

A Closer Look at the Perceptions of the International Boundaries

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Abstract: International boundaries perceived by many as an ordinary lines that divide one country from another, while is more than that as some of the international boundaries are fascinating, dangerous, long and cumbersome. These makes the international boundaries study interesting. Therefore, since international boundary is important in separating independent nations so in the absence of such physical boundary on the ground, the concern nations perceptions of the boundary is inevitably diverse and without the support of sufficient, accurate knowledge and information could easily spark border skirmishes, tensions, disputes and crises especially when the process of boundary making is incomplete, and erroneous, or is prolonged over a long period of time. Thus, the process of international boundary making necessarily should be adequately completed in the shortest possible time period to avoid tensions, crises, or disputes.

Keywords: Perceptions, International boundaries, internal border

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I. Introduction

Most of the international boundaries were introduced through Westphalian concept of boundaries by the Europeans colonials, underlines that boundaries denote ownership of land or territory, defining the exclusive use of property by the owner or others authorized for its use. Boundary lines on the maps produced by the colonials were drawn at a period or stage when knowledge of the region concerned was very scarce. Therefore the boundaries that emerged were generally based upon geographical natural features (mainly rivers, lakes, watersheds, mountain ranges) and astronomical or geometrical lines. The boundaries, in many cases, divided tribes or language groups although in some isolated cases reference was made to tribal distribution in delimiting the frontiers of, for example, Norway- Sweden, Poland-Ukraine, Netherlands-Belgium, Ethiopia-Kenya, Egypt-Sudan, Chad-Sudan (in part).

II. Methodology

The methodology employed for study is mainly desktop research whereby various related literatures on international boundaries and borders were reviewed. Most of the literatures and maps were obtained from Google search and archived of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Perpustakaan Sultan Zinaria Library, Johor Bahru, Malaysia.

III. Result and Discussion

The international boundaries delineated boldly on the maps may be, but imaginary lines that seem not to mean much apart from informing the position of the line at which a country is separated from another country. In reality, the international boundaries may not even been marked or demarcated at all on the ground, while those that are surveyed and demarcated are marked in different ways by placing various boundary marks. The longest international boundary (8891km.long) which separates the United States from Canada is just a *border vista*, which is created by keeping the boundary line clear of brush and vegetation for 3 meters on each side of the boundary line. The *border vista*, which in some parts, runs across mountainous terrain, remote prairie farmlands and heavily forested areas along the 49th parallel, is commonly referred in the military sense as the longest *undefended border*. In contrast, the international boundary between the United States and Mexico which stretches some 3000km. from the Pacific Ocean in the west to the Gulf of Mexico to the east is actively patrolled by over twenty thousand US immigration and customs personnel. Even though it is reinforced (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) with stretches of steel and barbed wires (including across vast empty desert and coastline edges), fortified with infrared cameras, imposing watchtowers, and blinding floodlights (unlike the US-Canada international boundary), it is the most heavily crossed international boundary, both legal and illegally [10].



Fig 1: Stretches of steel fence erected across empty desert of USA-Mexico international boundary.
(Source:wikipedia.org/wiki/Mexico–USA)



Fig 2: Stretches of steel fence erected near water edge to demarcate the US-Mexico international boundary.
(Source:wikipedia.org/wiki/Mexico–US)

This clearly reflects how different an international boundary can be perceived, and that the physical conditions and social processes related to international boundaries can raise different perceptions to different people as elaborated in the following paragraphs. In reality, international boundary lines are invincible, but their *positions* are usually tangibly marked on the ground by some kind of constructions such as concrete walls, barbed wires, chain link fences, wooden fences, concrete pillars and beacons and even electric flood-lit fences. The way an international border is marked can reveal a great deal about the relationships between the countries adjoining the boundary. A simple chain link fence may signal that the adjoining countries have been good neighbours, such as that at Naco, Arizona of the United States and Naco of Mexico, or that between Lithuania and Belarus. Nevertheless, the perceptions can be varied especially as one move along the United States-Mexico international boundary, only to encounter that along that single 2,000 km. international boundary, there are seven types of border among others; open border, controlled border, fortified fenced border, fortified metallised walled border, and also a militarised border. The triple layered 9km fence between San Diego, California in the United States and Tijuana of Baja California in Mexico was constructed to send the message that migrants are not welcome, and that they have to enter the country through proper channels if they still want to get across the longest border between the rich country of the United States and the less rich country of Mexico. Similarly, as one get to move along India's international borders which are shared with Pakistan, China, Nepal, Myanmar,

