

Background to the Trump Wall: United States-Mexico Border Wall in Historical and Global Perspectives

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Abstract

The plan of Donald Trump, the President of the United States to build a border wall between the United States and Mexico has strained the relationship between the two countries, resulted in the partial shutdown of his government for several weeks and raised global concerns. While some observers blame the decision on the erratic and bully nature of Donald Trump, others argue that the requirements of this era of globalization demand the building of bridges instead of barriers. This article offers a new perspective to the Trump Wall by analyzing it from historical and global perspectives. The methodology is narrative and comparative. With examples drawn from several parts of the world, the article concludes that the building of the Trump Wall represents a return to the phase of border control popularly believed to have ended with the pulling down of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

Keywords: Border, Border Wall, Illegal Immigration, Drug Trafficking, Smuggling, US-Mexico Relations.

Introduction

International boundaries have continued to exert considerable influence on the relationship between and among nations even in this era of globalization. The global dimension of border disputes tends to validate the 1907 assertion of Lord Curzon (Curzon: 1908) that the issue of war and peace among nations would in the future be determined by the developments along their borders. Some examples from different parts of the world can be cited to support the claim. In India, the Kashmir Crisis between India and Pakistan has been on since 1948, thus making it the longest war on the Indian sub-continent (Vaish, 2011:65). In Europe, one example that readily comes to mind is the on-going territorial dispute between Russia and Ukraine in the Crimea. The crisis was induced by national economic problems and subsequently drawn into the wider regional and global politics (Molchanov, 2002). In Africa, the unending controversy between Lesotho and South Africa has its roots in the land tenure systems of the colonial period (East, 1982:120-137). In the Far East, the growing tension over the ownership of some

uninhabited islands in the South China Sea illustrates the extent to which border disputes in our contemporary world are induced by competing quests for resource control (Seokwoo et al, 2002:11-12). Lastly, the US-Mexico border crisis, which is the focus of this study, is a classic example of the importance of boundaries in warfare and diplomacy. The article aims to examine the plan of Donald Trump to build a wall along the US-Mexico border in historical and global perspectives.

Ordinarily, the construction of a border wall appears to be the most visible and logical way of emphasizing the barrier effect of any boundary, whether internal or international. Indeed, the concept of boundary, as a line of demarcation between two things, or political or administrative jurisdictions, is as old as mankind or human society. Perhaps, the earliest form of boundary and border control, and refugee problem dates back to the account in the Bible—Genesis 3:23-24—where God drove out Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and stationed Cherubims with a flaming sword East of Eden to keep the two from reaching the Tree of Life. And in the process of development, mankind seems to have recognized the value of border walls. At least, experience has shown that they are usually erected to curb illegal migration, human trafficking, and smuggling or to emphasize ownership in case of disputed territory or where the border delimitation is not clear. For instance, the Great Wall of China was started as far back as 7th B.C to ward off the invasion of nomadic groups from the north. The length of the wall, estimated to be about 21,196 km, as well as the height and thickness has made it the seventh wonder of the world. Apart from defence, the wall also facilitated border control, allowing for the imposition of duties on goods along the Silk Road since the wall also served as a transport corridor (Evans, 2006:3; Waldron, 1990). Other border walls in antiquity include the Great Wall of Gorgan, built in 5th and 6th century A.D., and the Hadrian Wall which began in 122A.D. Nineteenth-century examples include the Great Hedge of India built by the British in 1803 and Zanja de Alsina, built in the 1870s along the southern frontier of Argentina (Moxham, 2001; Alsina, 1977), a combination of wooden trenches and watchtowers erected to protect the territories of the federal government against indigenous local militias. In the last century, there was the Maginot Line, a defensive structure built by France on the French-German border between 1929 and 1938 (Allcorn, 2003). There was also the infamous Iron Curtain that partitioned Germany and Berlin into East and West in 1961 at the height of the Cold War as well as the Panama Canal Fence that started in 1960 as a low fence on top of a retailing wall across the street from the border of Republic of Panama in the Canal Zone. Although Americans insist that there is no physical barrier

between the US and Panama along the 72 km long border, but the opinion of most Panamanians is that in Panama, there is another Berlin Wall (Hollihan, 1986). The pulling down of the Berlin wall on 9 November, 1989 on account of Glasnost and Perestroika seemed to have ended the bipolar world and a distinct phase in the end of the era of erection of border walls. However, contemporary reality shows that more than fifty percent of all the border walls completed since the end of the Second World War in 1945 were all built after 2000. The reappearance of border walls would help us to situate the Trump Wall in a global context.

