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The Making of Borders

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Introduction

Borders do not spring fully formed from the landscape. They are made through decisions, contests, and compromises that convert fluid frontiers into the sharp lines we see on maps. In Asia, where empires layered over older polities and where trade routes crossed mountains, deserts, and seas, the making of borders has been particularly consequential. This book asks how colonial legacies, ethnic claims, and competition over resources have combined to produce some of the world's most contested frontiers—and how those frontiers continue to shape national identities and regional security.

The story begins with cartography and administration. Colonial surveyors translated complex geographies into coordinates and treaties, turning rivers into borders and ridgelines into doctrine. Census categories and ethnographic classifications then hardened social difference into territorial claims, inviting political entrepreneurs to align people with place. When empires receded, successor states inherited maps and myths that rarely fit the realities on the ground.

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Yet borders are not only about lines; they are about livelihoods. Hydrocarbons beneath seabeds, copper in high plateaus, timber at forest edges, and water coursing through transboundary rivers have all incentivized states to press claims and defend access. Infrastructure—roads, pipelines, ports, and fiber-optic cables—has made otherwise remote peripheries strategically central, while technologies from aerial photography to satellites have amplified the authority and the ambiguity of maps. The politics of extraction and connectivity thus entangle sovereignty with markets, making borderlands sites of both conflict and cooperation.

To illuminate these dynamics, the book develops a comparative framework and applies it to emblematic cases. Kashmir illustrates how partition, plebiscitary promises, militarization, and identity politics intersect around a mountainous frontier. The China–India boundary shows how differing cartographic inheritances and strategic imperatives—from the McMahon Line to Aksai Chin—animate recurring standoffs and negotiations. Central Asia's Soviet-era national delimitation reveals how borders drawn to manage ethnicity and administration have produced post-imperial enclaves, exclaves, and interdependence, particularly in the Fergana Valley.

Across these examples, mapping is never merely descriptive; it is performative. School atlases, passport covers, and official geospatial platforms cultivate what this book calls cartographic nationalism: the everyday reinforcement of a state's preferred picture of itself. At the same time, local practices—pastoral movements, cross-border kinship, and informal trade—quietly redraw the map from below, complicating efforts to

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impose neat jurisdictional order. Understanding borders therefore requires attending to both the high politics of treaties and the ground-level routines of borderlanders.

Conflict is not the only possible outcome. Asian states and communities have built repertoires for managing disputes: confidence-building measures, demilitarized corridors, joint development agreements, and regionally brokered codes of conduct. International law offers tools—some precise, others pliable—for transforming competing narratives into workable arrangements. While law cannot erase history, it can structure the bargaining that history makes necessary, especially when paired with transparent data and inclusive dialogue.

The chapters that follow move from concepts to cases, and from mountains to seas. They trace how lines were drawn, how they were lived with and contested, and how they might be governed more peacefully. By treating borders as evolving institutions rather than fixed facts, The Making of Borders aims to clarify why certain disputes persist, why others settle, and how future pressures—from climate change to new extraction technologies—may shift the frontier yet again.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Idea of the Border: From Frontiers to Lines

Borders appear as thin blue lines on modern maps, neatly separating one sovereign territory from another. Yet these lines are historical artifacts, forged through a long and often violent process of converting vague frontier zones into precise boundaries. In Asia, where empires once overlapped and trade routes threaded across deserts and mountains, the transformation of space into jurisdiction has been especially dramatic. This chapter explores that transformation: how the idea of a border evolved from a loose notion of a frontier into the sharp, cartographic lines that now define states. It begins with the simple observation that the map is not the territory, though states have spent centuries trying to make it so.

Frontiers, in their classical sense, were zones of contact rather than lines of separation. They were spaces where political control thinned, where authority faded with distance from a capital, and where communities negotiated coexistence and competition without a sovereign insisting on exclusivity. Caravans crossed them, pastoralists moved through them, and rulers claimed rights that were often more symbolic than real. The concept of a border—as a singular, vertically integrated jurisdiction—was not inherent to this world. Instead, sovereignty itself was layered, overlapping, and sometimes shared, with tribute, vassalage, and kinship complicating the notion of exclusive territorial control.

