



# **FIVE FAULT LINES: REFLECTIONS ON SOUTH ASIAN FRONTIERS**



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The Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) is dedicated to research on contemporary South Asia.

It was established in July 2004 as an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. The establishment of ISAS reflects the increasing economic and political importance of South Asia, and the strong historical links between South Asia and Southeast Asia.

The Institute seeks to promote understanding of this vital region of the world, and to communicate knowledge and insights about it to policymakers, the business community, academia and civil society, in Singapore and beyond.

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ISAS-KAS International Conference on South Asia 2021

Five Fault Lines: Reflections on South Asian Frontiers

April 2022

Co-authored by Jasnea Sarma and Claudia Chia

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*Printed in Singapore by Oxford Graphic Printers Pte Ltd*

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# Five Fault Lines: Reflections on South Asian Frontiers

Institute of South Asian Studies  
Konrad Adenauer Stiftung

April 2022 | Singapore

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Special Report Issue No. 19





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## Executive Summary

The Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) at the National University of Singapore partnered with Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) to jointly organise its annual flagship event – the International Conference on South Asia – from 10 to 19 May 2021. Titled ‘Five Fault Lines: Reflections on South Asian Frontiers’, the conference aimed to understand, reflect on and analyse the origins, evolution and relevance of frontiers and boundaries in South Asia. The discussions sought to commemorate 75 years of the 1947 Partition of British India, the anniversary of which falls in 2022.

Past partitions, frontier-making and border demarcations in South Asia produced uneven geographies, identities and territories that continue to underpin some of the region’s most pressing geopolitical conflicts and social struggles today. New drives for infrastructure connectivity projects, changing mobilities, ongoing militarisation and ecological changes continue to create opportunities and challenges in the region’s fragmented ‘fault lines’. Correspondingly, there has been a welcome turn from academia and policymakers towards using cross-disciplinary, critical and transnational approaches in studying South Asian borders.

Thus, the conference’s thematic focus on borders, borderlands, frontiers and cross-regions aimed to understand and analyse the colonial origins, postcolonial legacies and contemporary congealing of frontiers and borderlands in South Asia.

The conference brought together panellists from a variety of disciplines, such as political science, sociology, anthropology, geography and history. Over the course of a week, the panellists discussed key theories and presented their original research on the unique dynamics within South Asia that constitute frontier and border-making as well as the impact on those who live on or guard them.

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The interesting conversations and exchanges that took place at the conference are compiled and analysed in this Special Report. In the introduction, we briefly explore the intellectual lineage of borders and frontier studies in South Asia. The sections that follow highlight key ideas and debates from each roundtable discussion.

## Introduction: Frontiers and Borders

Frontiers have long histories in how they are produced and theorised. Today, we understand frontier-making as colonial, religious and masculinist expansions characterised by looting, commodifying and converting indigenous populations, both human and non-human, into immutable spacial categories. Such projects of production and extraction occur in “concrete physical spaces and symbolic thresholds”, and continue to be imbibed in the global expansion of imperialism and modern capitalism.<sup>1</sup>

Frederick Jackson Turner posited the “frontier thesis”, where white settlers built the foundations of modern American political culture after decades of self-imposed rights to tame and order the Native American territories.<sup>2</sup> Similar ideas of taming and ordering were expressed by Lord George Curzon in the expansion of British India and the justification of colonial logic, management and settlements.<sup>3</sup> Frontiers, for the colonists, were not instruments for chaos but rather bulwarks of peace and civilisation. Colonial frontier projects have created South Asia’s borders and their lasting troubles.

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Historians dispute these logics of demarcation and buffer creation today. As in the case of the *Patkai* frontiers between India and Burma, historian Bérénice Guyot-Réchard has found that even colonial officers described them as “silly boundaries” or as a political “madness”.<sup>4</sup> History would show that colonial frontier projects, and the borders they created, resulted in long-lasting catastrophes for native territories and populations in South Asia, as much as they did worldwide.

1 Jasneema Sarma, Hilary Oliva Faxon and K B Roberts, “Remaking and Living with Resource Frontiers: Insights from Myanmar and Beyond”, *Geopolitics*, (2022): pp. 1-22.

2 See Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and company, 1920).

3 *Frontiers*. By The Eight Honourable Lord Curzon of Kedleston, D. C. L., LL. D., F. E. S. The Eoumanes Lecture, 1907. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press.

4 *Patkai* is the mountainous region between India and Myanmar. For more information on the delineation of the Indo-Myanmar border, see Bérénice Guyot-Réchard, “Tangled Lands: Burma and India’s Unfinished Separation, 1937–1948”, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 80, no. 2 (2021): pp. 293-315.



*New scholarship and research on resource frontiers highlight the ongoing processes of accumulation, territorialisation and imagination that repeatedly rework landscapes.*

In its postcolonial and critical adaptation, the “frontier” has been conceptualised as a travelling and capitalist project. Frontiers emerge where and when extraction of a new commodity becomes possible, and in doing so, both draws and displaces.<sup>5</sup> They make new borders and extract from old ones. New scholarship and research on resource frontiers highlight the ongoing processes of accumulation, territorialisation and imagination that repeatedly rework landscapes.<sup>6</sup> These fault lines were frontiers when they were carved out by departing imperial powers. What they have left for us in the postcolonial moment are messy borderlands.

In its initial inceptions, border and borderland studies emerged from the changing geopolitical map of Europe in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the period following World War I. Early border scholars collected empirical data and conducted geological surveys to demarcate the new boundaries of post-war Europe. In this sense, borders were thought to be physical, fixed and static lines on the ground, reflected in maps that entirely determined the sovereignty of European nations.<sup>7</sup> The categorisation of border types and physical processes of border demarcation were paramount in the field. Much of this knowledge of ‘border studies’ was used to justify colonial projects and frontier making, often guised as “objective” knowledge for colonial field professionals like surveyors, geographers, anthropologists and other frontier officials.

In the aftermath of colonialism, the field expanded to cover the practical mechanisms to control the permeability of borders – how “close” or “open” they were – and the regulation of transboundary movement of people and goods. The geographer John Agnew has since defined the term as “territorial trap”, which prioritised the actions and

5 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, “Natural resources and capitalist frontiers”, *Economic and Political Weekly* (2003): pp. 5,100-5,106.

6 For example, see *Frontier Assemblages: The Emergent Politics of Resource Frontiers in Asia*, Jason Cons and Michael Eilenberg (eds) (Wiley, Hoboken NJ, 2019). Also see Jasneema Sarma, Hilary Faxon and Kimberly Roberts, “Remaking and Living with Resource Frontiers: Myanmar and Beyond”, *Geopolitics* (forthcoming 2022).

7 David Newman, “Borders and bordering towards an interdisciplinary dialogue”, *European Journal of Social Theory* 9, no. 2 (2006): p. 174.

views of authorities and geographical experts,<sup>8</sup> undermining ground realities and experiences of people, and thus being trapped in the artificial lines on the map.

A shift in border studies occurred in the late 1980s and 1990s when researchers sought to develop a more dynamic and critical understanding of borders as a process that was unfinished and unstable. Borders are increasingly perceived as “a verb”.<sup>9</sup> Most significantly, the encouragement of cross-disciplinary approaches to study borders prompted studies that reveal the everyday experiences of the border residents and non-state actors, successfully integrating people-oriented narratives into the understanding of borders.

Meanwhile, critical work on the capitalist production of borders has led Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson to deploy the analytic of “border as method” as an epistemological starting point to explore how the expansion and proliferation of borders have moved much beyond actual boundaries.<sup>10</sup> Borders are both produced as lines in the sand between countries and how they appear in everyday life through the construction of hierarchical social and political relations of differentiation. Issues of territoriality, identity, migration and citizenship are all heavily intertwined with borders, as populations get divided accordingly as insider-citizens versus outsider non-citizens in most South Asian nations in the modern era.