It is sufficiently well known that one of the campaign promises of Donald Trump as the Republican Candidate in the US Presidential election of 2016 was to build a wall at the 'Southern Border' to curb illegal migration from Mexico. While the proposal was hailed by his right wing supporters, who were anxious to reclaim the United States for the White Anglo-Saxons Protestants original owners (Sowell, 1981), the tough talk of making Mexicans pay the cost aligned well with the national pride of many more Americans since it reinforced the bully image that made the US the policeman of the world. But few people could have anticipated the extent to which Trump could go to achieve this dream. To achieve his goal, Trump has threatened to impose tariff on a number of goods from Mexico and invoke emergency power to raise the needed fund. This development has raised many questions: how much sense does the building of the Trump Wall make in this age of globalization that requires the building of bridges rather than barriers? Is the Trump proposal an isolated development borne out of the bully nature of the president or a new phase of the evolution of border control and management of which he is merely a vocal advocate? To ask the question another way, has the current scale of illegal migration and cross border or transborder crimes promoted by globalization not encouraged the return of the border fence in many parts of the world? These are the questions and issues raised in this article. The presentation is in three parts: Evolution of the US-Mexico Border; The Trump Wall in Global Perspective and the Conclusion.

Evolution of the US-Mexico Border

The border between the United States and Mexico extends from the Pacific Ocean in the west to the Gulf of Mexico in the east. The 3,201-kilometer continental border is the most frequently crossed border in the world and one that has the greatest degree of economic discrepancy existing on both sides of it. There are ten states that are adjacent to this border; four on the side of the United States and six on the Mexican side. They are Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California in the

United States and Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon, Coahuila, Chihuahua, Sonora and Baja California on the Mexican side. The long border traverses a variety of terrain that includes urban centers, rugged hills and uninhabitable desert (Ganster, 1997: 237-239).

The most unique thing about the border, like most border regions, is the intermingling of the people and the settlements. In a sense, the US-Mexico border region is a transition zone of culture overlap. The border region comprises diverse peoples and the population density is higher than in the surrounding areas or cities. So intertwined are communities and settlements that border twin cities have emerged along the border. They include Matamoros and Brownsville, El-Paso and Ciudad Juarez, Nogales and Nogales, and San Diego and Tijuana. Indeed, there is a dynamic mixture of elements of Mexican and American cultures in the border region. The contiguous cities are culturally, economically and socially interdependent. In fact, many of the people living in the border region frequently live on both sides of the border and are bilingual. For them, the borderlands on both sides of the border constitute a homogeneous unit. Beginning from 1924, with the passing of the 1924 Immigration Act (National Origins Act) and the establishment of the US border patrol, people of Mexican descent have increasingly been seen as 'illegal alien' irrespective of their legal status, gender, class or educational status. The hardening of the US-Mexico border after 1924, and the creation of 'legal' and 'illegal' categories of migrant status created two streams of Mexican migrants in the United States. The development can be traced to the history of the evolution of the border and subsequent social, economic and political developments on both sides of the border.

The border itself resulted from the outcome of the 1848 Mexico– US war in which Mexico lost 55% of its national territory to the United States. The process was completed in 1853 in what is usually called the Gadsen Purchase by which the US paid Mexico the sum of \$18,250,000 to abandon her claims to New Mexico and other lands now included in the states of Arizona, Nevada, Utah, Colorado and Wyoming. This arrangement set the Colorado River and the Rio Grande as the border between the two countries. When the boundary commissioners of both countries met to survey the boundary, the US still had to pay an additional \$10 million to allow the US build a railway through southern Arizona to California (Deeds, 1996; Devine, 2004). In spite of the warfare and diplomacy behind the evolution of the border, the border had not ceased to exert strong pressure on US-Mexico relations. The pressure came from two major directions. Firstly, from the

disagreement over the location of the border. Secondly, from the localized economic impact of the border.

The treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848 fixed the middle of Rio de Grande and Colorado Rivers as the boundary between the United States and Mexico irrespective of the shift in course or banks of the two rivers. Between 1852 and 1868, the Rio de Grande had shifted southwards significantly. By 1873, the U.S. had lost approximately 2.4 km² of land to Mexico. In 1888, a major disagreement arose over the management of the waters and the waste water facilities. This was resolved through the creation of an International Boundary and Water Commission in 1889. In 1963, the perennial argument over the ownership of the strip of land that connects El Paso in Texas with Ciudad Juarez in Mexico resurfaced. This was settled by the Boundary Act of 1970. The Treaty Act of 25 October 1972 authorized US section participation in the International Boundary and Water Commission (McCarthy, 2011). By 1975, the border between the US and Mexico could be said to have been settled. Nevertheless, a great deal of the policy of the U.S. towards Mexico centres on the containment of the negative effects of cross border crimes. David Shirk provides this useful explanation for:

The border separates communities and markets in ways that produce anomalous economic pressures. In other words, were it not for the border, flows of people and goods would normally conform to the market pressures of supply and demand of the currently divided territories on either side. The border, however, separated different types of markets where the distributions of supply and demand differ significantly due to the inconsistency of regulations and the distribution of productive factors on either side. For most of its existence, it is these market forces that have driven cross-border economic activity, both legal and illegal (Shirk, 2003:3).

Drug trafficking from Mexico to the U.S has become a major issue since 1970, when the Nixon administration started an all-out war against illegal drugs. The prohibition of guns in Mexico and the legal availability in the U.S account for the smuggling of weapons into Mexico. The smuggling of cars from the U.S into Mexico has been encouraged by the legalization of ‘auto-chocolates,’ the

equivalent of Nigeria's Tokunbo cars. It is also on record that about 70% of the undocumented immigrants in the US are from Mexico. In 2002, US and Mexico signed the 22 Point Smart Border Agreement aimed at providing 'secure infrastructures', 'secure flows of goods' and 'secure flows of people.' This led to the creation of the International Liaison Officers Association (ILOA) to implement the policy (Agbolor, 2015). The cooperation was taken a step further in 2008 when the Merida Initiative began. This is a security agreement between US, Mexico and the Latin America governments to deal with cross-border crimes at the roots. Under the arrangement, the US is required to offer assistance to Mexico in the areas of justice reform, police capacity building, anti-corruption programmes, promotion of rule of law, delivery of sniffer dogs and supply of scanners and cross border communication gadgets between ten US cities and Mexico sister border towns (Martinez, 1997:293-298). On account of the location of their common borders, the US, Mexico and Canada are signatories to the North America Trade Agreement (NAFTA), designed to remove barriers to free trade and foreign investment. On account of this, Mexico is US third largest trading partner and has benefited tremendously from this in terms of foreign direct investment. In fact, one of the US companies, Walmart, is the biggest employer of labour in Mexico (Barajas et al. 2014). The issues of illegal migration and associated problems have continued to strain the relationship between the United States and Mexico. The 2010 Annual Report of the United States Border Patrol Agency (USBPA) indicates that 90% of illegal crossings into the United States occurred through this southern border.²¹ It was estimated that there are more than 6 million undocumented Mexicans residing in different parts of the United States. The US-Mexico border is recognized as one of the busiest in the world. There are 48 Points of Entry and about 800,000 people arrive in the US from Mexico every day (<https://www.nap.edu/read/13498> accessed 08-01 2019) In 2010, the Barak Obama Administration gave the Customs and the Border Patrol Agency \$600m to beef up security arrangements along the US-Mexico border (Martinez, 2007:48-52). The numbers of interceptions and arrests along the border have continued to rise in spite of the efforts made to discourage illegal migration and smuggling from Mexico to the United States. This was the background to the campaign promise of Trump to build the 'Southern Wall' that will curtail the influx of Mexicans into the United States.