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The leap from frontier to line was enabled by intellectual and technical revolutions. The rise of the modern state brought with it a bureaucratic desire for legibility: rulers wanted to see their realms clearly and tax them efficiently. Mapping provided this clarity, but it required both knowledge and power. Surveying instruments, trigonometric calculations, and standardized units turned landscapes into coordinates. Triangulation networks stretched across continents, and border commissions rode out with escorts to fix points on ridgelines and riverbanks. The work was arduous and sometimes lethal, but the result was a new grammar of space: boundaries that could be described, drawn, and defended.

In Asia, these changes unfolded unevenly and often under external pressure. Imperial courts had long recorded boundaries in poetic and administrative texts, describing passes, beacons, and markers more as references than as legally binding limits. When European powers arrived with their own legal concepts and survey technologies, they brought a different kind of map. Treaties began to fix rivers as borders, ridgelines as crests, and latitudes as partitions. The Qing and Mughal courts, for example, had to negotiate how to interpret and accept these new cartographic claims, often leading to

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hybrid arrangements where overlapping cartographies existed side by side for decades.

The codification of borders was inseparable from the codification of sovereignty. The Treaty of Westphalia is often invoked as the origin of the territorial state, but its principles traveled unevenly across Asia. What mattered on the ground was the idea that a state must have a defined territory to exist. To be a “civilized” actor in the international system, one needed treaties, maps, and border guards. For newly forming states or those modernizing under duress, the act of drawing a border was both an assertion of control and a performance of legitimacy. In short, the border became the signature of statehood.

One of the most consequential tools in this process was the straight line. Colonial administrators loved straight lines because they were simple, fast to draw, and cheap to administer. Mountains, rivers, and deserts may not respect geometry, but bureaucrats did. Straight lines sliced through ethnic regions, trade networks, and ecological zones with a certainty that reality rarely possessed. The adoption of straight lines was often a pragmatic response to a lack of precise knowledge. If no one could say exactly where an ethnic group ended or a river began, a line of latitude offered an acceptable fiction, at least until someone else insisted on a different fiction.

Behind the line lay the prism of power. Geography was not neutral; states drew lines where they could project authority and accepted lines where they could not. Battles, surveys, and negotiations carved borders, but so did expeditions, map seizures, and the quiet placement of boundary pillars. The result was a cartographic record that combined technical precision with political contingency. For local communities, this sometimes meant waking up in a different country without moving an inch. For border commissions, it meant reconciling field reports with instructions from distant capitals, where maps often told a more convenient story than the ground did.

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Of course, ground truth had its own stubbornness. Mountains erode, rivers migrate, and glaciers retreat. Natural features chosen as boundaries change, sometimes dramatically. A river that formed a border might cut a new channel, leaving farmland on the wrong side. A pass used for centuries could be closed by a rockfall or a fort. States responded with complex rules about whether boundaries follow the thalweg or the median line, whether they move with shifting riverbeds or remain fixed at the time of demarcation. These seemingly technical debates often carry enormous consequences for sovereignty, resources, and livelihoods.

A particular kind of border emerged from these contests: the watershed line. On paper, it is elegant—following the high ridge where waters part. In practice, it is a line traced through fog and scree, often decided by officers with barometers and binoculars. The watershed principle aligned with colonial notions of strategic defense—holding the high ground mattered—but it also sliced valleys in half,

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separating villages from markets and herders from summer pastures. The map's ridge looked crisp, but the lived valley was messy. The result was a permanent negotiation between military logic and economic necessity.

