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Big Fences Do Not Make Good Neighbors!

By David J. Keeling

Iran's recent political skirmish with Britain over alleged incursions by British naval personnel into Iranian territorial waters highlights once again the importance of geographic boundaries. Territorial boundaries are important political and social elements in our modern global system. Boundaries are critical to the ordering of people and resources across the planet. Yet boundaries, like big fences, do not always make good neighbors. This is especially true where boundaries are ill-defined or where they are used to hide broader policy problems. Failure to consider both the practical and perceptual importance of boundaries in today's geopolitical climate can lead to policy disasters for the U.S. and other countries. Clear demarcation alone is not enough. Understanding the meaning of boundary as barrier and as bridge is equally critical.

Without clearly defined and recognized political boundaries, the global system would collapse into territorial chaos. Indeed, humans have a long and sordid history of fighting wars over territory and resources. Even today, there are myriad unresolved boundary disputes across the planet. Iran's disagreement with Britain over the interpretation of territorial sea boundaries around the Shatt El Arab delta is but the latest and best publicized example. Others include several unsettled boundary disagreements between the U.S. and Canada, Chile and Argentina's ongoing boundary disputes in Patagonia, and quarrels between China and it neighbors over islands in the South China Sea.

Ronald Reagan clearly recognized two decades ago that boundaries can limit opportunities and inhibit social, political, and economic development. One of the defining moments of the Cold War was Reagan's famous exhortation in 1987 to the Soviet leader at the time – "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall." Reagan's explicit reference to the Berlin Wall had broader implications, as he argued for the elimination of the Iron Curtain – the perceptual and physical boundary between US capitalism and Soviet communism.

As a champion of globalization, free-market capitalism, and participatory democracy, the US ideologically supports the free movement of capital, goods, information, and people as a cornerstone of global economic growth. It has enforced the right of innocent passage in ocean waters – witness the US bombing of Libya in 1986 over the Gulf of Sidra boundary disagreement. The US has argued vigorously for unimpeded access to global markets, not only for goods but for the transnational elite who drive the global economy. Yet since September 11th, the US has hardened the boundary that defines US sovereign territory, making it harder for students, migrant workers, business people, and tourists to enter the country.

Twenty years after Reagan's call to tear down the wall, debate about another wall – one between Mexico and the US – is generating disagreement and ill-will across all segments of society. Yet it is hard to imagine the US initiating its own Iron Curtain, especially one running thousands of miles. Hardening the physical barrier along the

US-Mexico border is unlikely simultaneously to solve the illegal immigration problem and to encourage “good neighbor” policies. The latest US policy initiatives to fortify the border with Mexico are misguided and hypocritical. Further militarizing or fortifying the boundary between the US and Mexico will not create more neighborly relationships.

Even Reagan recognized that walls do not facilitate economic integration, social change, or democracy – they discourage and isolate. U.S. policy instead should be aimed at creating seamless boundaries in the region, delineating zones of engagement rather than zones of separation. Strategies to help build vibrant economic communities in Mexico and points south would be far more productive than building a big fence. The US needs to develop policy approaches to important issues like illegal immigration, drug trafficking, and terrorism that do not create more barriers to economic and social interaction. An isolated, walled-in America viewing friends and neighbors with growing suspicion over bigger fences is not good for the region and it sends a bad message to the global community.

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