

[SFGate.com](http://www.sfgate.com)www.sfgate.com[Return](#)[to regular view](#)

[Free trade and the geography of ignorance](#)

- David J. Keeling

Tuesday, August 3, 2004

With debate sharpening on the implications of the Sept. 11 commission report -- and as NAFTA celebrates its 10th anniversary, an historic Free Trade Agreement with Central America is signed and the World Trade Organization rolls out a farm-trade deal -- few questions are raised about the links between free trade and global terrorism.



Rhetoric about tariffs, subsidies and the impacts of labor and job redistribution runs high, but discussions about the geographic impacts of global trade are barely heard. Acronyms for regional trade associations (CAFTA, EU, APEC) presume an unproblematic and homogeneous environment for trade relationships. Indeed, marginalized peoples of the world often are explained away as simple economic units that can be "developed" with the right combination of free trade, financial reform and democracy. Some commentators have gone so far as to announce the end of the nation-state and elimination of geography as a barrier to free trade. Even the Sept. 11 commission argued that modern terrorists are defined more by societal fault lines than by the boundaries between states, intimating that political-territorial units are not as important as they once were.

Supposedly, socioeconomic differences between Chiapas and Tijuana, or between southern Afghanistan and Kabul, can be eliminated by open and free global trade. The stark realities of the internal geographies of political states are dismissed as minor challenges to the forces of globalization. The conventional mantra is that globalization strategies, combined with strong regional trade alliances, will eliminate the tyranny of space and provide equal trade opportunities for all societies, thus reducing the threat of terrorism.

Barely acknowledged by free-trade proponents is the reality that the world's 200-plus political states continue to exert significant sovereignty over internal and external relations, including trade. Also frequently ignored are the different geographies that shape all states, from the most advanced industrial centers of the world to underdeveloped societies struggling with disease, isolation and inadequate infrastructure. The global reality is that a powerful relationship exists between radicalism, terrorism and the geographies of difference.

Understanding the geography of free trade, globalization and terrorism becomes critical when developmental challenges meet regional differences. Political and economic analyses of Iraq that focus on introducing democracy and building an economy that can be regionally and globally integrated tend to underplay the country's internal geographies. Iraq's major disparities in resources and infrastructure require a level of spatial development not anticipated by current plans; its geographically significant ethnic and religious differences make a U.S.-style democracy unlikely.

In regions such as Africa and Latin America, geographic disparities are so profound within and between countries that an investment of at least \$2 trillion dollars in basic infrastructure -- according to figures from both the World Bank and the Economic Commission on Latin America

and the Caribbean -- would be required just to prepare the regions adequately to take advantage of free-trade opportunities.

Over the past two decades, the United States has championed the principles of free trade, globalization and democracy internationally with barely a hint of a basic geographic understanding of national and regional differences. What the Sept. 11 commission cites as a failure of imagination is, in reality, a stunning level of geographic ignorance about how the world works. Economic collapse in Argentina, terrorist attacks on New York, nuclear rhetoric from North Korea, ethnic butchery in the Sudan and societal meltdown in Haiti can all be linked to policies that demonstrate a profound geographical naiveté about socioeconomic differences within political boundaries and across the globe.

Successful free and fair trade, meaningful regional development and economic integration that improves the lives of all citizens can be achieved only if geographic differences are recognized. Until this goal is achieved, the threat of terrorism will remain significant.

David J. Keeling is a member of the Writers Circle of the American Geographical Society (www.amergeog.org) and a professor of geography at Western Kentucky University.

Page B - 9

URL: <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2004/08/03/EDGBH81N3N1.DTL>

[©2004 San Francisco Chronicle](#) | [Feedback](#) | [FAQ](#)