

*Essay Option 5.*

*Vestigiality refers to genetically determined structures or attributes that have apparently lost most or all of their ancestral function, but have been retained during the process of evolution. In humans, for instance, the appendix is thought to be a vestigial structure. Describe something vestigial (real or imagined) and provide an explanation for its existence.*

*—Inspired by Tiffany Kim, Class of 2020*

### Bordering on Extinction

The 1997 Chevy pickup truck bounced along the uneven dirt road approaching the border. Cacti and faded speed limit signs shot past the driver's field of vision only to be replaced by the cold, protruding pavement of a border checkpoint. From behind the bulletproof glass of his teller window, the Customs and Border Protection officer instinctively slid his right hand to rest next to his trusted sidearm. He didn't expect any trouble, but months of guard training taught him to fear whoever might be crossing into California from Mexico at 2 am. After inspection, the truck officially entered US soil. No bald eagles soared down from the sky in red, white, and blue feathers. No fireworks shot up into the clouds. The truck rumbled on, as cacti and rusting signs once again cluttered the country road. If not for the checkpoint, nobody would've guessed the driver had crossed into an entirely different country.

In an increasingly interconnected global community, physical borders between nations have lost any practical application or intrinsic significance. The arbitrary division of people has emerged as one of the greatest inhibitors of peace and stability. Needing to protect the homeland, powerful nations spend trillions of dollars annually in a necessary game of preemptive strikes and offensive reserves. At its best, two percent of global GDP is wasted on deterrent forces that will never see combat. At its worst, the offensive nature of national security prompts Russia to sustain its Middle Eastern naval base with a Syrian campaign, China to block-off access to the South China Sea through asymmetrical provocations, and the US to play a dangerous game of chess with carrier groups as pawns. Limitations to the free movement of people also constitute the single greatest source of humanitarian inefficiency. Democratic governments have a political incentive to establish welfare programs that mitigate the birthright lottery by equalizing the distribution of wealth within their respective countries; there is little incentive to combat the growing disparity between nations. Not only are these borders harmful, but the globalization of information technology is homogenizing cultures across the globe through the need to assimilate to pop culture, ridding borders of their ancestral ability to preserve cultures and reinforcing their vestigiality. Yet, despite their growing flaws, borders persist in an effort to demarcate differences in political ideology.

Within blocks of politically aligned nations, policy efforts tend to work towards breaking down the role of borders. In the European Union, prior to the Global Financial Crisis, the multilateral appreciation of capitalism and democracy fostered a supranational form of political and financial governance: Europe formed a new “ideological border.” Unlike modern arbitrary barriers between nations, an ideological border is a geopolitical equilibrium; the natural result of nations gravitating towards self-governed alliances that fit their respective economic, political, and religious philosophies. Under an ideological view, clearly delineated borders have two requirements. The first is the need to ensure the dogma’s survival. In Israel, for example, the state’s religious beliefs differ wildly from those of neighboring Arab nations. Maintaining strict borders creates a geopolitical safe haven that prevents the Jewish religion from being lost to assimilation or invasion. Yet, preserving Israeli culture comes at a price. The conscious curation of an ideologically and religiously homogenous population hinders the free exchange of ideas and villainizes those who don’t conform to the state’s narrow expectations. Jerusalem serves as a monument to the human cost of maintaining ideological borders; each outburst of sectarian violence epitomizes the divisive nature of creating a unified state. These massive sacrifices beg the question: Is the trade-off of diversity for survival worthwhile? There is likely no unconditional answer.

Secondly, clearly delineated borders facilitate the spread of ideologies. In his 2001 book, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, University of Chicago faculty member John Mearsheimer posited that even in an age of dollar diplomacy and cyber warfare, the ability to project power at great magnitudes is dependent on holding massive swaths of land. Physical projection often resembles the former Soviet Union’s gravitational pull of neighboring countries into the motherland’s communist orbit. The spread of such an ideology requires the forceful violation of a border; the annexation of Crimea or the colonization of Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea, for in the violation of the border comes the surrender to a new regional order. Such a process is impossible without clearly delineated borders. In central Africa, before Western colonization, the lack of defined borders led to an amorphous amalgamation of tribal units. While each tribe had differing ideologies, the lack of a home base to grow or an enemy base to conquer meant that conflicts centered solely over resources rather than ideological domination and proselytization. While ideological projection is not inherently productive, the instinct of nations to convert the global community in pursuit of ideological hegemony, as the United States has attempted to achieve in pursuit of a universally democratic world, necessitates that nations will seek to alter borders rather than eliminate them. As a result of states’ realist desire to maintain and expand their ideological dominion, physical boundaries between nations continue to exist long past serving any productive purpose in the global community.

When I visited South Korea over the summer with a delegation of students from the US, our original itinerary included a visit to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), the heavily-armed border separating the North from the South. Our plans took a sudden turn when the travel agents discovered that we would be accompanied by six of our Korean peers. While Americans are still

allowed to pass through the Joint Security Area (JSA), anyone holding a South Korean passport is barred from entering. Talking with my friends from the US and Korea, I find the distinction difficult to justify. None of us lived through the Korean War or pose any form of a threat to the northern regime. We listen to the same music, watch the same movies, and even the speak the same language. We are equals in every sense, up until we we reach the 38th parallel, at which point ancestral wounds that are better left dormant are awakened by the border. The DMZ serves as a focal point, storing and amplifying decades of cultural tension. Both the North and the South advocate for a united Korea, seeking to reunify families that were separated decades ago, yet the nature of a border compels both regimes to fight for control, rather than fight for compromise. A united Korea can only be achieved if the border itself is eliminated. Any effort to absorb the North into the South or vice versa would only unleash a half-century of tension stored in the Korean border.

A future without borders may be reminiscent of a liberal idealist dream, nevertheless its potential points out a hidden flaw in the works of many international relations scholars. Philosophies, such as the concept of offensive realism pioneered by Mearsheimer, assume that the pursuit of hegemony is a wholly physical and militaristic exercise. In a world without borders, the trail towards ideological domination relies exclusively on the projection of economic and diplomatic power, forces whose magnitudes cannot be measured in mere acres nor be geographically inhibited. Considering that supranational organizations such as the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations are increasingly viewed as models for other regions of the world to emulate, contemporary theories on international relations ought to accommodate for a time when the vestigial becomes the extinct.