



A Wall Alone Can't Secure The Border, No Matter Who Pays For It

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A cornerstone of President-elect Donald Trump's campaign has been the idea of building "a great wall" along the US-Mexico border. With his term beginning tomorrow, Trump remains adamant that construction will begin soon. But regardless of how you feel about Trump's plans to secure the border, experts agree on at least one thing: He's doing it wrong.

A wall helps to an extent. But it's limited at best, impractical at worst, and impressively expensive. While focusing so narrowly on a physical barrier may have been politically expedient, it belies the technological innovations and staffing solutions that have actually worked for US Customs and Border Protection.

Not-So-Great Wall

As it turns out, there's no universal solution to securing the southwest border, or any border for that matter. For starters, topographical constraints on the 2,000-mile US-Mexico border make it difficult to erect any physical structure all the way across. Trump himself acknowledges that his wall would cover more like half the total distance. Then there's the cost. The US has already spent \$7 billion on 700 miles of border fencing in recent years. Replacing or augmenting that existing divide with a literal wall would cost as much as \$25 billion, according to an estimate last summer by AllianceBernstein analysts.

"The really key part is that a wall or a fence or any type of physical barrier only works in conjunction with other tools," says Christopher Wilson, the deputy director of the Mexico Institute at the Wilson Center who specializes in border and immigration issues. "It's a nice one-liner and it sells well as a sort of silver bullet solution to our complex border problems, but it doesn't work that way. In reality if you don't have someone behind the wall then people just climb over it or cut through it or do whatever they need to do to avoid it." And if building thousands of miles of wall sounds expensive, imagine what it would cost to staff a comprehensive, 24-hour patrol.

In fact, replacing fencing—which border patrol officers can see through—with a presumably opaque, concrete wall makes the all-important surveillance aspect harder, not easier. As David

Bier, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, noted in November, “At a basic level, a wall or fence can never stop illegal immigration because a wall or fence cannot apprehend anyone.”

That matters particularly when it comes to broader border security implications, like screening to prevent terrorists from entering the US and the reduce smuggling—particularly drug trafficking and illegal arms flow. A wall might deter some individuals from trying to sneak into the US, but wouldn’t resolve large-scale coordinated efforts to infiltrate, especially given that there is a huge volume of legitimate entrance and exit traffic across US borders every day. Additionally, the demographics of illegal immigration have changed, with far fewer Mexican individuals attempting the crossing and more coming from impoverished or violent regions in South America. Many of these people do not attempt to circumvent border control, but instead go to entry points willingly and seek asylum or other protections.

So no, a wall alone isn’t gong to cut it. But there are plenty of solutions that do.

A Better Way to Border

US Customs and Border Protection was created in 2003 to consolidate border and entry port security “through collaboration, innovation, and integration.” This has included increased sensor deployment along the border (like radar, cameras, and ground sensors) in combination with other surveillance tools like helicopters, manned planes, drones, and even tethered aerostats used for radar.

US Customs and Border Protection also has new technology projects in the works at the border. The agency reported to Congress in 2016 that its Integrated Fixed Towers program was ready to progress after a required audit showed that towers were meeting their “operational requirements.” Sensor arrays mounted on the towers include radar, electro-optical, and infrared cameras, and the systems are solar powered.

The Integrated Fixed Towers program are designed to communicate with and enhance other CBP border surveillance programs like the Remote Video Surveillance System (which puts cameras on towers, buildings, and other structures), aerial monitoring initiatives (that use powerful cameras and sensors to see details at the border from thousands of feet in the air and miles away), and networks of ground sensors.

So far the towers have cost about \$23 million to install and the total cost is slated to be \$145 million. DHS piloted seven towers along the border in Nogales, Arizona and will install a total of 52 as part of the project. CBP has also been piloting the use of bodycams on its law enforcement agents, and is working on biometric screening tools for entry points.

All together, this technological cadre gives human patrolmen eyes on hundreds of miles of rough terrain at once, making it easier to spot all sorts of activity—people in the process of crossing the border, those hiking to find a spot where they can pass, or larger coordinated efforts to forge a crossing strategy. It’s not just preventative, it’s actionable.

Not all technology initiatives at the border have been successful and cost effective. For example, the Department of Homeland Security spent five years and a billion dollars on a “virtual fence” project, called SBINet, that was eventually cancelled. SBINet deployed sensors and attempted to collate and analyze information, like the Integrated Fixed Towers program does, to offer

visibility for a wider swath of the border, but in the remote sensors struggled to relay data across difficult terrain.

There are still problems with these technological approaches. Some studies question the value of using drones for flyovers versus manned planes, for example. And algorithm-driven surveillance techniques, especially those aimed at identifying individuals, can have complicated privacy implications. But at this point CBP has been using tech solutions for years, has fully integrated them, and has come to rely on them.

“Technology is critical to border security operations,” two ranking CBP officers said in Congressional testimony last year. The systems are “helping see through the darkness and increasing the accuracy and speed of our response.”

Over the Wall

Notably, when asked about the wall at his confirmation hearing last week, Trump’s cabinet pick to lead the Department of Homeland Security, retired Marine Corps General John Kelly, agreed with taking a multi-pronged approach that doesn’t center on a wall. “A physical barrier in and of itself cannot do the job, it has to be a layered defense,” Kelly said. “I believe the defense of the southwest border really does start about 1,500 miles south, including partnering with some great countries.”

Kelly’s not alone. After studying border fencing, Texas Rep. Michael McCaul, chairman of the House Committee on Homeland Security, said in a 2015 statement that, “In our conversations with outside groups, experts and stakeholders, we learned that it would be an inefficient use of taxpayer money to complete the fence. ... We are using that money to utilize other technology to create a secure border.”

The question, though, is whether Trump and those who voted for him will listen. As border surveillance technology has evolved, the need for physical barriers has become less fundamental to how the US polices the southwest border. Fences still play a prominent role, but they are expanded and supported by more flexible and cost effective tools.

“The concept of a wall as a solution to border security problems is very much based on an antiquated notion of what a border is,” the Wilson Center’s Wilson says. “A wall is a huge symbol of division between our two countries, and that’s dangerous at a time when we need to engage Mexico as a partner in our border security more than ever.”