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Another significant area of change is the proliferation of discussions on borders and borderlands in Asia. The difficulty of transposing the European and North American experience of borders into the study of Asia is widely acknowledged, which has led to a diverse group of scholars coming together to consider Asian borderlands.<sup>11</sup> Most of

8 John Agnew, “The territorial trap: The geographical assumptions of International Relations theory”, *Review of International Political Economy* 1(1) (1994): pp. 53-80.

9 Henk Van Houtum, “The Mask of the Border”, in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies*, edited by Doris Wastl-Walter (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 50.

10 Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

11 Willem van Schendel and Erik de Maaker, “Asian Borderlands: Introducing their Permeability, Strategic Uses and Meanings”, *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 29, no.1 (2014): p. 4.

*The postcolonial states inherited these boundaries, which often ignored local geographies, experiences and ground realities.*

the borders in Asia were created by external forces and were a hasty patchwork of colonial boundary demarcations and partitions that occurred as part of the decolonisation process. The postcolonial states inherited these boundaries, which often ignored local geographies, experiences and ground realities.

In his book on 19<sup>th</sup> century Siam, Thongchai Winichakul argued that the “geo-body” of a nation is a construct created through claims over spaces and cultures rather than fully verifiable histories.<sup>12</sup> They are projected through technologies like territorial classification, boundary-making and mapping, all of which re-define not only spaces and territories but also subsequent histories. The emergence of *Zomia* further highlighted the contestations and complications within the Southeast Asian borderlands.<sup>13</sup>

In the South Asian context, the colonial obsessions with frontiers, boundary demarcations and lines were inherited by what Sankaran Krishna has called “cartographically anxious” nation-states and many of their citizens.<sup>14</sup> In the postcolonial era, South Asia has had to confront several conflicting borders where disputes occurred between states and divided people with shared identities, affinities, histories, languages, ethnicities, religions and trade practices. Now, these lines and borders are “agents of active politics”,<sup>15</sup> proliferating beyond their original geographies at the “border”, reaching into the heart of identity, citizenship and contemporary national politics in many South Asian states.

12 Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

13 Dutch social scientist Willem van Schendel coined the term ‘Zomia’ in 2002; and geographically, it refers to the vast highlands of Asia from the western Himalayan Range through the Tibetan Plateau and to the lower end of the peninsular Southeast Asian highlands. It expanded to include southern Qinghai and Xinjiang within China, the highlands of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in 2007. In his conception, this area could be seen as a transnational political and historical entity distinct from the usual area divisions of Asia; and that the inhabitants in these overlapping segments experienced historical isolation, political domination by surrounding states and encompasses wide linguistic and religious diversity. For more details, see his original article: Willem van Schendel, “Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20, no. 6 (2002): pp. 647-668.

14 Sankaran Krishna, “Cartographic Anxiety: Mapping the Body Politic in India”, *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 19, no. 4 (1994): pp. 507-521.

15 Paula Banerjee, “Borders as Unsettled Markers in South Asia: A Case Study of the Sino-Indian Border”, *International Studies* 35, no. 2 (1998): pp. 180-191.

Contemporary drives for the construction and imagination of infrastructural connectivity projects, 'Act East' policies, trans-border infrastructures, changing mobilities, continued militarisation and ecological transformations in South Asia create new opportunities and challenges in the region's fragmented "fault lines". New infrastructure and development projects are carved out over old frontiers of terrestrial demarcation, bringing the formation of new frontiers and spaces. That "fault" in the line is pervasive.

Many governments in South Asia are pushing for stricter border demarcation, increased militarisation and state presence, albeit often concealed behind powerful state-led developmental rhetoric of trade liberalisation and interconnectedness. As a result, South Asian borders have become sites of heavy securitisation, regulation, surveillance and militarisation. Critical border scholars are increasingly interested in looking at state officials' attitudes towards the marking of boundaries and how locals interact with the state and go about their everyday lives in borderlands.<sup>16</sup> This is contrary to the domination of post-cold-war 'globalisation theory' that posited a "borderless" world by over-emphasising the easing of border controls to heighten interconnectedness and integration between countries and people. The past two decades supply ample evidence that rather than fading away or enabling smooth circulations of goods, capital, people and services, borders and border regions have gained prominence in the ways nation-states and individuals order, divide and understand the world.

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Paying attention to these emerging works of literature and debates in the South Asian context, the panellists presented their research and gave insights on the various forces that shaped frontier-making and boundary demarcations in the region. Conversations throughout the conference, together with interactions with the audience, charted out new directions and possibilities for future research both in and beyond academia.

16 For example, see Reece Jones, "Agents of Exception: Border Security and the Marginalization of Muslims in India", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 27, no. 5 (2009): pp. 879-897.

## The International Conference

The first public panel, which included distinguished senior scholars and former ambassadors, opened the discussions for the conference. Together, the panellists reflected on the event's theme, the postcolonial influences on border creations and the possibility of open borders within South Asia as well as the impact of globalisation on the fluidity of borders and the mobility of people.

Following that, a group of scholars working on South Asian borderlands and frontiers from various disciplines and around the globe participated in a series of roundtable discussions on the critical aspects and lasting legacies of some of the most geopolitically contested boundary demarcations in South and Southeast Asia. Five roundtable discussions were organised in correspondence to five "fault lines" – the Durand Line (between Afghanistan and Pakistan); the Radcliffe Lines (between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh); the McMahon Line (between India and China); the disputed lines in Kashmir (between India, China and Pakistan); and the Myanmar borderlands (between India, Bangladesh and Myanmar).

*The scholars presented their original research and illuminated key concepts, histories and events that unravelled the dynamics which characterised the establishment and maintenance of each fault line.*

The scholars presented their original research and illuminated key concepts, histories and events that unravelled the dynamics which characterised the establishment and maintenance of each fault line. The roundtables collectively sparked and generated interesting conversations around South Asia's colonial and contemporary trajectories and the limitations of state-making as well as the dynamic mobilities and movements that mark the fluid (and often violent) borderlands. Further, the panellists and participants exchanged ideas, discussed critical questions and charted new trajectories for border studies in South Asia.

First, the Durand Line roundtable discussed the nuanced complexities of the region and the impact of colonialism and imperialism. The presentations highlighted the contested legality of the Durand Line between Afghanistan and Pakistan and the tensions between the colonial authorities and the locals. It also underlined the importance

of paying attention to the overlap of regional and international developments to better comprehend the power dynamics within boundary-making.

The second roundtable on the McMahon Line focused on how the local communities are witnessing an increased state presence, as evidenced by significant infrastructural development and the pervasion of the Hindi language in the borderlands. Moreover, discussions ensued on the intertwined positional and territorial dimensions along the Tibetan border that have added complications to the relationship between China and India.

The third roundtable touched on the varying border arrangements, cross-border trading activities and political rights of citizens in different parts of Kashmir. Increasing Chinese presence along the Pakistan-China border was also explored. Since the Line of Control (LoC) is not recognised as an international border and remains contested between India and Pakistan, arrangements in trade, border management, securitisation efforts and the exercise of rights have been difficult, and local lives continue to be implicated by the border conflict.

*Increasing Chinese presence along the Pakistan-China border was also explored.*

The fourth roundtable on the Myanmar borderlands featured presentations on the contemporary dynamics of ethnicity and identity on either side of the border, the concept of resource frontiers, the role of non-state actors and how the indigenous communities in the borderlands navigate there vis-à-vis official control and regulations.

Finally, the fifth roundtable discussion on the Radcliffe Line addressed the issues of citizenship, repression and refuge in the borderlands, the scope of the European modes of surveying and mapping geographies and the cross-generational kinship networks across borders.

## Reflections on the Five Fault Lines in South Asia

The opening public panel of the conference featured five panellists – Shivshankar Menon, Tariq Karim, Ian Talbot, Sarah Ansari and S D Muni – who discussed the creation of borders and their impact in South Asia.

