

Ceuta and Melilla: Pioneers of Post-Cold War Border Fortification

Written by Jaume Castan Pinos

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/02/28/ceuta-and-melilla-pioneers-of-post-cold-war-border-fortification/>

JAUME CASTAN PINOS, FEB 28 2022

Building fortified border fences used to be an anomalous practice. In 2022, this is no longer the case. The state-driven policy of fortifying national border perimeters with a wide range of military-inspired methods – including concrete walls, electrified fences equipped with top-notched radars, and control towers – has become a truly global phenomenon. This proliferation is illustrated with quantitative evidence. While in the early 1990s there were twelve border fortified fences (Vallet, 2016), thirty years later, the number has sky-rocketed to around 80 (Vernon & Zimmermann, 2021), and the tendency is growing as new border walls are being built and planned across the globe. Since the publication of Vernon and Zimmermann's article, several new fortified fences have emerged in various borders, *inter alia* between Serbia-North Macedonia (N1 Belgrade, 2020), Dominican Republic-Haiti (BBC, 2021), and the People's Republic of China-Myanmar (Qi & Zhai, 2022).

This debunks the popular myth that the end of the Cold War led to end of border walls. The so-called 'Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart' (the official name of the Berlin Wall, according to the GDR authorities) and other Iron Curtin fortified fences were indeed torn down (Szábo, 2018), following the collapse of communist governments in Central and Eastern Europe and break-up of the Soviet Union. The point, however, is that the tearing down of these fortified fences did not mean that all border walls were gone, or indeed, that the practice of wall-building had magically disappeared from the face of the earth. In fact, the post-Cold war period has been buoyant for this practice.

The fortified borders in Ceuta and Melilla

This is where Ceuta and Melilla, two Spanish maritime enclaves in North Africa of roughly 80,000 inhabitants each, enter the stage. Nearly a decade ago, I predicted that far from being an isolated case, the border fortification practices in these enclaves could 'potentially become a trend at other European borders' (Castan Pinos, 2013: 53). Building on this argument, the present article claims that these two cities, which have been used as illustrative examples of 'rebordering' (Ferrer-Gallardo, 2008) and the 'fortress Europe' metaphor (Castan Pinos, 2009), can be considered the pioneers (at least in the European context) of the post-Cold war border fortification trend.

The physical barriers surrounding the entire land perimeters of Ceuta and Melilla were initially erected in the mid-1990s by the Spanish government. The timing is particularly interesting, not least, because this is the period when many in Europe were developing metanarratives based on the myth of 'borderless Europe' (Castan Pinos & Radil, 2020). There is an additional chronological coincidence. The same year the Spanish government approved the plan to build the fortified fence in Ceuta (1993) the Clinton administration began implementing its anti-immigration strategy, based on fortifying the US-Mexico border through – among other instruments – the erection of 'a 10-foot-high steel fence' in the El Paso and San Diego borderlands (Cornelius, 2005: 779).

Like in the US-Mexico border, the fortification of the border perimeters between the two Spanish cities and Morocco was primarily driven by the aim of preventing the entry of irregular migrants. This is in no way exceptional. As various authors have argued, the chief aim of fortified fences is (in most cases) to impede and deter the infiltration of unwanted individuals – namely migrants (Hassner & Wittenberg, 2015; Schain, 2019). The so-called migration crisis in the enclaves can be illustrated with data: while in 1993, the Spanish security forces had expelled a total of eighteen

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migrants from both territories, two years later, in 1995, the number of devolutions had impressively surged to 15,729 (Spanish National Police, 2008). Further, in October of that year, serious riots erupted in one of the enclaves, Ceuta, involving stranded migrants[1], security forces and local residents (Lizarralde, 1995).

The incidents were of great concern for the Spanish government, which feared that the crisis in these 'sensitive' territories could spiral out of control. Here, it is important to briefly explain why these territories are considered sensitive by the Spanish government. Ceuta and Melilla are surrounded by Morocco, a state that claims sovereignty over both cities. It is therefore in Madrid's best interest to minimise crises in these enclaves, as instability can potentially translate into a quagmire that can challenge the territorial *status quo*, that is, the Spanish sovereignty over the two cities (Castan Pinos, 2014b). Thus, while preventing migration is the key factor behind the border fortifications in Ceuta and Melilla, problématiques connected to sovereignty and bilateral geopolitical rifts must also be considered as subsidiary factors.

At any rate, a week after the incidents in Ceuta, on 18 October 1995, the Spanish Ministry of the Interior at the time, Juan Alberto Belloch made a statement at the Spanish Congress which would have pivotal consequences. The minister announced 'concrete measures [...] to tackle the real problems affecting Ceuta. First, we will seal off the border [...]. From tomorrow on, we will proceed with the installation of a wire fence all over the [border] perimeter' (Spanish Congress, 1995: 9385). While the fortification of the border had been initially planned in 1993, this declaration represented a turning point (Castan Pinos, 2014a), accelerating its implementation. Just a day later, members of the Spanish Legion began the construction of a 3.5-meter barbed-wire fence in Ceuta. In Melilla, which had also experienced similar crises, the construction of the border fences began in 1996.

