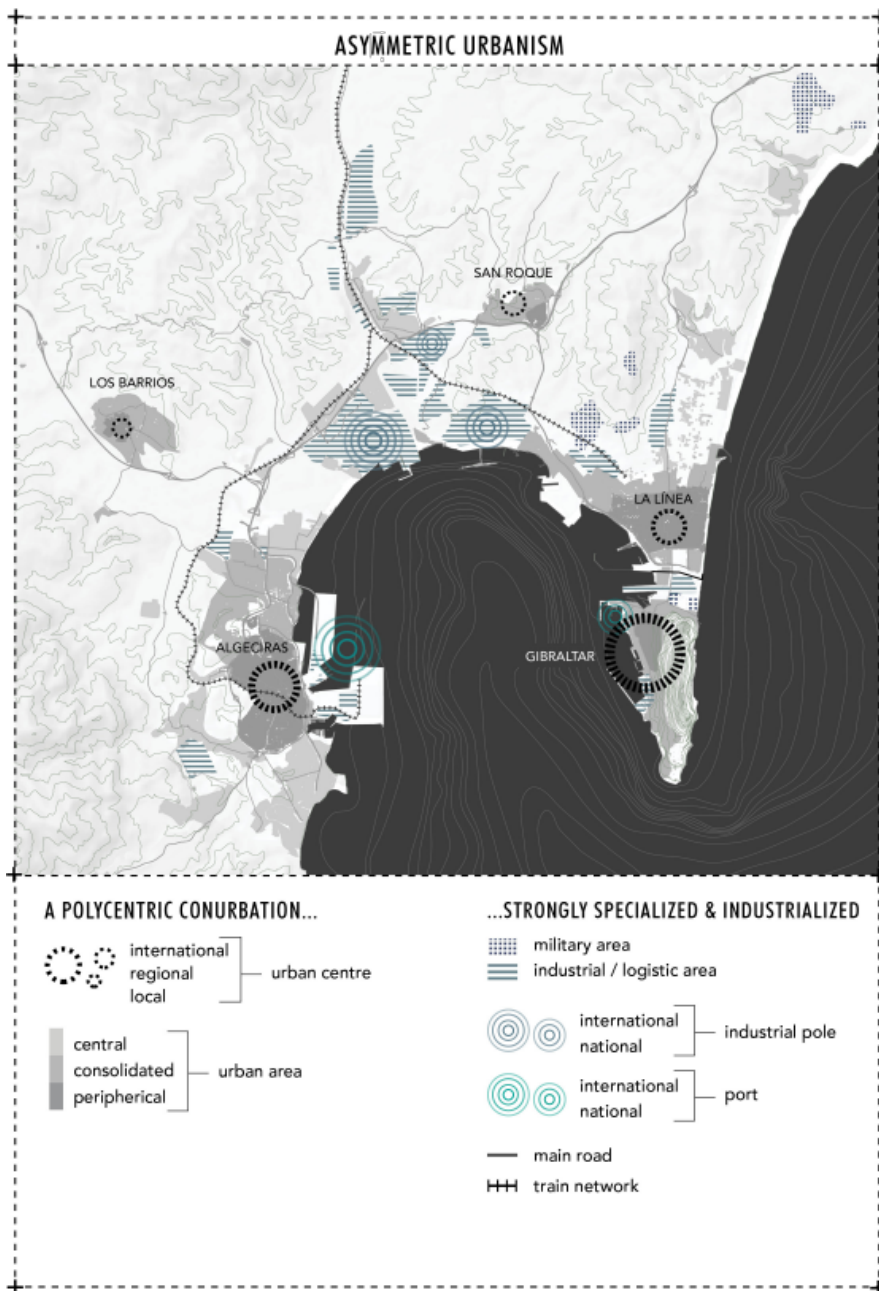


Fig. 3. A cross-border region dominated by a centre-periphery model

The Neutral Zone deserves to be treated separately, as it condenses the tensions between territorial disputes and the strive to foster economic development through cross-border synergies. Spain claims sovereignty over the entirety of the Neutral Zone. Hence, Gibraltar's airport – situated on the Neutral Zone and owned by the Royal Air Force – has always crystallised territorial tensions. Negotiations to expand the use of the airport by creating a communicating terminal on Spanish territory have been underway since the border re-opening in 1985. Yet, despite the ratification of the 1987 airport agreement and of the 2006 Córdoba Agreements, this plan has never been concretised, because deemed by both Madrid and Gibraltar inseparable from sovereignty claims.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, both sides are highly aware of the economic potential of a bi-lateral airport. The new terminal, built following the Córdoba Agreements and completed in 2011, was designed to enable a potential future connection to a Spanish terminal.⁵⁰ The negotiations on Gibrexit have once again revived this debate, with the municipality of La Línea taking a keen interest. As part of its PGOU, it has foreseen to develop the zone facing the airport in an ambitious high-tech business centre, which aims to pool Gibraltar's resources in this sector.⁵¹ An equally ambitious project, detached from the PGOU, has been implemented on the opposite side of the border strip. The *Gran Marina del Estrecho* foresees to expand considerably the existing marina and create a cruise ship terminal (in competition with Gibraltar's one) and shopping centre. Meant to be completed in 2023, the construction has been paused since 2021 due to various concurring crises.⁵²

FUTURE OUTLOOKS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

What clearly emerges from the study of these two periods of border closure and/or restriction, is the asymmetry in the economic and functional resilience of the two sides of the border. Gibraltar has managed to withstand well the periods of border crises, especially economically. This is due to the combination of various factors, notably Gibraltar's unique political and legislative status, its strong economy, its international projection, and London's financial help during both crises. At the same time, it should be noted how the future of the city is challenged on the one hand by the geographical and logistical challenges posed by climate change, especially on land reclamation projects due to the progressive sea-level rise, as well as by the increasing demand for affordable housing, particularly among the younger population.

