Strategic Barriers:  
What History Can Teach Us about International Security

WASHINGTON D.C. — A number of nations, conspicuously Israel and the United States, have been increasingly attracted to the use of strategic barriers to promote national defense. From walls along Israel’s border with Lebanon and the Gaza Strip and the fence along the U.S.–Mexico border to missile defense systems like Israel’s Iron Dome, the question must be asked: Are these methods of defense really effective?

In Do Good Fences Make Good Neighbors?, defense analyst Brent Sterling examines the historical use of strategic defenses such as walls or fortifications to evaluate their effectiveness and considers their implications for modern security. While most studies on fortifications center on the physical dimensions of the project, such as size and materials, Sterling focuses on the rationale behind each course of action and assesses how modern barriers against ground and air threats could influence threat perceptions, alter the military balance, and influence the builder’s subsequent policy choices.

Sterling studies six famous defenses spanning 2,500 years, representing both democratic and authoritarian regimes: the Long Walls of Athens, Hadrian’s Wall in Roman Britain, the Ming Great Wall of China, Louis XIV’s Pré Carré, France’s Maginot Line, and Israel’s Bar Lev Line. Do Fences Make Good Neighbors? finds that although many of these barriers were effective in the short term, they also affected the states that created them in terms of cost, strategic outlook, military readiness, and relations with neighbors.

Advocates and critics of strategic defenses often bolster their arguments by selectively distorting history. Sterling emphasizes the need for an impartial examination of what past experience can teach us. His study yields nuanced lessons about strategic barriers and international security and yields findings that are relevant for security scholars and compelling to general readers. Antulio Echevarria, of the U.S. Army War College, praises the book as “an unusual and long overdue perspective. This will be a welcome addition to any course on defense studies.”

Brent L. Sterling is an adjunct lecturer at the School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University. He has spent the past twenty years as a defense analyst, including positions at the Central Intelligence Agency and consulting firms that support the Department of Defense.

PUBLICATION DATE: November 2009, 352 pages  
ISBN 978-1-58901-571-5, hardback $32.95 / £22.75

CONTACT: Jacqueline Beilhart, Publicist, (202) 687-9298, jb594@georgetown.edu  
# # #