AS THE WORLD BEGINS A NEW CENTURY, some aspects of international politics are experiencing rapid changes amidst other more rigid aspects which refuse change. Two concepts may best capture the nature and scope of this simultaneous static yet fluid state: namely, globalization and national borders. Globalization is currently a fashionable topic—some laud it, claiming that it is the path to peace, prosperity and progress. Others abhor it, attributing to it many evils in world affairs including polarization, environmental destruction, cultural degradation, and so forth. The showdown surrounding the WTO gathering in Seattle last November highlights the intensity of the conflict. In contrast to globalization, the concept of national borders gets less and less attention. Technological progress, especially the Internet, has brought people closer together. International and domestic concerns are becoming increasingly intertwined. Under these circumstances, national borders have lost their previous significance and national sovereignty is becoming both anachronistic and a less valid excuse for idiosyncratic rule within national borders.

Such a view is premised upon the assumption that we are indeed in an age of comprehensive globalization. Close examination of the assumption, however, reveals that it is a very misleading one. The truth is, the current incarnation is at most a partial and uneven globalization; national borders are as relevant as they have ever been since their formation. Unless we fully appreciate this, our understanding of international politics will remain inadequate.

A TREND OF THE TIMES
Proponents of globalization argue that increasing technological innovations in communication and transportation have brought the world closer together economically, socially, and politically. Economically, international trade and economic relations have exploded over the past decades. Commodities, capital, and managerial and technological talents flow across national boundaries at an increasingly accelerated pace. In their endless search for efficiency and profits, multinational corporations have been expanding their global production and marketing networks. In order to make use of the opportunities for development outside their borders, national governments have opened their economies one after another to conform with prevailing international free market principles by lowering tariffs, instituting laws to regulate and encourage fair competition, and offering tax incentives to foreign investors. As a result of measures like these being taken around the world, the international economy has never been so integrated and individual nations’ economic practices have never been so similarly uniform.

As national economies become more homogeneous and more integrated with the outside world, people are moving across national boundaries in unprecedented numbers and frequency. Tourists, business people, artists, researchers, educators, students, and even bureaucrats are increasingly seeking opportunities outside their home countries; as a result, people from different countries are getting to know each other and exchange views and ideas, often becoming friends and collaborators. The human network is broadening and deepening with the passage of time. Enhanced by international media, people across national boundaries have begun to share similar views, aspirations, and even similar heroes and idols. People are talking about similar topics, dressing according to similar codes, eating similar foods, sharing similar dreams, and protesting against similar evils, as if the world were a single community.

Economic interdependence and social integration are also generally accompanied by the spread of democracy. This is particularly true for the post-cold war period. In Eastern Europe, country after country has embraced Western-state democracy in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. In East Asia, South Korea and Taiwan joined the democratic
camp and in other parts of the world, democratization also appears to be the trend of the times.

**THE FLIP SIDE**

Globalization, however, has not only not solved the problems the world is facing, but in some cases, even made them worse. To begin with, the process of globalization has not reduced national and ethnic conflicts. Instead, in many places, one sees nationalism and separatism on the rise. From Kosovo to Chechnya and from East Timor to Taiwan, the clamor for independence has either led to deadly wars or generated the risks of military confrontation with dire consequences.

Nor has globalization helped reduce the problems of polarization, both among the people within countries and among countries in the world. Economic integration has led to increasing concentration of wealth within a few hands in a few rich countries. While billionaires grow in number, millions of people find themselves out of jobs and many without food, shelter or medical care. As we begin a new century, the world has never looked so prosperous but at the same time, it has never been so glaringly unequal.

Globalization has also done nothing to relieve the hazards of ecological destruction. As developed countries strengthen environmental regulations, multinational corporations move their polluting factories to developing countries. Meanwhile, third world countries struggling for development are more and more accommodating to the demands of the multinational corporations in order to attract and keep their investments. Consequently, ecological destruction continues and intensifies, only in a different locale.

As the world becomes increasingly polarized, migration from third world countries to first world ones has become an increasingly attractive option for many people in third world countries. Despite the ever tighter immigration rules of wealthy nations, a growing number of people try to smuggle themselves into richer countries which provide more lucrative opportunities. Gangsters in almost every country have also found a highly profitable business in human smuggling. With their help, increasing numbers of illegal immigrants reach their “land of hope” to become contemporary coolies in sweatshops in the first world without any form of protection. This development has lowered the cost of labor in the richer countries but has also caused political, social, and ethical problems.

Globalization has thus been coupled with the internationalization of crimes. Improved means of transportation and communication across national boundaries have enabled criminals to establish international networks and operate on a global scale. They traffic drugs, counterfeit currencies, sell arms,
and launder money. Corrupt officials—especially those in the third world countries—deposit their ill-gotten money in banks of the Western countries while suspects accused of heinous crimes sneak to other countries to avoid prosecution. This has posed a serious challenge to international law and order.

