

Fault Lines

Reflections on South Asian Frontiers

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Fault Lines

Reflections on South Asian Frontiers*

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Abstract

Why have boundaries been so changeable while frontiers and borders are relatively long-lasting? Is the experience of borders and boundaries in south Asia different from other regions of the world? This paper explores the subcontinent's recent historical experience, marked by the colonial Raj's geopolitical and power-centric approach to frontiers, and post-independence Nehruvian, approach to the impermanence of boundaries. It also considers India's situation, located as she is in a region with old nations in new states, with porous borders, where nationalism is still a work in progress and boundaries are contested, and as a result, boundaries are sometimes meaningless or unenforceable in practice. The paper concludes by indicating some possible research avenues and policy paths to reconcile two seemingly opposite objectives: of clarifying and formalising borders in and around the Indian subcontinent, while at the same time using technology and other resources to make boundaries irrelevant and borders open to the communities and people who straddle them. Intellectual and infrastructural investment on South Asian frontiers and borderlands could facilitate the freer flow of people, goods, and ideas in a more integrated region and reduce the future propensity for tension and conflict.

Fault Lines

Reflections on South Asian Frontiers

Every boundary, no matter when it was set, is only temporary. We can be as certain of this as we are that empires that rise also fall (Messmer & Chuang, 2018, p. 20). I am hard-pressed to think of one state boundary on earth which is where it was 200 years ago. Why is this so?

The other question that has bothered me is: Do we in South Asia have more trouble with our borders, boundaries and frontiers than other parts of the world, and, if so, why? Or is this a frog's view from the bottom of his well, extrapolating from a career of dealing with disputed boundaries and their consequences?

I think not. Objectively speaking, even subregions where modern boundaries are entirely artificial colonial creations—parts of Africa, west Asia—seem to have less trouble with their frontiers. They seem to find enough other issues to fight their wars over; seldom is it territory, unlike the Indian experience. All independent India's wars have involved territory in one way or another.

I can think of two broad reasons why this is so: our inheritance and our present situation in South Asia. This working paper examines both these reasons, and then concludes with a final section laying out a possible approach to borders in and around the Indian subcontinent.