The panellists elucidated the origins, contestations and impacts of borders in South Asia and illuminated that the “fault” in the lines in South Asia are direct products of colonialism and imperialism. They provided a nuanced outlook on the inherent complications of borders and the importance of using interdisciplinary approaches to analyse and understand contestations and identities in these dynamic spaces. Additionally, they addressed questions from the audience relating to the possibility of open borders, postcolonial influences on border creations, whether border-related issues could be resolved through different power structures and the impact of globalisation on the fluidity of borders. In the following section, we highlight the key themes discussed.

### History: Inheritance, Partitions and the Cold War

*Notably, South Asia has a history of partitions, and all of independent India’s wars have involved territory in one way or another.*

Notably, South Asia has a history of partitions, and all of independent India’s wars have involved territory in one way or another. It has many border-related issues and challenges compared to other regions that similarly inherited their modern boundaries from artificial colonial creations. This inheritance of borders from colonial times led to the emergence of the South Asian states into a Westphalian order that emphasised hard sovereignty and precise boundaries. As the region is composed of old nations in new states, with porous borders and contesting views of nationalism, every boundary has cross-border ethnicities and affiliations, complicating border enforcement and management.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Shivshankar Menon, “Fault Lines: Reflections on South Asian Frontiers”, Working Paper, Centre for Social and Economic Progress, 9 August 2021, <https://csep.org/working-paper/fault-lines-reflections-on-south-asian-frontiers/>.

Furthermore, post-Cold War legacies and other factors such as historical influence have led to a build-up in the modern states' "cartographic anxiety".<sup>18</sup> Within the South Asian states, a post-partition mindset that targets existent societal divisions aided in hardening these divisions into physical boundaries. Borders are now regarded as areas where sovereignty must be maintained at all costs, making them integral not only for foreign relations between the states of South Asia but also for domestic policy considerations.<sup>19</sup> Although some of the frontiers in the region have congealed into boundaries, the reality of their porosity and territorial ambiguities remains as a source of political friction and continues to animate contemporary politics.

India, for example, has shown some accommodationist tendencies in settling border disputes both within the country and with other states.<sup>20</sup> Yet, it was still observed that India remained a stickler for its colonial inherited boundaries. The mindsets of clinging to inherited borders and territorial accommodation are inherently contradictory and deserve further scrutiny.

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### **Between the State and Local**

During the discussion on internal politics, the speakers highlighted how politicians and stakeholders have frequently leveraged the contentious and controversial nature of the borders to weave differing narratives in domestic politics and international affairs. These narratives drew attention to the overlapping themes of politics, geographic limitations, religions and livelihoods along the border.

Second, the perceptions and attitudes of state officials towards the marking of boundaries and how locals interact with the state and navigate their daily lives in the borderlands play a significant role in

18 Sankaran Krishna, "Cartographic Anxiety: Mapping the Body Politic in India".

19 For example, see Dhananjay Tripathi, "Influence of Borders on Bilateral Ties in South Asia: A Study of Contemporary India-Nepal Relations", *International Studies* 56, no. 1-2 (2019): pp. 186-200.

20 For example, see Wilfried Swenden, "Centre-State Bargaining and Territorial Accommodation: Evidence from India", *Swiss Political Science Review*, 22(4) (2016): pp. 491-515.



the making of borders and frontiers. An example of kinship networks in the city of Sindh, which borders the Indian states of Gujarat and Rajasthan and the Arabian Sea, demonstrates how frontiers are permeable and representative of spaces through which things, people, material objects and ideas cross. Trading, social and kinship networks can help to comprehend the porous nature of borders. These people-to-people interactions and informal networks serve to remind one that frontiers and borderlines exist not only in state-to-state relations but also in the shaping of relationships and the politicisation of identities within states and communities.

With the demarcation of borders, South Asia has experienced an increase in mobility. However, these borders have become heavily securitised and militarised with heightened state control over the years. The panellists concurred that the interdisciplinary dimension of border studies needs to be reviewed first to properly understand its impact on policy-making decisions. Therefore, academics and policymakers should move beyond peripheral regions and zones of exchange to emphasise cross-community interactions across borders.

### **Globalisation, New Technologies and Power Shifts**

*It has been widely acknowledged that expanding economic relations and integrating regional markets among the South Asian countries would drastically boost intra-regional trade.*

The influence of globalisation and new technologies has challenged the idea of fixed boundaries through the rapid transmission of information and capital worldwide. In an article published in 2015, Annette Dixon, the World Bank's Vice President for the South Asian Region, prompted the reader to "imagine a South Asia without borders".<sup>21</sup> It has been widely acknowledged that expanding economic relations and integrating regional markets among the South Asian countries would drastically boost intra-regional trade. Consequentially, enhanced trans-border economic cooperation may help to alleviate tensions arising out of the existing borders. If trade incentives are sufficient, states would be motivated to legalise trade movements across borders and enhance cross-border mobility. For

21 Annette Dixon, "What would a borderless South Asia look like?", *World Economic Forum*, 8 October 2015, accessed 12 December 2021, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/10/what-would-a-borderless-south-asia-look-like/>.

open borders to succeed, the participants stressed the necessity of building trust and confidence between the South Asian states to manage open borders efficiently.

Moreover, it is useful to keep in mind that the fault lines in South Asia were drawn in a geopolitical context that is no longer valid. As countries today are still adjusting to contemporary geopolitical shifts and a changing power balance, the power transitions will likely make existing flashpoints and border conflicts more volatile and dangerous.

So far, there is not yet a concrete Asian dispute mechanism in place to facilitate reconciliation and resolution amongst countries in the region. Most Asian countries have bilateral tracks of dialogue and confidence-building measures, but those have not proven effective in resolving disputes. During the discussion, opinions differed among participants on whether an Asian century was possible or if borders within Asia would remain disputed. Drawing on historical examples from North America and Europe, an Asian century is likely to develop despite unresolved, intractable border disputes. Moving forward, it would be imperative for researchers to investigate how the shifting nature of geopolitics and strategic context affect frontiers and border-making.

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## The Durand Line

This session covered an overview of the origins, history and contemporary relevance of the Durand Line. Named after then British foreign secretary Mortimer Durand, the Durand Line was negotiated between British India and the Emir of Afghanistan in 1893. Today, it remains a source of contention between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The promulgation of the Durand Line has been considered a historical mistake by Afghanistan, and no Afghan administrations have conferred the Line official recognition. Pakistan, on the other hand, claims to have legally inherited the Durand Line and recognizes it as the international border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The speakers pinpointed three different aspects that affect border studies – local/national, regional and international – emphasising that none of these exists in isolation but instead overlap, making the study of the Durand Line multi-faceted.

### Problem of Legality

*Through the lens of international law, there exist complexities of splitting sovereignty through the treaties and agreements made on the line throughout history.*

The question regarding the legality of the Durand Line has emerged in academic literature as uncertainties continue to permeate the nature of the various agreements and treaties pertaining to the line, which date back to colonial times. Through the lens of international law, there exist complexities of splitting sovereignty through the treaties and agreements made on the line throughout history.

Britain prioritised the security of its Indian subjects in the region and sought a buffer zone between India and Afghanistan in defence of British India against Russian encroachment. The British avoided direct rule over natives, choosing to rely on local subjects to control these tribes and prevent trouble from reaching India and antagonising British colonies. However, there were concerns in defending against invasion and controlling borderland incursion. As a result, the colonial administrators often oscillated between pursuing two types of policies

in Afghanistan – ‘close border’ or ‘forward policy’.<sup>22</sup> The frontier was “evolving uncertainly as the ideas of government fluctuated.”<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, local and indigenous leaders did not always agree with British institutions and concepts, which created tensions. Physical demarcations on the ground were often unclear, and there were several passes through which it was easy to move from British India into Afghanistan and back.