Finally, globalization has also led to strong resistance to democratization and international intervention in third world countries. As some people in the West step up efforts to push for democracy in developing countries, many in the developing countries resist such pressures. They believe that interventionists often proceed from self-serving biases and priorities and work for their own good instead of the interests of the people they are supposed to help. They also worry that rapid democratization will jeopardize economic development and political stability. Finally, some also question the validity of the Western form of democracy, which is perceived as giving emphasis to the procedural rather than substantive aspects of democracy.

**INCONSISTENT BENEFITS**

Upon reflection, one finds that practically all of the problems discussed above have to do with the fact that globalization is but a partial and uneven process. Whereas capital, technology, information, and the elite have gained unprecedented access to other countries, the vast majority of people—particularly the laborers in third world countries—find themselves with few such privileges. They cannot go to live and work in other countries because immigration restrictions deny them the right to do so. Although some do make it across national borders—through legal and illegal means—most of them can only stay in their own countries and the political construct of a national border becomes a very real barrier.

Precisely because of this, the interests and welfare of the vast majority of the people in the world are associated more with the interests and welfare of the countries in which they reside rather than those of the so-called global community. If a person’s country of citizenship is prosperous and stable, his life is likely to improve. On the other hand, if his country is experiencing economic problems and political turmoil, his quality of life is likely to deteriorate. Accordingly, globalization as we know it has not weakened an individual’s identification with his respective country. On the contrary, such identity has become stronger because outside pressures tend to make people feel insecure and more willing to embrace nationalism as a form of protection.

The national segregation of labor underlines many of the problems discussed above. To begin with, it constitutes a blatant breach of human rights: the right to immigrate and the right to seek a better life. Ever since the dawn of history, immigration has been a way—as well as a right—for human beings to escape natural and human disasters and to seek a better life. Over the past two centuries, however, the world has witnessed increasing restrictions on immigration. Existing immigration systems, particularly those in richer countries, deny such a right. Moreover, by requiring a certain length of residency for citizenship and taxing those on citizenship probation, the existing immigration systems perpetrate another violation of human rights, taxation without representation.

Secondly, the construct of national borders is a hotbed for the growth of nationalism. Since national borders largely define most people’s interests and welfare, they tend to identify more with people residing in their own countries and less with others outside their borders. The more pressures a people feel from the outside world, the more likely they are to feel insecure and nationalist. Because the labor force is large in number, its political support is the target of local and national politicians. While the latter may have international perspectives or interests, they nevertheless need to address the concerns and interests of the masses at home if they ever hope to consolidate their political support. Accordingly, one hears politicians banter about catchwords such as “patriotism,” “fair trade,” “decent labor standards,” “foreign exploitation,” and “international hegemony.” Internationalism may sound nice, but the key to success at home for the politicians is still patriotism.

In the third place, national borders are a source of international polarization. Because capital can move globally much more easily than labor, the bargaining positions between the two tend to tip in favor of the former. If labor refuses to accept a certain wage or labor conditions, capital can always threaten to move its business to another country. Consequently, labor either in the rich countries or the poor, must to accept the terms of capital-holders or face
unemployment. This explains why wealth is being concentrated in the hands of few people in a few countries so much faster than ever before.

A fourth point is: national borders are a major reason for the world’s inability to deal with environmental problems. Since capital-holders can always persuade some governments to accept lax environmental standards in exchange for investment, governments tend to accommodate them as much as possible so as to attract or keep the investment. In the cases in which governments do impose strict environmental regulations, capital simply moves its factories to other countries. Consequently, the factories either pollute the country where they originally locate or pollute the countries to which they move.

Finally, national borders are the source of many international conflicts. As long as people are segregated into different states by national borders, they develop separate interests and identities. Consequently, they are disposed to see international relations more as a zero-sum than as a positive-sum game, a mindset which hampers international cooperation in dealing with the problems the world is facing. This is the case with trade, security, human rights, and the environment. Under these circumstances, international conflicts are likely to continue to be a way of life in world affairs.

PROSPECTS FOR DEVELOPMENT

Given this analysis of rigid national borders, the world’s prospects for dealing with the problems of globalization discussed above is dim. The difficulty in resolution is rooted in the partial and uneven nature of the current globalization process, a troublesome situation which can best be alleviated by through removing the existing national immigration restrictions. Only through this method can the current imbalance of power between labor and capital be corrected and can the world deal effectively with the problems engendered by globalization. This prescription will not be easy to execute, however, for although laborers in the West stand to benefit from removing immigration barriers in the long run, in the short run increased immigration would lead to lower wages for them. In accordance with their short-term calculations, labor forces in the rich countries is more likely to oppose liberalization of immigration rules than not, and as long as they oppose this liberalization, there is little hope of effectively dealing with the problems discussed above. In short, the current kind of globalization may bring people of the world closer together than before where national borders had previously kept them apart. Sadly, largely because individuals in wealthy countries refuse to look beyond their short-term interests, a more effective handling of the world’s problems is unlikely to arise.