Trump was sworn in as American President on 20 January 2017. On 25 January, 2017 he signed Executive Order 13767 to pave the way for the building of the wall. So far, the Mexican President, Enrique Pena Nieto, has vowed never to pay

for the building of the border wall (BBC News 26 January, 2017). Many people in the United States have also criticized the wall project by arguing that the president should focus on building bridges and not barriers (Branstein et al. 2017). Xavier Beccara, the Attorney General of the State of California, filed a lawsuit on 20 September 2017 challenging the legality of building the Trump Wall (<http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-pol-la-xavier-becarra-trump-wall-lawsuit> accessed 20-09- 2017).

In December 2018, the president requested the approval of Congress for \$5.6 billion to build a wall that covers half the length of the border. The congress has only approved \$341 million to maintain the existing 1,100km high security fencing approved under the Secure Fence Act 2006 (*New York Times*, 25 January, 2017). The impasse resulted in the partial shutdown of government business from 22 December, 2018.

The Trump Wall in Global Perspective

There are three stages in the evolution of boundary or border namely Delimitation, Demarcation and Boundary Management. The nature of the control of any border, called border regime, at the third stage usually depends on the nature of the relationship existing on both sides of the border. The border can therefore be open, close or partially so. And because border control responds to human development, they are not static. They can therefore be adjusted to suit the prevailing circumstances. The advantage of the border historian, as distinct from the border manager, is that he is suitably placed to trace the phases in the evolution of a particular border. The historian is equipped by training to understand the dynamics of change over time. Indeed, like most international boundaries, the US-Mexico border has entered the third phase of its evolution. The first is from the beginning of the nation states to 1980. This was when the borders were conceived essentially like the shell of an egg. This was understandable in the age of trench wars when the first casualties were usually the borderland communities. Hence, scholars like Holdich and Ratzel (Holdich, 1916:2; Scott et al., 1997:8; Boateng, 1973) had argued that boundaries must be made as militarily strong as possible to safeguard the state. The increasing deployment of airplanes and ballistic missiles rendered that position increasingly untenable. At any rate, that phase was climaxed with the erection of the iron curtain that divided Germany into two in 1961.

The second phase was the post 1980 era that witnessed the flowering of liberal democracy, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the reunification of Germany and the end of the Sino-Russian confrontations. This New World Order was marked by globalization and regional identities that intruded into the functions of the state and the control of the border. The negative effect of this internationalization on global security is becoming increasingly obvious. For instance, Pierre Lapague, the Regional Representative, United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Regional Office for West and Central Africa, noted that the free circulation of goods and persons has been a major achievement of ECOWAS since the 1979 adoption of the ECOWAS Protocols of Free Movement. He, however, added that this singular achievement has also created its own security dilemma. He noted that:

One of the risks posed by these positive trends, however, is the emergence of new opportunities for criminal networks involved in illicit trafficking and thus benefiting from the transportation facilities; the challenges of the circulation of criminal assets, border vulnerability and sometimes an inadequate legal framework are yet to be addressed (UNODC/ECOWAS Newsletter, 2 June 2017:5).

Didier Bigo (1997:90-91) similarly came to the same conclusion in his analysis of the effects of migrations on the Schengen States and Europe as a whole. He observed that transnational and globalizing phenomena ‘disturb borders’, especially since the new migrants come with their own different values, cultures, and identities. Hence, the conclusion that, ‘when border control had to be viewed from its cost angle, the whole structure of security, collective identity, citizenship and democracy became endangered.’

The associated problem of internationalization has raised new problems that have now ushered the world into a new phase of the return of the border fence. It is in this context that the Trump Wall can be best conceptualised.

The second point to note is that the decision of Donald Trump to build the Mexican Wall was not a bolt from the blues. What has made it dramatic is his own theatrical idiosyncrasies. The presidents before him had tried to tackle the same problem with little success. First, there was ‘Operation Wetback’ of 1954 aimed at preventing undocumented immigrants from entering the United States,