Ethnic strife within Afghanistan was also a significant source of tension. Imperial state-building, under which the dynamics of “tribe” and emerging nation-states affected line-drawing, came to influence the dynamics of border and frontier-making. New archival evidence has suggested that the Durand Line was not intended to be an international sovereign boundary.<sup>24</sup> A deeper legal analysis into the treaties revealed legal nuances in word choices indicating that the original intention for the line may have been simply to denote the division of the zones of influence and that the Afghans did not consent to the split of territory.

*New archival evidence has suggested that the Durand Line was not intended to be an international sovereign boundary.*

### **Influence of Decolonisation, Nationalism and Geopolitics of Security**

As the legal status of the Durand Line remains disputed, it is crucial to think about how events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as the departure of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan, the Cold War and decolonisation intersect with regional and international developments regarding the region and its escalating tensions. Collectively, the participants cautioned against the arbitrary, often-made generalisation of the border as “lawless” and “ungovernable”. The stability and order of the borderland along the 2,400-kilometre Afghanistan-Pakistan border

22 See Bijan Omrani, “The Durand Line: History and Problems of the Afghan-Pakistan Border”, *Asian Affairs*, 40:2 (2009): pp. 177-195 and Paul Titus, “Honor the Baloch, Buy the Pushtun: Stereotypes, Social Organization and History in Western Pakistan”, *Modern Asian Studies* 32, no. 3 (1998): pp. 657-687.

23 Bijan Omrani and Frank Ledwidge, “Rethinking the Durand Line”, *The RUSI Journal*, 154:5 (2009): pp. 48-56.

24 Ibid.

have been disrupted by foreign incursions and protracted wars on numerous occasions.<sup>25</sup>

*The varied political actors and resistance groups harbour vastly different ideas of nationalism and the Afghan identity.*

During the discussion, it became evident that Afghan nationalism is hard to define as there are many different ideas of what an Afghan nation looks like and represents. During the 1970s, Afghanistan's political "revolutions" witnessed Afghan leaders espousing their conceptualisation of the Afghan statehood and Afghan-ness as territorially focused. The demands for international recognition of an autonomous Pashtun state in the Afghan-Pakistan borders became one of the rallying calls of Afghanistan's engagement with international politics.<sup>26</sup> Ideas of an "Afghan nation" were further compounded with the rise of various political parties and the invasion of the Soviet Union. The varied political actors and resistance groups harbour vastly different ideas of nationalism and the Afghan identity. Many ethnic groups in Afghanistan have also argued that the dominance of nationalist Pashtun ideologues espoused by the Afghan governments has largely excluded their issues of separation and neglect.

The panellists pointed out that it is essential to understand that Islamic fundamentalism is just one form of nationalism present in Afghanistan. There are differences in what Islam means to different parties and groups. While a common understanding of the intersection between nationalism and Islamic funding is the rise of *jihad* and the holy war, where terror groups die for their religion while pushing back against foreign intervention, others perceive Islam as a means of governance and societal structure. Therefore, it would be hasty to draw correlations between Islam and nationalism without first understanding the complexities of both in Afghanistan.

Today, the Durand Line has evolved from a porous border to a hard border due to Pakistan's desire for security. Pakistan maintains that the Durand Line was established as the international border between

25 Rasul Bakhsh Rais, "Geopolitics on the Pakistan-Afghanistan Borderland: An Overview of Different Historical Phases", *Geopolitics*, 24:2 (2019): pp. 284-307.

26 Elizabeth Leake, "Afghan Internationalism and the Question of Afghanistan's Political Legitimacy", *Afghanistan*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2018): pp. 68-94.

Afghanistan and Pakistan due to colonial treaties and its post-partition inheritance of the boundaries as a legitimate successor state to British India. On the other hand, Afghanistan refuses to acknowledge the Durand Line, claiming that it is invalid under international law.

The rise of the Taliban in the north-western borderland and the ethnic nationalism in Balochistan further contributed to the growth of militancy and violence in the borderlands. The American War on Terror saw many militants emulating the Taliban movement and challenged the authority of the state of Pakistan in these border spaces. Peace negotiations between the Pakistan government and the militant movements were often violated and breached. Many tribal populations have been internally displaced because of militant actions and military operations. The relationship between the centre of the state and the periphery of borderlands remains tense. Throughout the years, the Pakistani government has attempted to modernise the administrative and bureaucratic structures along these borders and implement development projects to enhance the local standards of living. However, the fact remains that these fences have been erected with little consideration for the communities living along the border.

*Peace negotiations between the Pakistan government and the militant movements were often violated and breached.*

## The McMahon Line

The session offered a multi-disciplinary approach towards understanding the McMahon Line. The McMahon Line, the frontier between Tibet and British India negotiated in 1913, has never been accepted by China. It was one of the causes of the 1962 India-China War and partly overlapped with the contentious Line of Actual Control (LAC), the demarcation separating Indian-controlled territory from Chinese-controlled territory in India's eastern sector.

*On the national level, the McMahon Line forms a broader geopolitical rivalry between China and India.*

Combining geography, history, political science, linguistics and health, the discussion focused on the line's effect at a societal and national level. Local communities are witnessing an increased state presence at the societal level, evidenced by significant infrastructural development. The increased state interference has led to a gradual erosion of local identities and cultures. On the national level, the McMahon Line forms a broader geopolitical rivalry between China and India.<sup>27</sup> As both countries continue to jostle for position and territory, the line will remain a source of tension and competition.

### Infrastructural Projects as Drivers for Conflict and Diplomacy

The discussion raised the possibility of infrastructure projects as a driver for conflict and diplomacy along the McMahon Line, pointing to projects in Aksai Chin, Nathu La and Cho La as immediate precursors for bouts of cross-border violence. National and ideological change on the ground were generated by the respective borderland development pursued by New Delhi and Beijing. The presence of more infrastructures over the years increasingly come to reflect the experience and sensation of geopolitical conflict felt by the inhabitants.<sup>28</sup> More issues like the fuzzy fault lines and continuing disputes over the Simla Accord (1914) continue to problematise and

27 For an overview of India-China dispute over the Line, please read Amit Ranjan, "India-China Boundary Disputes: An Overview", *Asian Affairs*, 47:1 (2016): pp. 101-114.

28 One such example is India and China's competing construction of dams in the upper-Brahmaputra River basin. See Ruth Gamble, "How Dams Climb Mountains: China and India's State-Making Hydropower Contest in the Eastern-Himalaya Watershed", *Thesis Eleven* 150, no. 1 (February 2019): pp. 42-67.

undermine the possibility of resolution between India and China. As India and China continue to expand their infrastructure projects along the disputed borderlands, it remains to be seen if these will be harbingers of peace or abettors of further tension.<sup>29</sup>

The panellists discussed various aspects of this borderland: the geology of the area, the generations of inhabitants and their cultural understandings of the place as well as the geopolitical actions of the two Asian giants, to comprehend the developments of the infrastructure projects vis-à-vis the borderlands. For example, the imposition of the McMahon Line effectively bisected the Pemako region and resulted in lasting socio-political, religious and cultural effects on borderland communities. The analysis of the confluence of the ontological-technocratic character of the Chinese state, the Hindutva-majoritarian nature of the Indian state and the prospect of natural events as an actor showcased how the dynamics of the Pemako region play out and evolve.

The China-India relationship is a complex rivalry with interlinked issues. Intertwined positional and territorial dimensions, most amplified in the axis of rivalry along the Tibetan border, further complicate the issue.<sup>30</sup> According to a participant, if the Tibet dispute could be settled, India would be free to look farther East with renewed vigour and solidify its regional position, rather than focusing the majority of its defence resources on the border. Demilitarising Tibet might be one method to deconflict the region and contribute to long-term peace and security.