Did the fortification policy work?

The substantial investment[2] to build the border fortifications begs the imperative question of whether this costly infrastructure has been effective in terms of preventing and deterring migration flows in Ceuta and Melilla. At first glance, they have not. Thousands of individuals are able to irregularly enter the enclaves each year, empirically demonstrating that the border fences are far from impenetrable. Further, the fortifications have encouraged alternative strategies (e.g., entering the enclaves through the sea) and have proven to be particularly vulnerable to 'collective storms'. As detailed by Andersson, the governmental militarisation of the border has generated counterproductive effects, such as the sophistication – and militarisation – of migrant's strategies aimed at crossing the border fences (2016).

For instance, in early October 2005, nearly a thousand people were able to cross the fence through well co-ordinated 'collective storms', with the tragic result of fourteen migrants killed and hundreds injured (Amnesty International, 2006; European Parliament, 2006). On the one hand, this tragic incident consolidated the enclaves' image of infamous gates of 'Fortress Europe' (Castan Pinos, 2014a). On the other, it led to the strengthening of the border fences, which were reinforced with concertina wire (removed in 2020) and increased from 3.5m to 6m (Castan Pinos, 2009). The reinforcement did not prevent further incidents; in the period 2012-2019, dozens of similar 'collective storms', often referred to as avalanches by the Spanish press, occurred both in Ceuta and Melilla.

The details provided in the previous paragraphs would seem to indicate that the fences have failed in accomplishing their mission. However, from the Spanish government's big picture perspective, the fences have been reasonably successful. How so, some readers may wonder? For one thing, since the border fences were built, the enclaves are no longer what in Frontex jargon is referred to as a 'main migratory route into the EU' (see Frontex, 2021). In other words, the enclaves, unlike in the mid-1990s, are no longer critical 'entry points'. This 'success' is illustrated by the fact that, in 2021, only 5.4% of irregular entries to Spain occurred through Ceuta and Melilla (Spanish Ministry of Interior, 2022). Therefore, while migrants continue to cross into the enclaves, their number is sufficiently low for the security forces to control their flux, and most importantly, the Spanish government is able to avoid large-scale crises in 'sensitive' territories. The fact that fences do not solve the roots of the problem and instead generate incentives for new migration routes is a fair argument, but – unfortunately – it goes beyond the scope of this article.

While they may be the most visual aspect of the fight against irregular migration, these modern border fortifications

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could not be effective without an indispensable element; the collaboration from the Moroccan security forces at the other side of the border (Castan Pinos, 2014; Schain, 2019). Rabat's collaboration is not accidental nor gratuitous as it receives considerable EU funds to specifically protect the border. Morocco's substantial and multifaceted contribution includes the permanent militarily patrolling of the border perimeter, the destruction of migrant's camps (Castan Pinos, 2009; Andersson, 2016; Johnson & Jones, 2018) and its own barbed-wire fence on its territory (Sampere, 2021).

Spain's security reliance on Morocco to protect the border perimeter inexorably empowers the latter, which can potentially weaponise migration – by for instance manufacturing a security crisis at the border – for geopolitical purposes (see The Economist, 2021).

Border Fortification in Ceuta and Melilla and beyond

An interesting aspect of fortified border fences is that the grounds for the justification of new ones very often lie in the construction of previous similar walls by other actors. Thus, the Greek government justified the decision to erect a 5-metre-high fortified steel fence on its border with Turkey in 2011 using the Ceuta and Melilla fences as an example that prompted 'positive results' (Ekathimerini, 2011). In turn, said steel fence at the Greek-Turkish border 'inspired' the Polish government for its newly constructed border fortification with Belarus (Reuters, 2021). In other words, *old* border fences serve in a self-fulfilling fashion as models and precedents to legitimise the construction of similar new fences.

Ceuta and Melilla can be considered as the pioneers of the new wave of post-Cold war border fortification practice. A practice which is nowadays systemic. While the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has consistently insisted that the EU would not finance 'barbed wire and walls' at the borders (European Parliament, 2021), the inconvenient reality is that the EU is covered with border walls. According to a recent report, there are, as of December 2021, 1800km of border walls (the equivalent of 12 Berlin Walls) in Europe, most of them separating EU member states from non-members (Rigby & Crisp, 2021). This is, to say the least, paradoxical given the fact that the EU has consistently used the narrative of borderless Europe to gain legitimacy (Castan Pinos & Radil, 2020; Radil et al., 2021). However, it is not just 'Fortress Europe'. The proliferation of border fortifications is not exclusively a European phenomenon but a prominent global trend present in four different continents.