Bhutan and Bangladesh, the perceptions towards international border differ depending on the terrain and relations with the country that share the common border. In the north, the international border between India and her arch rival Pakistan (known as the *international Border*) runs from the Line of Control (LoC) which separates the Indian controlled Kashmir from the Pakistan controlled Kashmir. The Line of Control which refers to the military control line is a *de facto* border, a line that does not constitute a legally recognised international boundary. Marked by double fence with barbed wires in between the fences, the LoC is perceived as a dangerous zone while a contrasting perception is observed at Wagah where the *International Border* ends. At Wagah, where the boundary partitions the Indian state of Punjab and the Punjab province of Pakistan, the security forces of India and Pakistan will jointly follow the colourful “lowering of flag ceremony” as a daily military practice held every evening before sunset as a symbol of the two countries’ rivalry as well as brotherhood and cooperation. As wars and conflicts have been common to both countries since they gained independence in 1947, the Indian government even extent their expenditure to provide their international border with flood lights just to get the India-Pakistan border under control especially against smuggling, arm-trafficking and infiltration by terrorists.

From a technical point of view, a boundary may be perceived as a line or a zone; a boundary may be represented by a physical border or an intangible cultural intersection. Boundary may also be perceived spatially as well as functionally perceived. Nonetheless, there are boundaries perceived as impermeable while others are perceived highly permeable [2]. Permeable boundaries are boundaries that allows easy passage from one side of the boundary to the other. In contrast to the permeable boundaries which normally has only one entry exit points, highly permeable boundaries (porous boundaries) can have several entry/exit points along the boundary.

The perceptions of international boundaries are diverse depending on the people, environment and situations. Some boundaries are perceived safe and friendly, being an open and undefended border, whereas others which are closed and heavily guarded seem to be insecure and unwelcoming. Yet other boundaries are perceived as fascinating, a few are unique, a few others are perceived as weird and some are perceived as dangerous. Interestingly, there are those international boundaries that are perceived as confusing, cumbersome or complicated. Thus, the nature of these boundaries and the way the boundaries are perceived could play an important role in ensuring not only the safety and security of the border communities but also the safety and the security of the boundary line and in turn, the stability and prosperity of the nation.

International boundary lines that appear to be simple and straight perhaps include that of Norway-Sweden where crossing the border between Sweden and Norway does not require a passport due to the Nordic Passport Union and secondly there is no physical border obstruction along the 1,630km. long boundary which mostly follows the drainage divide in the Scandinavian Mountains. The border may be just a border vista running through its forests, but its function as an international boundary remains relevant. Regulations are strictly observed along the border vista, an example of which is one that concern snowmobiling (Fig 3); snowmobiling for fun is prohibited and illegal in Norway but not in Sweden. The strict laws in Norway allow snowmobiling relating to work only. The border vista that separates these two countries provides no discretion in this context.