and also rounding up and deporting illegal aliens. The number of Mexicans involved in the exercise that resulted in the deportation of 1.3 million under President Eisenhower was so huge that people began to point to every Mexican as illegal alien. It is the largest mass deportation in American history (Hernandez, 2006:421-424; Garcia, 1980). In 1990, the US Border Patrol first began to erect physical barriers in the San Diego Sector of the border with the construction of 22.5km border wall (Robbins, 2006). Beginning in 1994, the US border defence policy moved from internal detention to fortifying the border in highly trafficked crossing points through the construction of large walls and other barriers, the use of high-tech equipment to track migrants, increased number of border patrol and a new system of identification linked to fingerprinting of all those detained. In that year, Operation Gatekeeper was launched in the San Diego/Tijuana area where the problem was particularly acute. This sector traditionally is the preferred point of entry of more than 40% of illegal Mexicans into the United States (Nevins, 2002). By 2006, it had become clear that the US must continue with the erection of the wall at the Southern Border. Hence, the passing of The Secure Fence Act of 2006, also called H.R 6061, by the Congress which authorized and partially funded the construction of 1,125km along the US-Mexico border. The Act was signed into law on 26 October, 2006 by President George W. Bush who stated that the Act would 'help protect the American people', 'make our borders more secure' and was 'an important step toward immigration reform (White House, 2006). The original plan was that the entire length of the border should be fenced by December 2008. In October 2007, environmentalist groups and certain concerned individuals filed a restraining order to stop the project. The complaint was that the construction of the fence will harm the wildlife and endanger the indigenous species of the area (Gordon, 2000; Archibald, 2008). This was the reason for the partial construction of the fence. It was under this Secure Fence Act that the Congress approved \$341 million for the maintenance of the existing 1,100km border fence between the US and Mexico for President Trump.

Thirdly, and flowing from the first point, is that in several parts of the world, the iron curtain or border fence is reappearing especially since 2000. These include the border wall between Botswana and Zimbabwe (2003); the 225km high tech border fence between South Africa and Zimbabwe built in the 2000s; the 1,416km wall between China and North Korea under construction; the 2,400km border wall between Pakistan and Afghanistan also under construction; the 8 km border wall at Ceuta built in 2001 between Spain and Morocco to join the existing 11km wall at Melilla built in 1998; the 410 km barrier between the United Arab Emirates and

Oman that is still under construction just like the 828km border barrier between Turkey and Syria under construction (BBC News, 5 November 2009, *New York Times*, 20 February, 2017; Associated Press, 16 October 2016). One can also add to the list the 2,000km barrier under construction between Russia and Ukraine to stem the tide of weapon smuggling and to ward off terrorism in the conflict zone (*Moscow Times*, 11 September 2014; *The Daily Beast*, 27 October, 2014). The Kenyan government was left with no other choice than to embark on the building of a strong wall that was planned to run through the entire 708km border with Somalia after the attack on Garissa University College in the north eastern part of the country that left over 140 dead in April 2014. The border is to be made up of concrete barriers, fences, ditches, observatory posts that will be equipped with CCTV cameras. The project began in 2015 under the Ministry of Interior. Four years after, only 10km of the fence has been constructed at the huge cost of \$35m, a development that has resulted in the suspension of the project amidst accusations of official corruption (*Kenya Business Day*, 14 March 2019). In Nigeria, two former Internal Affairs Ministers, Chief Sunday Afolabi and Comrade Abba Moro, had strongly advocated the building of a wall along the borders of Nigeria to contain cross border crimes and the Boko Haram insurgency in spite of the cost and the ECOWAS Protocols on Free Movement. On 6 January 2015, the Chief of Defence Staff, Air Chief Marshal Alex Badeh similarly expressed the view that the border should be closed to enhance military operation against Boko Haram. If the International Joint Task Force had failed to degrade the Boko Haram at the time it did, most Nigerians would have been forced to endorse this proposal (Akinyele, 2016:65-66)

Conclusion

From the above, it is sufficiently clear that one of the greatest needs of our contemporary times is peace. The collapse of the economies of many countries and the rise in global terrorism has induced large scale immigration that now threatens the security and sovereignty of many countries, especially the developed ones. In Europe, it led to Brexit; in the US and several other countries, border walls are now being erected to curtail the influx of unwanted migrants and check cross border crimes. After all, the best way to manage a difficult neighbour is for the individual concerned to erect a perimeter fence round his own property. This generally underscores the importance of lines and spaces in human affairs, even in this era of globalization. The Trump Wall is not intrinsically different from the border fence of George W. Bush of 2006. While Bush had used metal fence to demarcate half of the US-Mexico border, Trump wants to use concrete wall to complete the project.

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