I. Inheritance

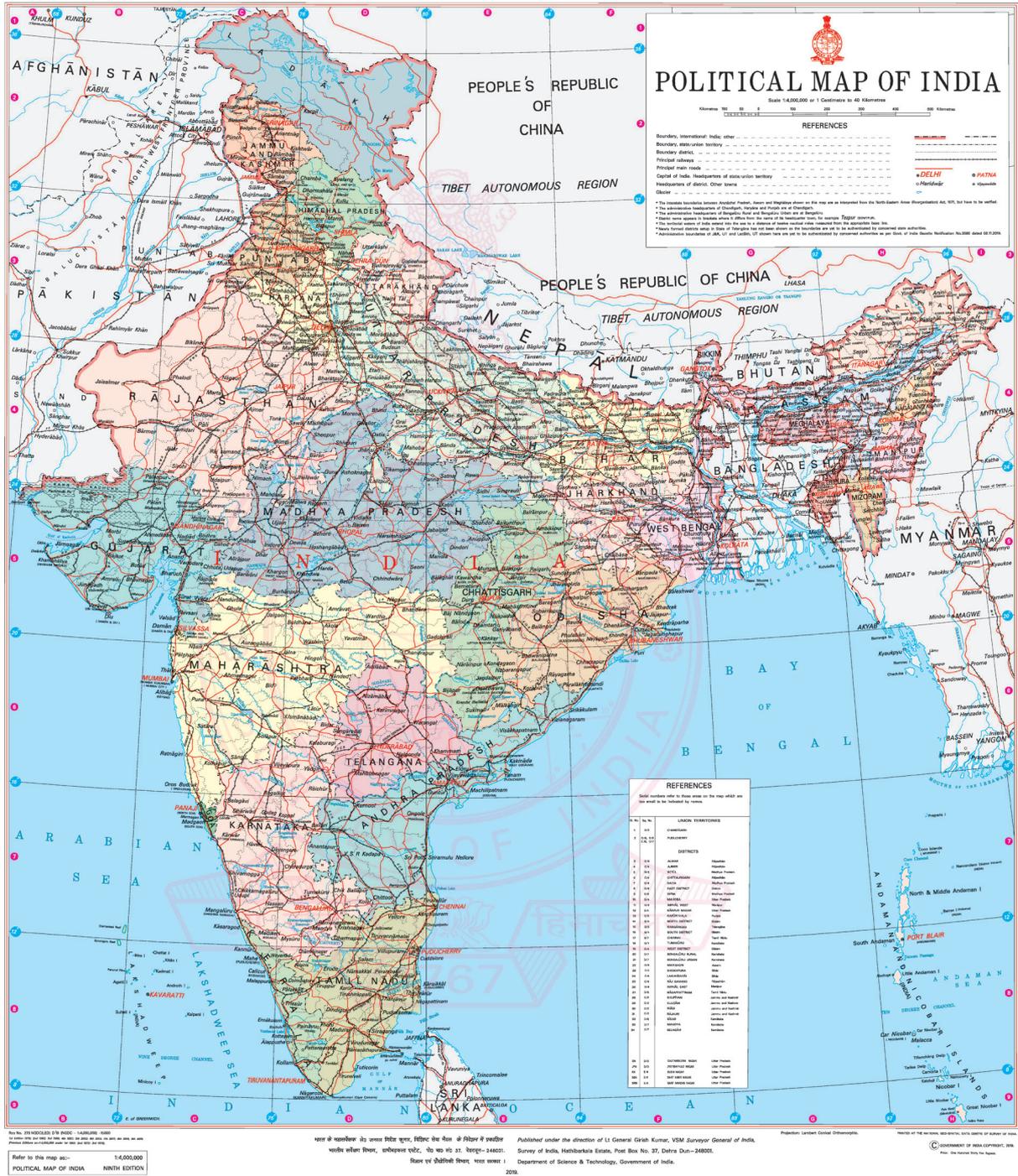
Theory vs Practice

Theory draws a distinction between boundaries on the one hand, and frontiers or borders on the other. A boundary is a line demarcated on the ground and drawn on a map; the frontier is an indeterminate zone at the edge of a territory, a zone where life shifts back and forth, a transition between two or more regions, cultures and peoples. A frontier is thus fluid and shifts over time. For classical geopoliticians like Karl Haushofer, they were zones of contestation. His post-Versailles volume on Borders spoke of 'wandering frontiers' and the realistic insight that during war there are no borders or boundaries (1939). Frontiers are then battle zones, subject to dispute.

The idea of fixed lines or boundaries is an early modern European creation and has been under attack ever since in practice. From the day the Westphalian system of state boundaries was agreed in Europe, it was undermined in practice. So-called after the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 to end the Thirty Years War, this system was credited with establishing the principles of sovereignty for the state within territorial boundaries, legal equality between states, secular politics, non-intervention in the internal affairs of each state, standing diplomacy, international law, and European congresses to maintain the balance of power between these states while admitting of inter-state anarchy and power politics.

In Europe itself, parts of East Europe and the Balkans were almost permanently unstable and were a standing mockery of much that was meant by a Westphalian system. The one practice that stood out throughout this instability was that of boundaries rather than frontiers, of the imposition of abstract cartographic lines on indeterminate frontier zones. International power politics substantially redistributed territories and even altered sovereignties, but boundaries were nonetheless nearly precise. Outside Europe, of course, no such precision was known or attempted by Europeans, with the advance of colonial settlement and imperial conquest, and the retreat of pastoral nomadism. The needs of empire were different.

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Source: Survey of India, Government of India

Other civilisations had a more practical approach to borders and boundaries. Universalist empires like imperial China of course saw no boundaries in All-Under-Heaven or *tianxia*. Indian polities, starting from a different world view, also dealt with the reality of frontiers and zones rather than lines. You only have to think of the location of Ashoka's rock edicts, well beyond areas he ruled directly but well within areas he influenced. Through Mughal times and in the 18th century, the frontier shifted between the worlds of Iran, Turan and Hind (Gommans, 2018, p. 17; Palat, 2015). Historically, the Indian sub-continent was a space with permeable frontiers, constantly shifting in response to political, economic and ecological changes.

Historically, the Indian sub-continent was a space with permeable frontiers, constantly shifting in response to political, economic and ecological changes.

The British Raj in India was ambivalent both in theory and practice on the sanctity of boundaries and was very aware of the fluid and shifting nature of the frontier. This was recognised quite early. Mackinder, speaking as a professional geographer in 1942, said: "The Victorian habit of thinking in political frontiers must have been seriously discredited by now!" (Mackinder, 1942, p. 125). So long as it enjoyed the advantage of power on India's frontiers, the Raj was quite willing to practice what it did not preach, relying on the reality of the relations of power at points of contestation.