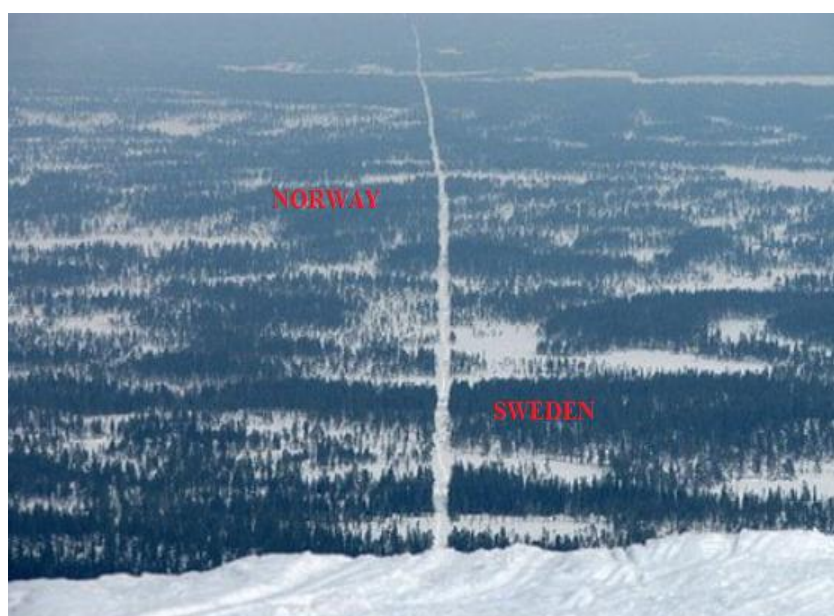


Fig 3: Snowmobiling in border vista of Norway-Sweden

(Source: <https://9gag.com/gag/a7DBdbA/norway-sweden-border>)

International boundaries that are perceived as dangerous include that of the United States-Mexico boundary where almost 40,000 people were killed since 2007 as killings have been an almost daily affair in the dangerous border state where many of the drug cartels operate [24]. The Cambodia-Thailand border is also considered dangerous for many have been killed and thousands displaced due to territorial disputes [24]. The boundary shared between Pakistan and India is obviously perceived as dangerous since many situations had soared into wars [24], and that boundary which Pakistan shares with Afghanistan is also perceived as dangerous being lawless and high in violent incidents resulting from tribal allegiances [24].

The demilitarized zone (DMZ) that separates North Korea from South Korea is another well-known international border perceived as dangerous. A demilitarized zone is an area in which treaties or agreements between nations, military powers or contending groups forbid military installations, activities or personnel. A DMZ often lies along established frontier or boundary between two or more military powers or alliances. The Korean DMZ region is actually an empty strip 250km.long and 4km wide across the 38th parallel on the Korean Peninsula. This zone is heavily fortified even when skirmishes are rare between the North Koreans and the South Koreans, thus making such a boundary to be perceived as the most dangerous border and obviously not tension-free [7]. The DMZ was created at the end of the Korea War in 1953. The two countries are considered technically to be still at war as both Koreas did not sign any peace treaty or agreement even though both the countries agreed to a ceasefire [14].

The international boundary between Poland and Ukraine is perceived as unique. At a length of about 500 km, the border is the most often crossed eastern border of the EU. A part of the international boundary line was somehow “erased” in 2011 when the fields between Horodyszczce of Poland and Warez of Ukraine were bulldozed to form the shapes of two giant fish crossing the boundary (Fig 4), and planted with twenty-three different types of crops, creating a piece of landscape art participating in the 2011 Land Art Festival. Designed by Polish artist Jaroslaw Koziara, the masterpiece constructed at the Schengen border was meant to represent unity [18,1] and trade between the two neighboring countries which once had a long history of tight relations.

