



Paper: South Florida Sun-Sentinel (Fort Lauderdale, FL)

Title: MENDING FENCES

Date: April 23, 2007

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 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 United States and other countries. 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 United States and Canada, Chile and Argentina's ongoing disputes in Patagonia, and quarrels between China and its neighbors over islands in the South China Sea.

Ronald Reagan clearly recognized two decades ago that boundaries can limit opportunities and inhibit 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 U.S. 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 U.S. dispute with Libya in 1986 over the Gulf of Sidra boundary disagreement. The United States 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 9-11, the United States has hardened the boundary that defines its 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 United States -- is generating disagreement and ill-will across all segments of society. Yet it is hard to imagine America initiating its own Iron Curtain, especially one running thousands of miles. Hardening the physical barrier along the U.S.-Mexico **border** is unlikely simultaneously to solve the illegal immigration problem and to encourage "good neighbor" policies. The latest U.S. 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. 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**. America 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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