Curzon is probably the best example of ambiguity and evolution in Raj attitudes to boundaries. He marked in his person the transition from an imperial to a geopolitical vision of the frontier. As governor-general in Calcutta, Curzon was full of mobile frontiers and plans to extend influence in Tibet, Central Asia, Iran, and the Indian Ocean, besides upholding paramountcy over the princely states in India. But from London as foreign secretary, he was busy drawing boundaries to make and unmake states in East Europe and demoting them to the status of protectorates (Palat, 2018, p. 10).

The Frontier Policy of the Raj

What George Curzon preached in his authoritative Romanes lecture of 1907 did not differentiate in theory between frontier and boundary, but he described it, in fact, in considerable detail as he explained the triple frontier of British India, especially on the north-west: the administrative, the military and the strategic frontiers of India. Other geographers followed suit. Thomas Holdich, a former colonial army officer with much experience like Curzon of India's northwest frontier, established the difference explicitly in 1916: 'No limit is set to a frontier until an actual line of boundary is defined by treaty; and even then, it is generally open to dispute until that boundary is actually demarcated' (Holdich, 1916, p. 76). This was an imperial approach and view.

In practice, the frontier policy of the Raj was bound not to boundaries but to managing the frontier and extending British influence—from Durand to Curzon to MacMahon to Caroe.

As a result, in practice the frontier policy of the Raj was, as we all know, bound not to boundaries but to managing the frontier and extending British influence—from Durand to Curzon to MacMahon to Caroe. Zones were central to their ideas of the 'glacis' and 'the Himalayan Fringe' in the defence of India.

The British in India saw a bogey of Russia, first imperial then revolutionary, in the north-west of India and repeatedly intervened in Afghanistan to preempt that fear from becoming reality. Despite policy based on false premises, and suffering repeated tactical setbacks in Afghanistan and elsewhere, the British in India did succeed in keeping external powers at bay and away from India itself. They also saw off a Japanese threat in the north-east when Japan took Burma and sought to enter India in WWII.

In 1893, Mortimer Durand, Foreign Secretary to the Government of India, negotiated a unique and peculiar agreement with Afghanistan which gave India a double border. The 'Durand Line', (which Pakistan today regards as its international border with Afghanistan), ran through tribal areas, eliminating no-man's-land and dividing it into spheres of influence loosely attached to Kabul and Lahore. But behind

it to the east, resting for the most part on the Indus, lay the administrative border. Between the two lines, tribes lived under British protection but not as British subjects; they came under the supervision of Political Agents and not the direct rule of Deputy Commissioners; their crimes were dealt with under tribal and Islamic law not the Code of Criminal Procedure.

In 1900, Lord Curzon, now Viceroy of India, who had long proclaimed the Russian threat, traveled to the North-West and revised what he considered the Empire's deeply flawed frontier policy. He withdrew regular troops from advanced positions on the Khyber and concentrated them in the rear, instead employing tribal forces recruited by British officers, such as the Khyber Rifles and Khurram Militia, to police the tribal country. In his own words, Curzon's way of managing the Pathan tribesman was "to pay him and humour him when he behaves, but to lay him out flat when he does not" (Gilmour, 2019). He also detached Punjab's frontier districts and united them to the trans-border tracts between the Indus and Durand Line creating the North West Frontier Province in 1901. Curzon had created a frontier that John Masters described as "a betwixt and between place, part India, part Central Asia" (1956, p. 6)

It was similar in the east, where Burma was administered from Calcutta from the 1870s to 1936. A belt of neutral states (Persia, Afghanistan, Tibet, Siam) were maintained beyond the zone of British influence. In the east, tribal and local law applied up to the high watershed boundary in the Himalayas, formalised in 1914 in the so-called MacMahon Line; behind that was a fully British administered area up to the Himalayan foothills.

Curzon, typically, liked to stress that scientifically determined boundaries "sanctified in international law" were "an agency of peace" (Curzon, 1907, p. 48). But in fact, the legacy that India inherited from the Raj on frontiers was an imperial model of soft frontiers rather than the modern nation-state model of hard boundaries, and of protectorates and buffer zones separating them from other imperial adversaries. As one of the Raj's Foreign Secretaries said, "The true frontier of the British dominion in Asia ... does not tally with the outer edge of ... territory over which we exercise administrative jurisdiction. The true frontier includes... large regions over which the English crown has established protectorates" (Lyall, 1973, p. 334-335).