*Demilitarising Tibet might be one method to deconflict the region and contribute to long-term peace and security.*

### Language as Marker of National Security

A participant spoke on the pervasion of the Hindi language within the border areas, especially Arunachal Pradesh. Insofar as Hindi is the *de facto* lingua franca of Arunachal Pradesh due to the absence of a

29 Pratik Jakhar, "India and China race to build along a disputed frontier", *BBC*, 30 July 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53171124>.

30 Manjeet S Pardesi, "Explaining the asymmetry in the Sino-Indian Strategic Rivalry", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 75:3 (2021): pp. 341-365.



*The presence of the Indian Army and other paramilitary forces in different parts of the state aided in the spread of Hindi language.*

common language, it is also the language of national security and has come to be a key marker of the relationship between troops and locals in this heavily militarised area. The presence of the Indian Army and other paramilitary forces in different parts of the state aided in the spread of Hindi language. Coupled with further aggressive measures of national integration imposed by the central government, the Hindi language has increasingly become the medium of communication in the area.

Accordingly, an individual's ability to communicate in fluent Hindi is regarded as a sign of patriotism. However, in recent years, cracks in the façade of patriotism began to appear as grievances manifested against the increased presence of the Indian Army. The use of security agencies to control inter-community clashes and quell anti-dam activists and demonstrations have upset the locals, widening the division between locals and the Indian government.<sup>31</sup>

### **Impacts of COVID-19**

The speakers commented on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on border communities and governments globally. The pandemic has witnessed many countries closing their borders and effectively shutting off contact with one another through a drastic disruption to supply chains and the mobility of peoples. Alongside these challenges, the rise in xenophobia aroused sentiments of nationalism and led national governments to retreat inwards, leading many to speculate on the sustainability of open borders in a post-COVID-19 world.<sup>32</sup>

The enhanced border control measures to manage the pandemic, coupled with governmental sensitivities, have made access to border areas increasingly restrictive. Notably, the participants posited that the economic downturn brought by the pandemic would see infrastructure building slowing down along the India-China border,

31 For an overview of anti-dam protests in Arunachal Pradesh, see <https://www.thethirdpole.net/en/energy/anti-dam-protests-continue-in-arunachal-pradesh/>.

32 Omotomilola Ikotun, Allwell Akhigbe and Samuel Okunade, "Sustainability of Borders in a Post-COVID-19 World", *Politikon*, 48:2 (2021): pp. 297-311.

especially on the Indian side. However, the pandemic has not eased the tensions between China and India. Both militaries remain mobilised at the borders, and scars from the border skirmishes in the Galwan Valley from May to June 2020 remain fresh.<sup>33</sup>

A colonial hangover, coupled with nationalist sentiments from both India and China, will continue to define the legacy of the McMahon Line. In addition, environmental issues and resource competition will be new sources of tension along the frontier. Therefore, it is vital to have a constructive dialogue and share expertise among scholars and practitioners on border securitisation and mobilities in the face of a post-pandemic future.

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<sup>33</sup> Vincent Ni, "Border dispute casts shadow over China's offers of Covid help for India", *The Guardian*, 29 April 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/29/border-dispute-casts-shadow-over-chinas-offers-of-covid-help-for-india>.

## The Kashmir Lines

The Kashmir Lines comprise three borders: the 724 kilometre-long LoC, which now serves as a frontier between the Indian and Pakistani governed parts of Kashmir (though both countries claim full sovereignty of the region); the India-China border or the LAC in Ladakh, which has been the site of increasing friction and armed conflict between India and China in recent times; and the Pakistan-China border, which came about in the aftermath of the 1962 Sino-Indian War when Pakistan ceded a part of the Gilgit-Baltistan region to China under a 1963 border settlement.

The roundtable focused on the varying border arrangements, cross-border trading activities and political rights of citizens in different parts of Kashmir. As the LoC is not recognised as an international border and remains contested between India and Pakistan, arrangements in trade, border management, securitisation efforts and the exercise of rights have been difficult and continue to implicate local lives.

### Positions of India and Pakistan on Kashmir

*Most marks on the maps exist merely as cartographical lines.*

The discussion examined the reasons behind why border arrangements in Jammu and Kashmir by Pakistan and India have not been finalised. Various India-Pakistan agreements relating to Kashmir, such as the Karachi Agreement (1949) and the Simla Agreement (1972), have not seen the full completion of physical delineations on the ground. The Cease-Fire Line (CFL) that the United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP) was mandated to monitor was not fully demarcated. Later, the LoC, which was established under the Simla Agreement, was also unmarked. Most marks on the maps exist merely as cartographical lines. With the Indian perception of the Simla Agreement (1972) as a confirmation of the LoC, the CFL lost its relevance.

It was observed that India is reluctant to formalise the ceasefire agreement, and it has long resisted the assistance of the UNMOGIP in monitoring the ceasefire and the line. India has also been resistant to implementing standard military operating procedures in the region. Pakistan, on the other hand, desires to formalise the ceasefire agreement and has been supportive of the UNMOGIP's presence in Kashmir.

*India has also been resistant to implementing standard military operating procedures in the region.*

With the revocation of Article 370 in the Indian Constitution since August 2019, the Indian government has effectively stripped Jammu and Kashmir of the self-autonomy it had previously been guaranteed. In this context, it is even more unlikely that the UNMOGIP will play a relevant role in Kashmir's affairs in the future. India has not officially asked the UN to withdraw, as the request would inevitably invite more unwarranted international attention on Kashmir.

### **Cross-border Trade Linkages and Networks**

Historically, the trade corridor and treaty road arrangements jointly set up between the British Raj and the Kashmir Durbar enabled duty-free movement of goods through Central Asia to British India. In contemporary times, certain customs and regulations have evolved to ensure that cross-border LoC trade protocols did not legally acknowledge the LoC as an international border. LoC trade was regarded as barter trade that was non-taxable. The cross-border trade and exchange was neither "internal" nor "external".<sup>34</sup> This was similar to the colonial bonded trade. Both forms of trade held high symbolic value rather than actual economic reasoning. The two forms of trade along the LoC could be seen as legal, technical fabrications established on the frontier at different junctures to suspend ordinary exchange and redirect the movement of people and things.

34 Aditi Saraf, "The Market and the Sovereign: Politics, Performance, and Impasses of Cross-LOC Trade", in *Rethinking Markets in Modern India: Embedded Exchange and Contested Jurisdiction*, edited by Ajay Gandhi, Barbara Harriss-White, Douglas E Haynes, and Sebastian Schwecke, pp. 206-233 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

Additionally, both forms of trade are instituted by political regimes whose legitimacy is disputed at the core; trade was being used to defer political problems. The trading networks are mostly informal connections that the state utilises to communicate; however, the state could also easily criminalise these connections when political tensions are high. Hence, looking at the genealogy of commercial regulation would provide insights into how the traders on both sides of the border endure through the flux of wars and the uncertainties of everyday economic life.

Interestingly, the shift from empire to the nation should have conveyed a shift from one form of the taxable regime to another, instead of using the language of barter that conceptually predates both empire and nation. To better understand cross-border trade and networks, it would be pertinent to look deeper into the interaction between the contextual specificities of local markets, cross-border traders and the regulatory intervention by the state.

### Politics in Azad Kashmir

*The region has received little publicity and remains the least known of Jammu and Kashmir's five major regions.*

A participant brought attention to the major changes to the region of Azad (Free) Jammu and Kashmir since 1947. The region has received little publicity and remains the least known of Jammu and Kashmir's five major regions. Over the years, the Pakistani government has afflicted tighter controls on the region through Article 257 of Pakistan's Constitution, the establishment of the Ministry of Kashmir Affairs in 1949 and the Azad Kashmir Interim Constitution of 1974. The presence of the Pakistani military continues to be highly visible in the region.

