

On the Subject of Walls

While it's [fallen off the news somewhat](#), one of Donald Trump's most conspicuous campaign-trail promises was to build a wall between the U.S. and Mexico. Not only did Trump say that a wall was necessary, but he said that he would get [Mexico](#) to build it, conveniently ducking the question of cost to U.S. citizens. This is because the border between the U.S. and Mexico is long, and walls are [expensive](#). Especially the kind of [well-built walls that are required to stop crafty humans](#) from getting around them.

Ukraine has a wall of its own. Or, at least, it's building a wall. Sort of. In [September 2014](#), during the height of Russia's attempts to intervene in Ukraine, shortly after Russia occupied Crimea and during the beginning of its ongoing incursion into Ukraine's east, lawmakers developed a plan to create a wall between Russia and Ukraine.

The wall received some coverage in Western Press—not much, but some—because building a wall along thousands of kilometers of territory is a big project, and the wall had a big number attached to it: 4 billion UAH (at 8 UAH to the dollar in 2014, \$500 million, now at 26 UAH to the dollar, or about \$160 million). The wall was scheduled for completion in 2018, and building commenced. Since then, there have been questions over whether or not it will be completed on time, according to the printed standards. There have been allegations of corruption, as well as questions over whether the planned structure would be capable of accomplishing its military mission of stopping Russian infiltration and military intrusion.

A Wall in Name Only

Based on reporting that I have done, including visits to the wall and interviews with subject matter experts, national security personnel, veterans, villagers living within 10 km of

the wall, and online research, if the wall is completed as promised and planned, it will not serve as a significant military obstacle against Russia. Without being able to find any evidence beyond official statements and visual confirmation that *something* is being built, it's impossible to decisively state anything. Has money been embezzled? Maybe. It's Ukraine, so, maybe *probably*. Is the wall being built to standard? Has every meter of the border with Russia been accounted for? There's no way to confirm that construction has succeeded or failed.

As of right now, the wall consists of two elements. The first, which looks much like what the wall was supposed to be based on initial projections, are a series of well-developed emplacements near significant border crossing points along major highways. Ukraine's State Border Service and military units staff and patrol these sections, guarding against saboteurs, infiltrators, and the possibility of a Russian military offensive. Practically speaking, of course, a ditch, concertina wire and double-fences won't create much more than a brief tactical pause for even the smallest military unit (and no pause for airborne or air assault units)—but (apparently) according to military thinkers and the politicians who give them strategic guidance, something is better than nothing at all.

This reality has given rise to a new story: the idea that the wall will be useful for stopping criminal activity. Smugglers and illegal border crossings will be diminished by the wall, which (along with the security provided by the wall) will help make Ukraine a safer and more law-abiding place. This has some merit to it, although it's also worth stating that every person with whom I spoke living near the wall viewed it as an eyesore at best, an actual nuisance at worst, and that it

seemed (paradoxically) to be increasing smuggling and illegal activity—precisely the opposite of its intended effect.

Notwithstanding the views of its residents, the border area with Russia is startlingly, astonishingly open. When I visited the area north of Kharkiv last in February, I nearly walked *into* Russia. There was no wall present, though residents were on edge, and warned me (through the Ukrainian who was interpreting) that patrols came by every few minutes looking for people who didn't have a reason for being there. I assumed that they meant Ukrainian patrols.

As of February 2017, two years after the battle of Debaltseve and three years after the invasion of Crimea, it was still possible to walk into Russia from Ukraine, more or less accidentally.

Why Should We Build a Wall?

Walls require strength and power, and wealth. They require organization and commitment, and maintenance. They are also the single most noticeable evidence of a nation's insecurity and fragility. What nation requires walls? What confident *people* would even think about erecting barriers? A weak nation, filled with anxious and neurotic people. And while this describes Ukraine to a certain extent—with all due respect to my Ukrainian friends, whom I love and respect, and with due respect for the idea of a country called Ukraine, (a) Ukraine as a country lacks significant allies, and has an overwhelmingly powerful enemy on its doorstep while (b) its people are justifiably traumatized by the repeated revolutions

and various attempts by Russia and Russian agents to undermine their economy, political autonomy, military, and (writ large) their independence.

Those justifications don't travel very well when the destination is the U.S.A. Although walls require power, money, and strength to build, they aren't *for* the powerful, they're for the weak, the fragile, the exhausted. Walls exist where there is no energy left to patrol, where one believes that some powerful energy or tendency toward chaos and entropy will, left *unwalled*, lead inexorably to conquest. This is what certain Americans believe: that a wall with Mexico is necessary, presumably because Mexico is more powerful, and left to its own devices, Mexico's Mexican inhabitants will swarm over the border and destroy what they find on the other side.

Of course, if U.S. citizens legitimately believed that Mexicans constituted some type of threat, the response to Mexico would be different from wall-building. What Americans fear is not Mexico—it's the loss of control, it's not being able to convince others that it is in their best interests to behave according to America's best interests. In many ways, this has been the story of the millennium, a slow-building narrative since the towers came down on 9/11.

On a psychological level, it seems almost certain that to Americans, the wall with Mexico is a replacement for the Twin Towers. We want to rebuild the towers and protect them from being blown up. We will call the product of this constructive but paranoiac impulse "The Wall with Mexico." It's a sad and quixotic impulse, if impossible due to constraints built into the space-time continuum.

But Why Build a Wall at All?

There are good points to be made against the building of walls. They restrict commerce, dampen the flow of accurate firsthand experience between citizens of different countries, reduce the ability of people to communicate, and lead to factionalism, nationalism, and the dangerous kind of international competition.

Walls are a last resort, when one must defend oneself against some foe that cannot be deterred by any other means. They are fixed positions that generate no revenue and require great sums for their upkeep. They can be avoided with the use of airplanes, rockets, and boats. They are as useful and necessary as fixed fortifications (which is to say, not very).

Ukraine's excuse for building a wall is that it's hard up for emotionally satisfying ways to thwart Russia. A wall is something that is seen, and can be measured, and will make it more difficult to enter Ukraine from Russia. There are many downsides, but from the perspective of Ukraine, a much smaller country than Russia, and isolated from meaningful alliances, building a wall is *something* (given that it actually gets built, rather than partially funded while the remainder of the funds designated to build it are pillaged by oligarchs).

Normally, one builds walls under desperate circumstances when no other possibilities are available to solve some critical international question or another. Mexico's turmoil stems from the illegal drug trade. The drug trade is profitable in part because it is so unpleasant to live in a capitalist society that objectifies its citizens that many U.S. citizens will pay excellent money for drugs that are easily fabricated and refined in Mexico, and in part because the U.S. (despite creating and abetting the conditions by which citizens would want to use drugs in the first place) has criminalized non-prescription drug use, artificially inflating the market to the point where Mexican citizens involved in the trade can afford to build private armies large enough to contend with the government's military (or simply buy government units wholesale). Rather than build a wall with Mexico, it'd be cheaper and ethically more humane to do something about the drug trade—legalizing and taxing drugs would be an excellent first step.

Ukraine cannot “settle” with a Russia intent on its partition and destruction—Ukraine is left with the unpleasant choice of having to just grit its teeth and do what it can to prevent Russian intrusion. A wall isn't the best way to do that, and especially when details of the wall's construction are kept secret. Still, it's *understandable* in a way that the U.S. wall with Mexico is not.