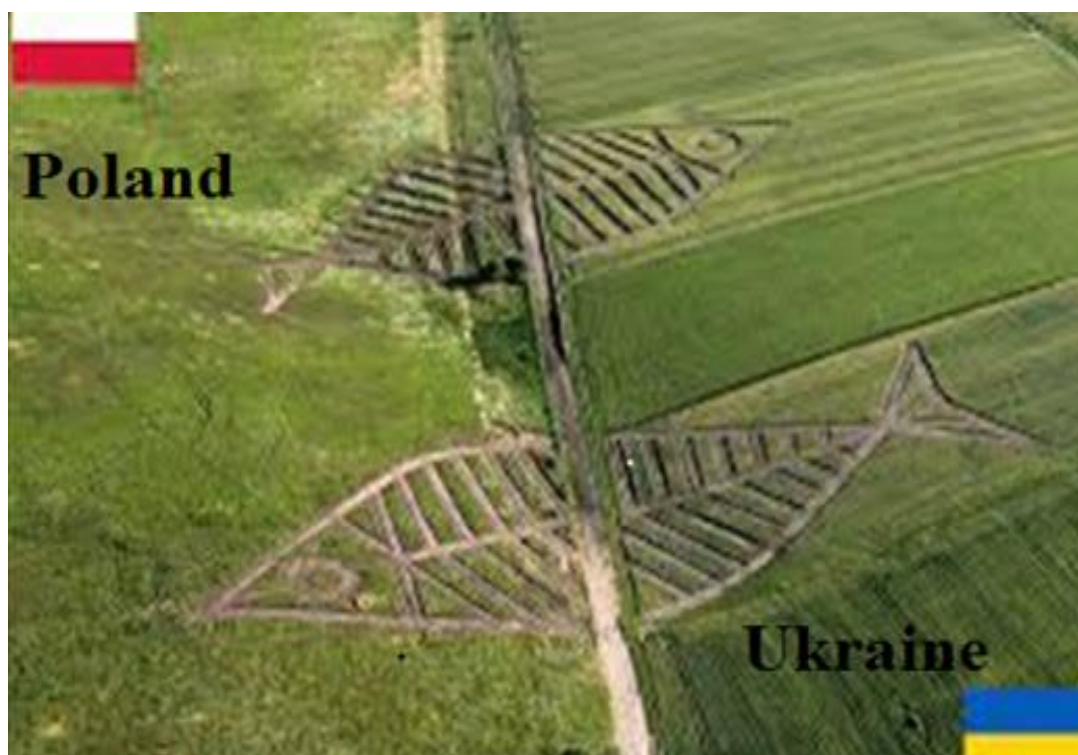


Fig 4: A unique international boundary between Poland and Ukraine
(Source:[https://www.google.com/poland/ukraine internationalboundary](https://www.google.com/poland/ukraine%20internationalboundary))

The international boundary line between Russia and the United States is also perceived as unique. It runs through the middle of the Bering Straits, thereby separates the Diomed Islands located in the middle of the strait as Big Diomed Island and Little Diomed Island. Interestingly, this US-Russia international boundary line coincides with International Date Line. Thus the Big Diomed Island of Russia is 23 hours ahead of the Little Diomed Island of the United States even though both islands are merely 3.8 km.apart.

Majestic natural waterfalls that straddle some of the major rivers which flow between two countries are often perceived as *fascinating* natural international boundaries. One of such waterfalls is the Niagara Falls that

straddles the Niagara River which coincides with the US-Canada international boundary. Other waterfalls include the spectacular Victoria Falls straddling the Zambia River which flows along the Zambia-Zimbabwe international border, the Iguazu Falls on the Iguazu River flowing through between Brazil and Bolivia, and the Ban Gioc-Detian Falls on the Quay Son River which forms the international boundary between China and Vietnam. These waterfalls attract millions of tourists and travelers thereby forming important natural resource for the economy of the countries. Similarly, although some mountain ranges could be just as fascinating as those waterfalls, many mountain ranges are perceived as barriers instead. Ural Mountains form the international boundary between Europe and Asia. The boundary between France and Spain follows the crest of the Pyrenees Mountains. The perception of borders may differ according to different images by people and a position in hierarchy or place of living (that government in the center or borderland citizen). Perceptions which emphasize notions of difference, mutual fear and threat are, more often than not, socially constructed from the center, with walls and fences constituting the mechanism through which difference is perpetuated [12].