Furthermore, the local council had only limited municipal functions. It could only make laws with the consent of the Pakistani government. Correspondingly, there were many restrictions imposed on the locals, such as the prohibition on participating in activities prejudicial against or detrimental to the unity of the state. Due to absent state policy and

a heightened military presence, the region's economic development has been slow, with at least 60 per cent of its budget being provided by the Pakistani government in the form of grants.

Interestingly, despite the tight controls, Pakistan has implemented a participatory political system in the region since the early 1970s. This accredited political rights to people and enabled them to vote and participate in Pakistani politics. The efforts to integrate Azad Kashmir into mainstream Pakistani politics are also attempts to distance the region from India.

### Gilgit-Baltistan

The historical overview of the complex interplay between the British Raj and China on Hunza was also discussed. Notably, "Britain's colonial Gilgit Agency was a legal governing instrument of British India but did not operate on British sovereign territory."<sup>35</sup> The attempts by China to incorporate the area into Xinjiang were met with the British response of integrating Hunza through Kashmir to British India. A stalemate between British India and China on Hunza eventually emerged. As head of a native state, the Maharaja of Kashmir had never really gained territorial rights over the Gilgit Agency and was excluded from the British-Chinese interactions over Hunza.

*The attempts by China to incorporate the area into Xinjiang were met with the British response of integrating Hunza through Kashmir to British India.*

Subsequently, the 1947 Partition and the 1962 Sino-Indian War impacted developments in the region. The details in the Pakistan-China agreement of 1963 revealed that China might need to join in conversation with India and Pakistan on resolving the statelessness of the locals in Gilgit-Baltistan and its unresolved border. A participant opined that the agreement had the same transformative potential as Britain's colonial agency in converting people into load bearers, producing lives lived as evidential of an alternative or another reality.

35 Julie Flowerday, "Identity matters: Hunza and the hidden text of Britain and China", *South Asian History and Culture*, 10:1 (2019): pp. 46-63.

In present times, there has been growing interest in China and Pakistan to buy properties and invest in Hunza. The advent of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has led to an influx of investments and infrastructural development in the Hunza Valley. The residents in Hunza harbour diverse views on the Chinese-led developments. While they acknowledged that the CPEC has generated more employment opportunities and investment, especially in the tourism sector, they are worried that the projects have resulted in pollution and probable land mismanagement that place people at a disadvantage. Moreover, the lucrative tourist areas are developed apart from the local areas, raising the question of how much benefit and development spills over to the residents.

## The Myanmar Borderlands

This session covered the Myanmar borderlands with India and Bangladesh. These borderlands comprise the land and maritime border with Bangladesh and the approximately 1,600-kilometre boundary between India and Myanmar. The latter was presumably settled by the India-Burma Boundary Agreement of 1967. However, several states in Northeast India, including Manipur, Assam, Nagaland and Mizoram as well as non-state ethnic organisations operating in the region do not accept the border and harbour resentment against it. This situation has been termed “durable disorder” by Sanjib Baruah.<sup>36</sup> There are several more lines on India’s eastern flank, including the borders between India and Nepal, and India and Bhutan, which remain contested in parts as well as fuzzy and porous.

*There are several more lines on India’s eastern flank, including the borders between India and Nepal, and India and Bhutan, which remain contested in parts as well as fuzzy and porous.*

The topics discussed during the session included postcolonial state-making, contemporary politics of identity-making, connectivity and connections, nationalism, citizenship politics, resource frontiers, refugee spaces and identities.

### Political Dynamics

The discussion noted that most studies on the Indo-Myanmar borderlands focus on contemporary dynamics of ethnicity and identity on either side of the border in isolation, with little attention given to their shared histories. This is due to a dearth of written history and academic discourse on the region that are accessible outside the region’s languages. In postcolonial India, the borderlands became even more pertinent in the questioning of “tribal” politics.

World War II and decolonisation led these borderlands to be caught between competing state-making processes. Insurgencies and counterinsurgencies were born to defend and counter-defend these processes, with ethnic minorities often being displaced

<sup>36</sup> Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007).



and misappropriated. Lines that define a state constantly shifted during this period, and the state did not always seek to establish an institutionalised presence in the borderlands as sovereignty and access to capital could be exercised in other ways.

Political dynamics in the borderlands thus reflect the incompleteness of the bordering process, which questions the assumption that the nation state always strives to upgrade the eligibility of its subjects through administration. Blank spaces are created by hollowing out the political and cultural connections within a particular territory, which is evident in events such as the creation of Nagaland. Counterinsurgency has often tried to fill or maintain blank spaces, and in this regard, violence remains an attractive alternative for all sides to raise the stakes when a shift in power or a redistribution of resources is anticipated.

*Till today, cross-border culture remains close and co-dependent on ethnic and faith-based affinities.*

The development of the borderlands significantly affected centuries of prior migration and intermingling between cross-border communities. Till today, cross-border culture remains close and co-dependent on ethnic and faith-based affinities. While the borderland is often regarded as a “tribal” area, the reality is that state systems and constraints imposed by Myanmar and India created push and pull factors for the movement of goods, people and capital across borders, and often closed the borders to communities whose lives depend on traversing them.

In an examination of how indigenous communities relate to the international border between India and Myanmar, a participant observed that the border has separated communities in ways that have upset their social relations, but it has simultaneously allowed the indigenous population to position themselves at the margins of the nation-states and leverage their borderland location.

The Indo-Myanmar border is difficult to define and demarcate, as it is largely forests and a river that separates the two countries. The river's changing course inevitably led to unfixed boundary lines that shift according to nature. Thus, indigenous communities in the Myanmar borderlands have been able to utilise the fluid border to negate state rule and define their idea of the land they live in. The borderlands are particularly important in serving as a bridge between India and Myanmar.

*The borderlands are particularly important in serving as a bridge between India and Myanmar.*

### Quest for a Pan-Ethnic Identity

Interestingly, folklore and mythology continue to resonate with the local population, and attempts have been made to historicise the origin of local folk stories. These folklores and myths continue to circulate among the locals, indirectly propagating the idea and imagination of a pan-ethnic identity.

The case of Mizoram was raised by several participants. The people on either side of the border have developed cross-border relations focused on promoting a pan-Mizo identity through informal trade, family and kinship relations. However, not everyone in the borderlands is open to Mizo integration due to the memories of 1966-1986, a period known as *Buai* (The Troubles), when the Indian armed forces bombed and attacked Indian citizens for the first time in Mizoram.<sup>37</sup> Many prefer to show their loyalty to India rather than to the integration movements. However, due to the multiple human rights violations and ongoing insurgencies in the region, the general perception of the Indian Army by the local population is negative.

With the recent military coup in Myanmar, the Mizoram government has tried to assert a pan-ethnic identity with the Chins. This pursuit underscored the politics involved in the process of defining Mizo identity and determining who it includes and excludes. In the multi-ethnic region with porous borders, the issue of autonomy aspirations remains highly fluid and contestable.

<sup>37</sup> For more reading on the issues of Mizo's identity formation, see Joy L K Pachuau, *Being Mizo: Identity and Belonging in Northeast India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014).

### Prevalence of Non-State Actors

One participant drew attention to how the state's neglect of healthcare in the Indo-Myanmar borderlands has resulted in non-state actors like non-government organisations stepping in to establish private healthcare and "creating the networks to bring bodies and body parts back and forth."<sup>38</sup> When the state restricts formal cross-border movement, these actors became influential in dictating mobility of who could and could not cross the border due to medical exigencies. For example, Burmese people travelling to Manipur for medical assistance have their mobility stifled through blockades by non-state actors.

States often circulate the ideas of boundaries and engage in material border politics using fences, checkpoints and immigration laws to demarcate and police the border. However, for those on the ground, inter-legal laws and the presence of external actors often hold more power in the governance of daily interactions.

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38 Duncan McDuie-Ra, "Mobilizing Bodies and Body Parts, from Myanmar to Manipur: Medical Connections through Borderlands in 'Transition'", *Modern Asian Studies* (2021): pp. 1-24.

