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A NONEXISTENT CONTINENTAL BOUNDARY

Europe and Asia, while often considered two separate continents, both lie on the same landmass or tectonic plate, the Eurasian supercontinent. The historic and geographic story of the Eurasian boundary is intriguing.

Most students of history, political science, economics and geography through the 20th century learned that Europe and Asia were two separate continents. The reasoning, however, was based more on cultural variables than on physical facts. In recent years, students began learning that Europe and Asia are not separate continents at all.

A continent is defined conventionally as one of several large, continuous and discrete landmasses on Earth, residing on a separate tectonic plate, usually separated from others by water. Traditionally, most geographers and historians identified seven continents. Listed from largest size to smallest were Asia, Africa, North America, South America, Antarctica, Europe and Australia.

Other than the conflicts surrounding Europe and Asia, the other continents are more clearly, but not perfectly, separated from one another. In reality, North America and South America are joined by the Isthmus of Panama. Likewise, Asia and Africa connect to one another at the Isthmus of Suez. The manmade canals cutting through each of these isthmuses, however, technically divide them.

In the case of Europe and Asia, arbitrary historical boundaries trumped these conventional continental criteria. The reasons are buried in antiquity.

By the 6th century B.C., Greek geographers had divided the Old World into three parts: Asia, Europe and Africa. At that point, the division between Asia and Europe was along the Rioni River in the Caucasus Mountains of present-day Georgia. By the Hellenistic Period of Greek history (323-330 B.C.), the division had moved to follow the Don River west of the Urals in present-day Ukraine.

Philip Johan von Strahlenberg, a German geographer, was the first to depart from the classical dividing line along the Don River in 1725, moving it farther east to follow the Volga River north and then north along the Ural Mountains. By the 19th century, the boundary between Europe and Asia was still very much in question with all three conventions used by geographers and historians of the times.

In conventional terms, since no water separates Europe and Asia and they physically exist on the same landmass or tectonic plate, their division into two continents clearly is a historical anomaly. This division’s roots likely were perpetuated by cultural biases of Europeans toward the Mongol people mostly located to the east of the Ural Mountains.

The modern convention of the Europe-Asia boundary (from south to north) follows the Aegean Sea, the Dardanelles-Sea of Marmora-Bosporus, the Black Sea, along the watershed of the Greater Caucasus, the northwestern portion of the Caspian Sea and along the Ural River and Ural Mountains. Controversy, however, still exists over the formal boundary, which remains nebulous since it has no geographical, political or economic significance.

The modern definition of the Eurasian boundary places Georgia and Azerbaijan mostly in Asia, however, each has small sections that lie north of the Greater Caucasus watershed in Europe. Turkey’s largest city, Istanbul, is split by the Bosporus Strait and was considered a transcontinental city, lying on both sides of the line. By that definition then, Turkey was a transcontinental country, as are Georgia, Azerbaijan, Russia and Kazakhstan.

Today, the past confusion in defining continents leads most geographers to identify only six continents by combining Europe and Asia into Eurasia. In fact, the division of Eurasia into two continents based on the definition of continents is now dated.

Separating Europe and Asia was a product of efforts mainly by European academicians seeking to distinguish their region of the world. Although it may be difficult for readers more than 40 years of age to accept, the continuation of Europe and Asia as two continents in any context other than the study of pre-20th century history arguably is passé.

And that is Geography in the News™. February 17, 2012. #1133.