

Land-locked countries

by Richard Sidaway

Is geography important? Here's a question for you to answer.

What have the following countries got in common: Australia, Japan, the United Kingdom, Iceland and Madagascar?

Quite easy if you can picture them on the globe - they are all islands. Australia is so big that it's almost a continent by itself so you don't think of it as an island, but of course all of these nations are surrounded by sea.

Now how about this question...

What have these five nations got in common? Hungary, Botswana, Kazakhstan, Paraguay and Liechtenstein. A bit more difficult to answer, but of course you've already read the title of this article. Yes, they are all landlocked. In other words, in contrast to the first five countries whose coastline forms their border, the second five have no coastline at all. If you are a Hungarian or a Paraguayan, you have to pass through somebody else's country if you want to go to the beach.

Liechtenstein is even more of a geographical phenomenon; it is 'doubly landlocked' because the countries that surround it - Austria and Switzerland are also landlocked. Lucky old Liechtensteiners. There is only one other country in the world in a similar position, Uzbekistan, which is surrounded by five other landlocked countries. Go and have a look at the map if you want to know which...

So how do countries become landlocked? If you are Swiss or Nepalese, you have probably never thought things could be any other way. Switzerland's mountains, like the Himalayas, have formed a natural boundary for thousands of years. But there are borders and there are borders. Where one country ends and another begins is not something that is fixed for all time.

Take Poland or the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example. They were landlocked at one time in their history but managed to get the map changed so that a thin piece of land gave them access to the sea. The Polish state created by the Treaty of Versailles after the First World War included a corridor of land to link it to the Baltic, because the rest of the coastline belonged to Germany. In Africa, Cabinda is still isolated from the rest of Angola because the King of Belgium, the colonial power in Congo, insisted on a similar corridor at the Berlin Conference in 1885, the meeting which started the division of the continent into nation states.

Then there are countries like Ethiopia and Bolivia which did have a bit of coast but don't any more. Does it matter? The Ethiopians are not happy that the creation of Eritrea means they now have to use another country's port, when before they had a long coastline on the Red Sea.

Bolivia's President is trying to get their neighbour Chile to give them some land so they can get to the Pacific like they did in the nineteenth century. The two countries haven't spoken to each other for 30 years.

But why does coastline matter so much? Throughout history people have preferred to live near the sea, and not just for the fish. Sea means trade, which means wealth. Think of the great empires of the past based around the Mediterranean or successful cities like Singapore, New York or Hong Kong today. Russia has fought several wars over the centuries so that its ships could have access to the Baltic, the Black Sea and the Pacific

Not having coastline is not so critical if you can get to somebody else's seaport via a river. In Europe the landlocked Austrians can reach the ports of Rotterdam, Antwerp or Marseilles by inland waterway, and of course they can use the River Danube to go east. The Czechs can go down the River Elbe to Hamburg, the Slovaks to Polish ports. Adam Smith said that European industrialization only started in the 18th century because of the existence of navigable rivers.

In central Asia or Africa, however, having a river that takes you from the interior to the sea is very rare. And this seems to make all the difference. There are 42 landlocked countries in the world. The United Nations classifies 30 of them (71%) as developing; and all except one of these are in Africa or Asia. None of these thirty are major exporters of manufactured goods. Why? Some economists estimate that these countries pay between 30% and 50% more in transport costs than coastal nations. In Asia, it is not only transit routes but oil and gas pipelines

that are affected if their neighbours decide to charge a high price to let them pass through their territory to get to the sea.

So what can these countries do to escape the disadvantage of being landlocked? You can't move mountains or make rivers, but perhaps other means of transport can be improved. The United Nations has its own High Representative to look at ways of improving cooperation from those countries that stand between the landlocked and the sea, most recently at an international meeting in Almaty, Kazakhstan in August 2003. The European Union gives money to help develop road and rail routes from the African interior to ports on the East and West coasts.

And what about redrawing the map? Some African intellectuals suggest a second Berlin conference to make Central African borders fairer. If Western Europe can take away their borders, why not in other parts of the world?

Geography, it seems, can make a big difference.

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