## The Radcliffe Line

This session focused on the broader implications of the Radcliffe Line on nationhood and determinism. It was drawn by the 1947 Boundary Commission to divide Punjab and Bengal. The Partition sparked the largest mass migration of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and left at least one million people dead. The deep political, economic, social and psychological impact of the partition on India and Pakistan, and later Bangladesh, and the unresolved boundary issues in the west and the east, have continued to dominate South Asian politics.

*The Partition sparked the largest mass migration of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and left at least one million people dead.*

### Between Geographical Expertise and Ground Realities

From the colonial period to contemporary times, maps have played crucial roles in border creation and perpetuation. Different maps push for different agendas during the early decades of state formation. These maps highlighted how local specificities had to be balanced with regional complexities and displayed how specificity could co-exist with ambiguity.

The lack of geographical knowledge in the creation of the Radcliffe Line and the unviability of the physical geography of the area were also discussed. Without visiting the border areas, without considering the river's dynamics and without attending any of the Boundary Commissions' public sittings, Radcliffe drew a "clear and tidy line", having surveyed the colonial maps and heard the various demands of the commissions.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, he drew the borderline using settlement maps rather than crime maps (used by local *thanas*, or police stations, to designate their jurisdiction), resulting in contradictions and confusion in border administration on the ground. He also drew the line based on natural markers such as rivers, which was problematic as the unpredictable flows often shifted river paths. Further, severe rains during monsoon months and melting ice caps from the Himalayas rendered the border invisible and inaccessible.

39 Joya Chatterji, "The Fashioning of a Frontier: The Radcliffe Line and Bengal's Border Landscape, 1947-52." *Modern Asian Studies* 33, no. 1 (1999): pp. 185-242.

In the matter of boundary creation, the panellists opined that the human geography of the subcontinent could have been better understood before drawing the partition lines. Participants explored how many frontier-makers, such as geographers, cartographers and anthropologists, were agents of the empire. Geography as a knowledge technique was employed in the creation of the Radcliffe Line. Thus, it was posited that the line remains a reminder of the subcontinent's colonial hangover.

*Geographical and environmental determinism remains a relevant theme to understand the construction of borders.*

Geographical and environmental determinism remains a relevant theme to understand the construction of borders. However, they are expressed more subtly and insidiously in the contemporary context as they elide the overt arguments of the past. The speakers highlighted that a cartographic vision is just an ideal and is often unable to refashion social and religious relations on the ground. Particularly, local histories must be looked at together with broader, overarching national socio-political contexts.

On the border between Bangladesh and Northeast India, early post-colonial nation building impacted tribal identity construction in these areas. The oversimplicity of the Radcliffe Line left persons of Buddhist, Christian and other tribal religions to face the fate of becoming either Indian or Pakistani and accepting the connotations of an Islam- or Hinduism-based national identity.

### **Social Connections across Borders**

Furthermore, on the discussion of communist activities in the foothills of East Pakistan, which caused suspicion and tension between East Pakistan and Northeast India, a participant noted that exchanges between the Garung Christian unionists and Bengal-inspired Hajongs were more prevalent than Maoist-based solidarity. At the separated border, people fostered new meaningful relationships with the state troops and among themselves, which enabled kinship and social ties to persist. The acts of cooperation, support and convivial exchanges

between the residents and the border police reflected the collective life along the border, “in a dangerous location where lives are lived across national divides.”<sup>40</sup>

The re-emergent character of the border continually impacts contemporary Indian and Pakistani citizenship and identity formations. The borderlands, when seen as a phenomenon embodying larger symbolic significance, gave rise to communities that were formed in ways that were both relational as well as contextual. The messy and indeterminate nature of the borders resulted in messy and indeterminate features of socio-political life in the surrounding areas of the line. Consequentially, the tension between the conceptual and material belonging to the nation and territory of the state revealed tensions surrounding inheritance, properties, rights and citizenship.

*The messy and indeterminate nature of the borders resulted in messy and indeterminate features of socio-political life in the surrounding areas of the line.*

There has been widespread demand for open borders that support the ease of movement for citizens of different states in South Asia, but that has not been fully actualised due to existent political differences. An exception was the India-Bangladesh passport which existed for a brief period. As India and Bangladesh heighten their border control and policing, more outposts and checkpoints were built and border crossings came under scrutiny. These border infrastructures mark citizenship and mobility as mutually exclusive and deepen distinctions among border communities.

On the topic of social connections in the borderlands, a participant highlighted reoccurring cross-border marriages and kinship patterns, albeit in an increasingly hostile environment. Significantly, borderland mobilities, specifically short distance mobilities, and family histories and cross-border marriages remain active across generations. Rather than facing rupture, there is the making of heteronormative kinship ties across the changing practices of border control, where transnational kin (re)negotiate their experience with the physicality of the borders.

40 Malini Sur, “Danger and Difference: Teatime at the northeast India-Bangladesh border”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 53(3) (2019): pp. 846-873.

Through these cross-border marriages, cross-border kinship continues to be validated in times of political tension and violence. These histories of attachment and estrangement across kinship geographies make the relationship much more porous and deconstruct the rigidity of the border. It would be wise to remember Willem van Schendel's words that "in borderlands, the spatiality of social relations is forever taking on new shapes."<sup>41</sup>

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41 Willem van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia* (London: Anthem Press, 2005), pp. 6-9.

## Looking Forward

The aforementioned sections detail a selection of the many ideas and themes presented by the panellists of the conference. The value of the event was in the diversity of voices, ideas and insights brought to bear on the implications of colonial and postcolonial objectification of frontiers, the importance of using diverse perspectives to understand their constructions and their contemporary relevance. The discussions collectively shed light on the origins, contestations and impacts of land borders in South Asia.

Furthermore, the conference brought into perspective how overlapping themes of politics, religions and geographic limitations resulted in specific issues remaining unresolvable. As discussed, a post-partition mindset that targets existent societal divisions has led to the conversion of these divisions into inflexible, physical boundaries. Increasingly, borders are viewed as areas where sovereignty must be maintained, making them essential calculations for South Asian states' external relations and domestic policy considerations. The ambiguous nature of existing borders ensures that the South Asian states will keep negotiating these lines.

*The ambiguous nature of existing borders ensures that the South Asian states will keep negotiating these lines.*

It is important to note that the increased demarcation of borders has also seen an increase in social mobility throughout different historical periods in the region. However, in recent decades, these borders have become increasingly securitised and militarised. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has hit ill-prepared South Asian countries and heightened immigration and border controls, causing disruptions to vulnerable communities that survive on cross-border trade as well as exacerbating existing tensions between India and China.<sup>42</sup>

Throughout the conference, it was clear that as the interest in border studies grows, South Asian borders will need to be critically examined and reflected on – from which the threads of the conversation can only become stronger. Crucially, it has been recognised that the perceptions and attitudes of state officials towards the marking

42 Rupert Stone, "Covid-19 In South Asia: Mirror and Catalyst", *Asian Affairs*, 51:3 (2020): pp. 542-568.



of boundaries, and the ways in which locals interact with the state and everyday lives in the borderlands, contribute to the making of borders and frontiers. More research has surfaced to deconstruct the linkages between state institutions, border residents, international politics and the impact on everyday lives. Therefore, it is imperative for researchers and policymakers to move beyond peripheral regions and zones of exchange to emphasise cross-community interactions across borders and understand the implications of globalisation and the pandemic on these territories as well as on vulnerable border residents.