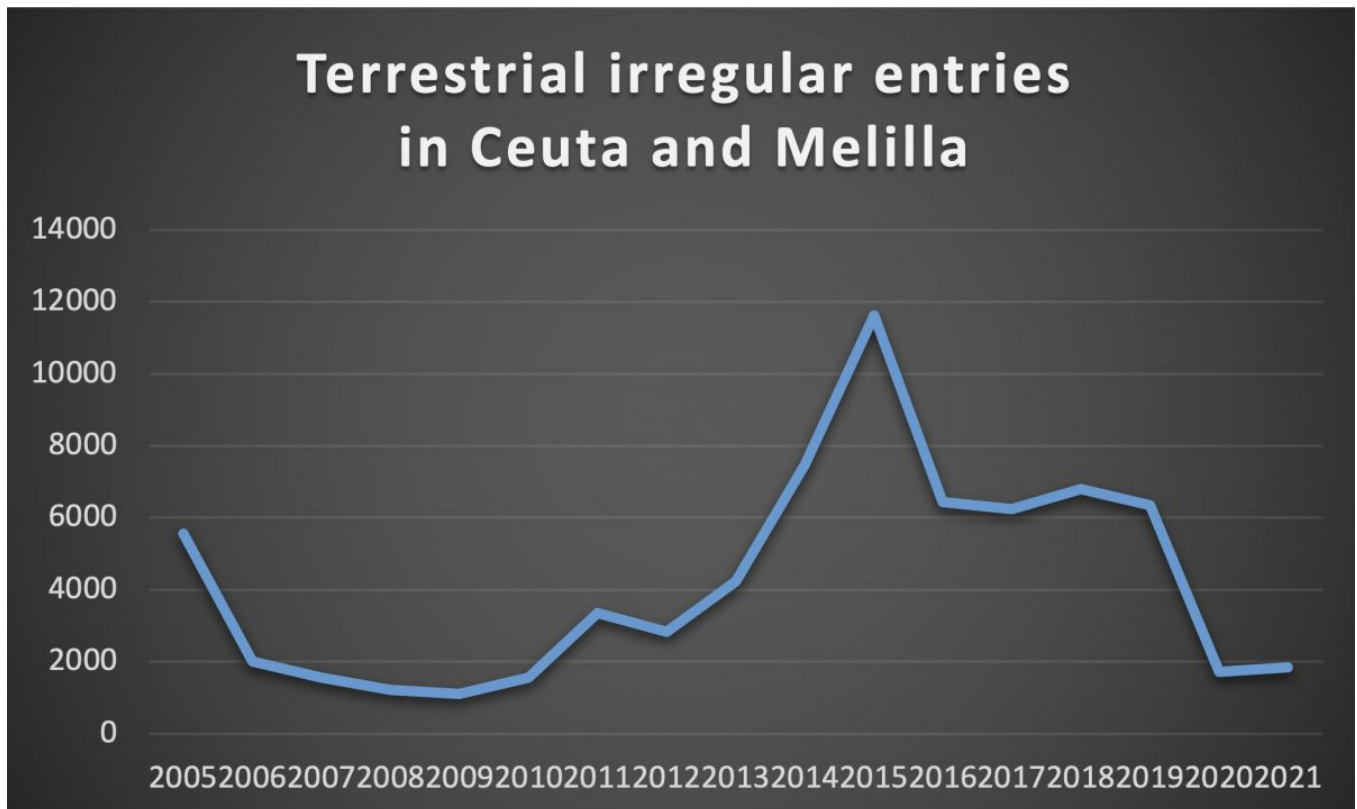
Finally, it is important to note that fortified border fences have implications that go beyond their utilitarian use. These dispositifs of power are a quintessential element of what has been termed the 'global border regime' (Radil et al., 2021) – a regime where states across the globe use border fortification practices to 'protect' themselves from various threats but also to project power. As argued above, the prominence of this instrument is self-reinforcing, as old border fortresses serve as pretexts and inspirations for new walls and fences. Borrowing from O'Dowd, the sobering conclusion is that we live in a 'world of borders' rather than in a 'borderless world' (2010). Ceuta and Melilla are just the tip of the iceberg.

Figure

Figure 1: Irregular Land Entries in Ceuta and Melilla (2005–2021). Elaborated by author based on Spanish Ministry of Interior (2006–2022).

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Footnotes

[1] Migrants demonstrated in Ceuta to demand their transfer to mainland Spain. This situation is not exceptional, very often migrants and asylum seekers find themselves stranded in the enclaves as they are unable to pursue their aim to reach mainland Spain/Europe. In most cases, the Spanish government refuses to transfer them in order to prevent the so-called *pull factor*. This means that the enclaves *de facto* become open-air prisons for irregular migrants.

[2] The Spanish government initially spent €62 million to build both border fences (Castan Pinos, 2014a). This was followed by a €72 million investment in fence reinforcements in the period 2005-2013 (La Vanguardia, 2014). Additionally, in 2019, €17,9 million were spent with the aim of heightening some 'critical areas' of the fences to 10m and of 'modernising' them technologically (Spanish Ministry of Interior, 2019). Finally, the ministry of interior assigned €9,7 additional millions for 'fence maintenance' for the period 2022-2026 (El Confidencial, 2021).

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