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## BORDER POLITICS

### Finding the answer in a 'park of peace'

JURGEN BRAUER

Much is happening in Thailand's politics and economy. The People's Alliance for Democracy continues to rally outside Government House.

The South is embroiled in tragic and continuous unrest and killings. Farmers and truckers are protesting over food and fuel prices. The refugee issue concerning Laos remains thorny and lately there is the mounting tension over Preah Vihear temple on the Thai-Cambodian border. All these help provide an illustration of how conflicts and economics are intertwined. With every bit of sad news, tourist cancellations increase. The stock market sours. The value of the baht declines. And foreign direct investment suffers. With that, potential advances in employment and living standards are sacrificed.

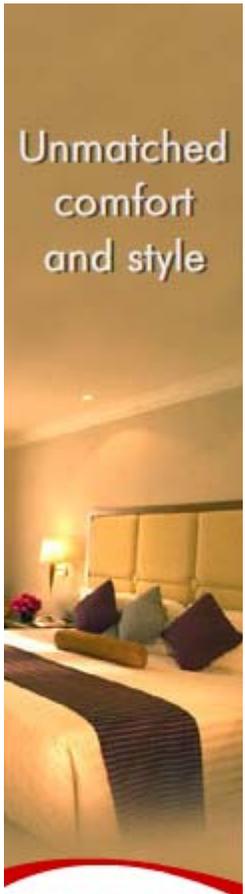
As a guest, I shall not presume permission to enter the debate on any of these issues. But I wonder if I may make,

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shall I say, a "conversational reference" to ideas and experiences elsewhere that may interest some readers?

For example, as a German national (I teach in the United States but hold a German passport), I well understand the heated sentiment over borders. After all, my forebears initiated two world wars in mistaken attempts to redefine them.

Yet it strikes me as utterly absurd to hear stern pronunciations to the effect that "we shall not cede one square inch of territory".

I imagine, perhaps naively, that if I were Chancellor of Germany, I could, in times of high tension, do nothing better than to cede a symbolic square inch to the French in the west and the Poles in the east, and invite a like response. This, it seems to me, would make clear to all that the issue is not of course the square inch, and that gearing up to fight over the symbol, therefore, does not resolve the underlying issue, either.

More specifically, and contrary to intuition, many countries in the world have found that tensions over borders can sometimes be lessened by deliberate attempts to create "fuzzy borders".

For example, over a 30-year period, Peru and Ecuador repeatedly had come to blows over a tiny piece of virtually uninhabited jungle in the Cordillera del Condor region in the Andes mountains.

A creative peace scholar, Johan Galtung, was able to host the presidents of the countries to a private dinner, the result of which was an agreement to declare the contested area a "peace park". Since then, Mr Galtung says, "they've been quarrelling over what trees to plant but very few countries go to war over that problem".

Peace parks are territories that straddle political borders. Usually their strategic, military value is slight but their symbolic, political value is high. That is why there is the animated politicisation of even minor border issues \_ as are ecological, cultural or other values that would draw tourists in particular. A peace park deliberately delegates questions over square inches to the bureaucratic backwater and correspondingly elevates questions over livelihood of local populations.

To be sure, political borders do need to be defined, if only to establish jurisdiction over access and property rights, disposition in cases of crime and so on. But these are purely functional issues with a practical view to enhancing preservation and development, not foreign policy issues of the highest order.



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In Peru and Ecuador, many and much more important issues needed to be addressed, deserving policy-makers' and bureaucrats' full attention. The peace park deal effectively removed the conflict from the agenda and freed up time, energy and money to deal with the real, if less symbolic, problems within each country and enhanced cooperation across them. Surely the same logic applies to other countries. And the same positive outcome is available to all.

In the past, relatively isolated local webs of relationships did not cause overly much harm to others. But the advances in communications and transportation that have come to characterise today's world ensure that a disturbance to any local web can rapidly spread around the globe. That may be thought purely a problem for outsiders, were it not for the fact that any disturbance that spreads outward also reverberates back inward and thus ends up hurting the population in the originating country.

Security economics really does have something to teach us.

Jurgen Brauer is Professor of Economics at the James M Hull College of Business, Augusta State University, USA. He is a visiting professor at Chulalongkorn University.

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