*Climate change, pollution and competition for oceanic resources further add up to the dilemmas surrounding maritime spaces.*

Moreover, many participants highlighted other important areas of study, such as the maritime borders in South Asia and how environments and climate change shape borders. Past colonial maritime boundary demarcations in South Asia have spawned border disputes and protracted conflicts. Today, with the “rise” of China and India and their contingent political and economic transformations, nationalisms and territorial imaginations, maritime South Asia has become a site for geopolitical rivalry and “chokepoint” anxieties, leading to competitive development schemes, port investments, resource extraction and setting up of military bases. Climate change, pollution and competition for oceanic resources further add up to the dilemmas surrounding maritime spaces. In this regard, maritime South Asia and its waters, like traditional overland territories, are “frontiers” for territorialisation too.

Looking forward, we hope to chart the evolution of territory and space as well as their interactions with the state locally and internationally. Compellingly, the question of South Asian connectivity is heavily dependent on how inter-state territorial and maritime disputes between these countries are managed. Infamously, the region’s integration, as envisioned by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and the South Asian Free Trade Agreement, is still far from reaching its full potential, with border disputes again catalysing tension between governments. The normalisation of relations between South Asian countries could be aided by enhancing the facilitation of border trade and changing the lens through which borders are viewed, as bridges to cross rather than lines to divide.

## Appendix 1

### List of Participants

#### Panel Discussion: Five Fault Lines: Reflections on South Asian Frontiers

##### Speakers

Ambassador Shivshankar MENON  
Distinguished Visiting Research Fellow  
Institute of South Asian Studies  
National University of Singapore;  
Former National Security Advisor; and  
Foreign Secretary, India

Professor S D MUNI  
Professor Emeritus, Jawaharlal Nehru University;  
Former Special Envoy and Ambassador of India;  
and Honorary Fellow  
Institute of South Asian Studies  
National University of Singapore

Ambassador (Ret) Tariq KARIM  
Director, Centre for Bay of Bengal Studies  
Independent University of Bangladesh; and  
Former High Commissioner of Bangladesh

Professor Sarah ANSARI  
Professor, Department of History  
Royal Holloway University of London  
United Kingdom

Professor Ian TALBOT  
Professor in History of Modern South Asia  
University of Southampton  
United Kingdom

##### Chairperson

Professor TAN Tai Yong  
President, Yale-NUS College; and  
Deputy Chairman  
Institute of South Asian Studies  
National University of Singapore

##### Opening Remarks

Professor C Raja Mohan  
Director  
Institute of South Asian Studies  
National University of Singapore

## Roundtable 1: The Durand Line

### Speakers

Dr Magnus MARSDEN  
Professor of Social Anthropology  
University of Sussex  
United Kingdom

Dr Rasul Bakhsh RAIS  
Professor of Political Science  
Lahore University of Management Sciences  
Pakistan

Dr Bijan OMRANI  
Honorary Associate Research Fellow  
University of Exeter, United Kingdom; and  
Editor, *Asian Affairs Journal*

### Chairperson

Professor James SIDAWAY  
Professor of Political Geography  
National University of Singapore

Dr Elisabeth LEAKE  
Associate Professor of International History  
University of Leeds  
United Kingdom

## Roundtable 2: The McMahon Line

### Speakers

Dr Ruth GAMBLE  
Lecturer in History  
Department of Archaeology and History  
La Trobe University  
Australia

Dr Galen MURTON  
Assistant Professor, Geographic Science  
James Madison University  
United States

### Chairperson

Dr Tenzin JINBA  
Assistant Professor  
Sociology and Anthropology  
National University of Singapore

Dr Manjeet PARDESI  
Senior Lecturer, Political Science and  
International Relations Programme; and  
Asia Research Fellow Centre for Strategic  
Studies  
Victoria University of Wellington  
New Zealand

Dr Swargajyoti GOHAIN  
Assistant Professor and Head, Department  
of Sociology and Anthropology  
Ashoka University  
India

### **Roundtable 3: The Kashmir Lines**

#### **Speakers**

Dr Happymon JACOB  
Associate Professor in Diplomacy and  
Disarmament Studies  
School of International Studies  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
India

Dr Julie FLOWERDAY  
Professor, Department of Sociology  
Forman Christian College  
Pakistan

Dr Aditi SARAF  
Assistant Professor, Sociology and  
Anthropology  
Ashoka University, India

#### **Chairperson**

Professor Kanti BAJPAI  
Professor, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public  
Policy  
National University of Singapore

Dr Christopher SNEDDEN  
Director, Strategic and International  
Relations  
ASIA CALLING, Australia

### **Roundtable 4: The Myanmar Borderlands**

#### **Speakers**

Professor Joy PACHUAU  
Professor of History  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
India

Dr Aditya KAKATI  
Research Fellow  
International Institute for Asian Studies  
Leiden, the Netherlands

Professor Duncan MCDUIE-RA  
Professor of Urban Sociology  
School of Humanities and Social Sciences  
University of Newcastle  
Australia

#### **Chairperson**

Dr Carl GRUNDY-WARR  
Senior Lecturer  
Department of Geography  
National University of Singapore

Dr Roluah PUJA  
Assistant Professor of Sociology  
Department of Humanities and Social  
Sciences  
Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee  
India

**Roundtable 5: The Radcliffe Line****Speakers**

Professor William GOULD  
 Professor of Indian History  
 University of Leeds  
 United Kingdom

Dr Sahana GHOSH  
 Postdoctoral Fellow  
 Harvard Academy for International and Area  
 Studies  
 Harvard University  
 United States

Dr Malini SUR  
 Senior Lecturer in Anthropology and  
 Deputy Director of Engagement, Institute of  
 Culture and Society  
 Western Sydney University  
 Australia

Dr Lucy CHESTER  
 Associate Professor of History and  
 International Affairs  
 University of Colorado Boulder  
 United States

Dr Hannah FITZPATRICK  
 Lecturer of Human Geography  
 University of Edinburgh  
 United Kingdom

**Chairperson**

Dr Gyanesh KUDAISSA  
 Associate Professor of History  
 Department of South Asian Studies  
 National University of Singapore

**Observers**

Dr Ronojoy SEN  
 Senior Research Fellow and Research Lead  
 (Politics, Society and Governance)  
 Institute of South Asian Studies  
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Ms Claudia CHIA  
 Research Analyst  
 Institute of South Asian Studies  
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Dr Jasnea SARMA  
 Postdoctoral Research Fellow  
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## Appendix 2

### About the Authors

**Dr Jasnea Sarma** is Lecturer in Political Geography at the University of Zurich, Switzerland. She is also a Non-Resident Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

Her research focuses on borderlands and resource frontiers in Asia, particularly in India, Myanmar and China. She is interested in the spatial politics of greyness and messiness that turn borderlands into highly extractable and creative spaces of flows and transnational imaginaries.

Dr Sarma received a PhD in Comparative Asian Studies from NUS and holds an MA in East Asian Studies from Delhi University and a BA (Political Science) from Lady Shri Ram College, New Delhi. Additionally, she has held teaching and research fellowships in Beijing, Kunming, Taipei, Singapore, Yangon and New Delhi. She also holds postgraduate diplomas in Diplomacy and International Law from the Indian Society of International Law and Chinese language studies from the National Taiwan University.

Her articles have appeared in the *Journal of Borderlands Studies* and the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. She is currently working on a book project with the working title, *Seeing like a Border – Resource Frontiers, Voices and Visions on Myanmar’s Borderlands with India and China*.

**Ms Claudia Chia** is a Research Analyst at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) at the National University of Singapore (NUS). She earned her Master of Arts (by Research) in South Asian Studies from NUS. Her dissertation on the topic of United Nations’ mediation efforts on Kashmir received the Singapore Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry Prize for Best Thesis on South Asian Studies.

Before joining ISAS, Ms Chia worked as a graduate teaching assistant under the Graduate Teaching Fellowship at NUS. During her two years of teaching, she was a two-time recipient of the Graduate Students’ Teaching Award. She has also worked as a research assistant and provided research support and analysis on India-ASEAN relations, India-Singapore bilateral relations, diplomatic history in South Asia and entrepreneurship education in India. Her present research focuses on the political dynamics between South and Central Asia.



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