The infamous historical walls, the Great Wall of China, the Hadrian Wall of England and parts of the Berlin Wall of Germany, are still visible in the present day landscape although these walls were built many centuries and years ago. Being relic international boundaries, these walls have since become important tourist attractions. The Great Wall of China, which was built thousands of years ago by different dynasties for various purposes, not as a single but a set of walls, is today perceived as a symbol of strength and ability of the nation [9]. It was once perceived as a symbol of tyranny and excesses of the Qin First Emperor [21]. However, depending on which part of the Great Wall a traveler or tourist is, the Great Wall of China has been perceived as mysterious, incredible, inscrutable and unfathomable [11]. As such, the Great Wall of China is known to have attracted millions of tourists each year, unlike the Hadrian Wall of England which is not perceived as an attractive place to visit [20]. According to a study by Newcastle University, the Hadrian Wall is not well known, understood, or perceived as an easy place to visit. The Hadrian wall which originally functioned as a militarized border monument to mark the northern most limit of the Roman Empire, is typically perceived as a complex Roman frontier [13], quite distinct from the renowned Berlin Wall. Also known as the “iron curtain”, the Berlin Wall which built in 1961, divided Berlin the capital city of Germany into West Berlin and East Berlin. The wall completely encircled all of West Berlin, thus separating it from East Berlin. This was to serve the purpose of keeping the western “fascists” from entering East Germany, the main objective being to stem out mass defections from East to West [3]. Thus, its perception as a barrier is self-explanatory. As a consequent, the Berliners were separated from their families, friends, work and even their homes for nearly thirty years [6] before the wall was finally torn down in 1989. A study conducted by the Allenbach Institute on east-west identities showed that there is still a strong perception of separate identities between the East Germans and the West Germans even though it has been decades after the wall was torn down and Germany was reunified [16].

International boundaries can also be perceived as *peculiar* or may be *weird*. While most countries have simple clear international boundaries that cut across or coincide with natural features, ethnic groups, or cultural domain, the international boundary between Canada and the United States at Derby Line, Vermont, for example, appear to be perceived as peculiar since the boundary zigzags its way [25] along side streets and running through many buildings including houses, cafes, a library (Haskell Free Library), an opera house (Haskell Opera House) and a business center (Eurode Business Center). Although it may be interesting from the tourists’ point of view, such boundary affects the people or communities differently. The US-Canada international boundary at Derby Line causes some houses to have their kitchens in Canada and their bedrooms in the United States or vice versa, and the Haskell Opera House has its stages in Quebec, Canada and many of the seats are in Vermont, United States. Some buildings in fact, have two different addresses, even though the buildings adjoin each other, and yet it takes a week for a letter to arrive at its destination even though the destination is just a few steps away in the same building. Similarly, someone who needs to visit his neighbor a mere ten meters away, needs to go through the check point when leaving his house and again, upon his return. Another person needs to be cautious of his position when cycling along a street where the international boundary runs through the middle of the street. For all these reasons, the international boundary line is clearly marked where appropriate by painting white crosses or bold white continuous line on the roads, and bold black line across the post office, library and opera house. Another example of such boundary is the international boundary between Netherlands and Belgium (Fig 5).



Fig 5: A peculiar international boundary line (Netherlands-Belgium boundary)
(Source:<https://www.google.com/Netherlands-Belgiuminternationalboundary>)