On the opposite, the Campo de Gibraltar suffers from (political) marginalisation, an extremely fragile economy, and lack of cohesion and cooperation at the local scale. Consequently, despite its considerably larger territorial and resources, it doesn't dispose from the necessary resilience to respond to the border crises. The failure of heavy governmental investment and industrial development to counterbalance the 1969 socio-economic crisis clearly indicates the limits an exogenous and tardive (urban) tool in generating new urban and economic poles. La Línea's PGOU constitutes a more promising, endogenous answer, but its implementation heavily relies on pooling resources from the local to the European scale, something which would be greatly facilitated if framed within a stable cooperation programme.

This case study shows that creating a robust polycentric urban system is a pre-requisite to promoting a more socially and spatially equal and resilient cross-border (spatial) development. It further shows that this can only be achieved through a robust endogenous collaboration at the local and cross-border level, able to withstand political changes and uncertainties, to pool resources from various scales, and to put in act long-term strategies.

The ‘Grand Genève’ EGTC (European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation) on the French-Swiss border provides a flagship example in this regard. Since 2007, it develops of a joint long-term “agglomeration project” updated every four years. Special attention is given to implement actions aimed at counterbalancing spatial functional asymmetries⁵³. In the Bay of Gibraltar/Algeciras, the *Grupo Transfronterizo* (Cross Frontier Group) has long been lobbying for the formation of a European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), an action also proposed in La Línea’s Strategic Plan of Impulse and Growth. Though the proposal had gathered political momentum on both sides at the local scale, it hasn’t been concretised, in part because its formalisation would entail putting territorial disputes by side.⁵⁴ Yet, as proven by the Campo de Gibraltar’s planning history, the region can only flourish if local interests are put to the forefront.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR(S)

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IMAGE SOURCES

Figure 1 J. Spilsbury, “Plan of the Spanish Batteries before Gibraltar” (1782), Garrison library.

Figure 2 Elaboration by Isabella Traeger based on various sources, notably historical maps, cited literature, and Instituto de Estadística y Cartografía de Andalucía’s historic aerial photographs.

Figure 3 Elaboration by Isabella Traeger based on Instituto de Estadística y Cartografía de Andalucía and HM Government of Gibraltar Department of Town Planning & Building Control.