Nehru's Geopolitics of Frontiers

Nehru was opposed to geopolitics and hard realism but was realistic in his understanding of boundaries and frontiers. He saw the impermanence of borders in practice, even though his entire 17 years as prime minister of India were spent on boundary disputes with Pakistan and China, in an inconclusive struggle to define them permanently. Yet he periodically reminded the public that boundaries were impermanent, fluid, and anachronisms to the age of air transport, wireless communication, and high population mobility in an integrating world.

Nehru understood boundaries as part of his globalist view as being an aspect of subordination to an international order, not of the expansion of a single state and of permanent struggles for survival and dominance.

"We talk of countries, of Pakistan and India and a frontier between the two and yet in these days of jet travel and various types of missiles, a frontier has no meaning. You cross a number of frontiers in the course of an hour or two. You cannot even delimit quite clearly where one frontier in the air ends and where the other begins, broadly you may know that underneath is some other country. You cannot draw a line in the air. In other worlds, the growth of science and technology and communications has really rather made the idea of national frontiers out of date, precise national frontiers they do not just fit in, you are crossing them, all the time, and I have little doubt, that unless some catastrophe intervene, we shall have to outgrow completely this idea of national frontiers" (Nehru, 2015, p. 484).

There is a difference here between what Nehru saw as the impermanence of boundaries and the geopoliticians who saw a mobile frontier as part of expansionism necessary for survival of the state, for *lebensraum*, for imperial dominion. Nehru understood boundaries as part of his globalist view as being an aspect of subordination to an international order, not of the expansion of a single state and of permanent struggles for survival and dominance. Both were supranational, but one was oriented to expansion and conquest, the other to cooperation, confederation, and federation (Palat, 2018).

II. Situation

South Asia today is composed of old nations in new states, with porous borders, where nationalism is still a work in progress. Every boundary has cross-border ethnicities. These factors combine to make our boundaries contested, and often meaningless or unenforceable in practice.

This situation is compounded by the economics of globalisation, by new technologies, expanding interests, which also make borders porous and boundaries meaningless.

Mid-20th Century Reality and State formation in South Asia

Many of South Asia's issues with boundaries are a result of the ongoing attempt to create modern states in ancient nations whose geographical boundaries do not match those of the new states. We are transitioning to Westphalian states—hard sovereignty, precise boundaries—very different from traditional theory and the practice of statecraft in this part of the world. Some traditional polities (India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and China) have made the transition; others (Tibet) did not. New states were formed—Pakistan, Bangladesh.

Two phenomena stand out in the modern political evolution of the subcontinent: The areas bordering it, such as Afghanistan and Tibet, (the buffers of an earlier era, that Raj coinage), have been occupied or contended over by one or another great power. The mountainous borderlands have now been pierced from the north, first by the Soviets and then by China.

The colonial state and its successors were and are devoted to the idea of the border as a fixed, dividing line, and drew boundaries to make the state enterprise more efficient. In this process, the states were blind to other factors such as community, livelihood, and ethnic and other links among local peoples, and to links between them and the land.

Secondly, since 1947 new restraints on movement have been imposed inside and outside the subcontinent. Frontiers have congealed into boundaries in some places, but in all of them the reality of their porosity, territorial and border disputes, remain as sources of political friction and military conflict in the region (Ispahani, 1989, ch. 4).

We have a history of partitions, not just the slapdash partition of India and Pakistan and therefore of Punjab and Bengal which attracts most attention, but also of Assam and of the borderlands with Burma/Myanmar. For example, Berenice Guyot-Rechard, who has worked on the Patkai highlands and the 1944-45 proposals considered by the British on creating boundaries in the areas inhabited by the Zo, Naga and Kachin communities, points out rightly that there is nothing natural about the division between India and Burma, now Myanmar, and that colonial boundaries divided and marginalised indigenous peoples (2020). Doctrines of “buffer zones” reduced the inhabitants to cyphers and contributed to preventing Tibet and Afghanistan from evolving into modern states.

In essence, the problem today is that the colonial state and its successors were and are devoted to the idea of the border as a fixed, dividing line, and drew boundaries to make the state enterprise more efficient. In this process, the states were blind to other factors such as community, livelihood, and ethnic and other links among local peoples, and to links between them and the land.