Travelling across some countries can be challenging, even to their citizens themselves, when the international boundaries are perceived as *complicated* and *cumbersome*. One would encounter such an experience when travelling across *enclaves* and *counter enclaves*. An *enclave* is a territory, or part of a territory, that is entirely surrounded by the territory of one other state. *Wadi-e-Madhah* or Madha is an enclave of Oman within the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where the Omani territory Madha in the Musaddam peninsula is surrounded by the UAE. Similarly, the tiny village Nahwa in the UAE is entirely enclosed by Madha, the Omani enclave in UAE, thus resulting in a *counter enclave*, where Nahwa (a territory of UAE) is an enclave in Madha (a territory of Oman), which itself is an enclave in the territory of UAE. The Vatican City and San Marino are both enclaves in Italy, just as Lesotho is an enclave within South Africa. Living in enclaves has its own set of problems as can be understood through the Indian-Bangladeshi enclaves. There were once 130 Indian enclaves in Bangladesh while Bangladesh had 95 enclaves in India [5]. Being Bangladeshi living in an Indian enclave within Bangladesh, many of the citizens of Bangladesh were deprived of public facilities. Fortunately, on August 1, 2015, 51 Bangladeshi enclaves in India became Indian territory and 111 Indian enclaves in Bangladesh became Bangladeshi territory [4, 19] (Fig. 6) when the two countries swapped their enclaves. Similarly Belgium has a number of enclaves within Netherlands and Netherlands has a number of enclaves within Belgium. Recently Belgium and Netherlands too decided to swap their parcels of land [23, 8] just as India and Bangladesh had swapped their enclaves [4] to simplify the international boundaries. Belgium and Netherlands signed a treaty to swap land on their borders which is expected to be enforced in January 2018. Belgium would soon cede a small peninsula in the river Maas (Meuse) of about 14 hectares to the Netherlands [22, 8].

Most tourists and travelers would love to travel cheap and hassle free across *open* and *friendly* international borders. An international border is perceived as *friendly* when the formalities are not rigid, the services at checkpoints are good and swift, and the policy and regulation can be easily complied. It would be no wonder if the countries of the *Schengen area*, which comprise of twenty six European states, are mostly visited as the borders of the countries within the Schengen area are open and friendly. The Schengen area mainly functions as a single country for international travel purposes where the interstate borders within the Schengen area are often open and completely unguarded as border controls are eliminated through the common visa policy. Movement within the states are free and easy so much so that one could not or may find it difficult to notice that he had actually cross many borders within the area. However, the border controls with non-Schengen countries are strengthened.



Fig 6: Enclaves and counter enclaves: Complicated international boundary
(Source: <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org>)

International boundaries that are perceived as *barriers* can be demarcated by various types of barriers ranging from simple concrete walls and chain link or iron fence to fortified metal or even electric fence. Unlike artificial man-made boundaries of costly walls and fences, international boundaries are also delineated by natural features such as rivers, lakes, forests, mountain ranges and deserts, many of which would once initially barriers to movement. The Atamaca Desert was no longer perceived as a barrier for Chile to have access to the valuable borax, copper and nitrate deposits when Chile advanced northward against Bolivia and Peru [15] between Chile and Bolivia and between Bolivia and Peru. The thick vast Amazon rainforest was once a barrier separating Brazil from Venezuela, Colombia, Guyana and other nations in the north and from Peru and Ecuador in the west before Trans Highway (Fig. 7) was constructed cutting through the resourceful forest. The International boundaries in the lowland Amazon forest which historically was drawn according to the scramble for natural resources [17] was no longer perceived as a barrier when roads were built to provide access to the forest mainly for agriculture and cattle ranching purposes. High and insurmountable mountain ranges of the Himalayas are perceived as natural barriers between Nepal and Tibet. Access to China was once complicated by the geography of the country. Great mountains (Himalayas), rivers (Yangtze River and Yellow River), deserts (Gobi and Taklamakan deserts) and sea (Yellow Sea and China Sea) formed natural barriers against invaders and explorers, making simple for China to adopt the close door policy. Many International boundaries in Africa though, run through large lakes such as Lake Malawi, Lake Mozambique, Lake Niassa, to name a few, making conflicts too easy to spark usually over the water and fish resources.



Fig 7 : Transhighway of the Amazon Forest
(Source: <https://millennialmagazine.com>)

IV. Conclusion

The international boundary is understood by many to be no more than a line separating or joining nations. However, in times of crisis or dispute, negative perceptions towards the boundary could easily plague the border communities if not properly handled could led to border skirmishes especially when the nature, purpose and functions of the international boundary are not well understood. It can also be concluded that the importance and knowledge on an international boundary immediately become conspicuous in the event of resolving a border dispute.

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