The pursuit of a boundary as a fixed dividing line has been accompanied by violence, conflict and people's suffering both within and between states. The violence on the Assam-Mizoram border, and continuing demands to partition Manipur can be seen as consequences of the partition of Assam. Indeed, Assam has been partitioned repeatedly—Sylhet's "transfer" to East Pakistan, and then in the 1960s and 70s the creation of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. As Guyot-Rechard points out, partition as an attempt to solve deep-rooted political, identity and socio-economic issues ends up creating the conditions of its own reproduction—or at the very least, separatist movements.

I am also convinced that our mental maps and concepts limit us and act as straitjackets. We need to change our partitioned mindsets. Today we think of India or south Asia as distinct, neatly delimited, and separate from south-east Asia, central Asia and west Asia. We tend to forget and neglect our intertwined history, our multiple links. To the east these links were both by land through the Myanmar highlands and through the maritime space of the Bay of Bengal. The imposition of immigration controls and exclusionary citizenship regimes between India, Burma and Malaya after independence was another partition that in historical terms is relatively recent.

Yet, there remain limits to what the Westphalian state can achieve in practice. When earlier this year Delhi asked Mizoram to close the border to refugees from Myanmar after the recent military take over, Mizoram refused to prevent their Chin kin from finding sanctuary in India.

Make Boundaries Irrelevant

So what should we in south Asia do in these circumstances, when boundaries are zero-sum, exclusivist, but necessary markers of individual sovereignties and cherished symbols of nationalism, while borderlands are our inclusive commons? Do we have to choose between them, creating and living the 'tragedy of the commons' (Hardin, 1968) by choosing hard Westphalian boundaries, or tapping into the 'miracle of the commons' (Ostrom, 1997) in our borderlands?

South Asian governments, drawing legitimacy from modern nationalism, would argue that without hard defined boundaries, with borders policed by states, controlling immigration and criminal activities, state security would be imperiled.

What I believe we should seek among ourselves in south Asia is to make boundaries irrelevant without changing them.

Partisans of the borderlands and their inhabitants argue that if we continue along our present path of building fences and hardening boundaries in the pursuit of illusory state efficiency, we would create human tragedies to dwarf what we have already visited on our border communities. If instead we were to treat the borderlands as what they are and have been in history, as the commons in which people, goods, and ideas flow and intermingle, we would find a much better future for us all.

My answer is to choose both: build clear, mutually agreed boundaries where both sides work to police, control immigration and suppress criminal activities. But at the same time, ensure that in aspects of the people's livelihood that same boundary is not an impediment, using various means like inland waterways, electric grids, road, rail and data connectivity, border *haats*, and so on.

In other words, what I believe we should seek among ourselves in south Asia is to make boundaries irrelevant without changing them. For south Asia, from Afghanistan to Myanmar and the Indian Ocean region, I am convinced that this is an idea whose time has come. And this could be done without touching the legal sanctity of existing boundaries where they exist but by changing their practical impact. Today's technologies actually make seamless connectivity possible without compromising security, through GPS tracking, fixed scanners at border crossings and the use of barcodes for identification. Shyam Saran has often pointed out that what is required is a mindset change, seeing boundaries and borders as connectors rather than as walls behind which we cower in fear of the "other" (2005). Instead, we should be reintroducing the permeability of the subcontinent's borders without changing boundaries, thus returning to the pattern that marked periods of prosperity in our history.

Some, particularly Indians, may ask what about boundaries in adversarial relationships like those that India has with China and Pakistan? In such cases, this approach would require, at a minimum, peace on the border, a positive equilibrium in the bilateral political relationship, and, ideally, a settled boundary. Is Beijing or Islamabad (or Delhi) willing to trust and empower their own communities in the borderlands? Not yet, I suspect, but this is one possible future. The present arrangements on these borders are clearly producing less than optimal outcomes in terms of both security and prosperity for the people and governments involved.

We must also recognise that the world seems to be going in the other direction, trying, I believe in vain, to draw clear boundaries and enforce them in the frontiers between states. At least seventy walls, it is estimated, now zigzag across the surface of the earth, most erected by states since the turn of the millennium in an attempt to harden boundaries: between Saudi Arabia and Yemen; between the US and Mexico; between South Africa and Zimbabwe; between India and Bangladesh, India and Pakistan; between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan; between Hungary and Serbia (Volner, 2019, p. 204). In south Asia we are building walls and fences in a region that has never known them in history. In no case, however, have walls and fences produced the outcomes they promise, as shown by the Indian experience with Pakistan, or the history of China's Great Wall.

It is time that we thought of better and more productive alternatives.

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