The introduction of border posts, fences, and patrol roads further transformed the meaning of the line. Once merely theoretical, the border became material. The first pillar sunk into a mountain pass signaled a new era: not just a claim, but a regularized presence. Fences turned borderlands into frontiers of exclusion. Patrol tracks made it possible to monitor movement, and customs posts formalized the idea that crossing should be controlled and recorded. These infrastructures of boundary enforcement made the line legible to the state and costly for those who had previously moved freely across it.

Transit and access rights became a currency in the politics of borders. States often acknowledged that a line could not be absolute. Where strategic interests demanded it, they carved out exceptions. Corridors for pipelines, enclaves for military access, and rights of way for trade routes were written into boundary treaties. In some cases, communities themselves negotiated de facto access regimes that the state later regularized. The result was a layered border, where the line on the map said one thing and the arrangements on the ground said another.

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The mapping enterprise also had a cultural dimension. Schools taught new geographies; passports displayed maps with borders fixed at a particular moment in history. Maps became national symbols, reproduced in newspapers and official documents. This "cartographic nationalism" helped citizens internalize where their country began and ended. Even if few citizens ever saw the frontier, they could point to it on a map. The border became an idea carried in the mind as much as a line on the earth, and the map itself became a source of authority that could justify policies and wars.

Maps could also legitimize bad information. Once drawn, a line on a map can obscure the complexity of the process by which it was produced. Survey errors, misidentified peaks, and ambiguous treaty language were not unusual. When these errors were discovered—often decades later—they could produce disputes that were technically framed but politically fraught. One state would point to a survey report from 1912; another would cite a 1925 map; both would claim continuity. The border thus became a conversation between different archives and their claims to truth.

Colonialism did not invent borders in Asia, but it did standardize the way they were made. The colonial state required frontiers that could be defended and administered, and it used treaties, surveys, and "agreements" to produce them. This mode of boundary-making privileged legalistic forms and written records, even when those records were negotiated under duress or mistranslated in the process. It replaced a world of shared sovereignty and seasonal adjustments with a grammar of fixed

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jurisdiction. The arrival of colonial border-making thus worked as a kind of administrative time machine, forcing older political logics into a new legal frame.

Global legal norms amplified these changes. As the twentieth century progressed, the idea of uti possidetis—that states should inherit the administrative boundaries of their predecessor—gained traction. This principle made it difficult to reopen settled lines, even when they were manifestly awkward. International bodies encouraged the use of technical standards for demarcation and the publication of official maps. While this stabilized some situations, it also fossilized errors and anomalies. The result was a kind of boundary conservatism: lines might be irrational, but they were legally entrenched, making change slow and costly.

Maps themselves have become political technologies. In the early days, boundaries were traced by hand, with errors and omissions often tolerated. Later, aerial photography allowed commissions to verify features from above, correcting old mistakes but also introducing new arguments over who controlled the sky from which the photograph was taken. Today, satellite imagery and GPS coordinates provide an apparently objective standard. Yet the politics of maps endures: what counts as an official source, how to interpret the same image differently, and who owns the data remain contested. Technology clarifies and complicates in equal measure.

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Borders are also ecological. They carve watersheds, disrupt wildlife corridors, and split forests. A line might protect a forest on one side while accelerating logging on the other. Rivers that form boundaries become sources of tension when upstream states alter flows. Dams, diversions, and pollution do not respect the line on the map. The result is an ecology of borders where political separation meets hydrological unity. Managing this requires cooperation, but the border's very existence can make cooperation difficult, because it frames the river as a resource to be defended rather than shared.

The human geography of borders is equally complicated. Kin groups, trade networks, and pilgrimage routes often ignore lines that were drawn without regard to them. People find themselves on the wrong side of a border created far away, sometimes by clerks who had never visited the region. When borders move, identities are reclassified. Individuals learn to navigate multiple identities, carrying papers from one state and cultural affiliations to another. This flexibility can be a survival strategy, but it also puts communities at risk when states demand exclusive loyalty or crack down on cross-border ties as threats to security.

Where borders cut through densely populated regions, enclaves and exclaves can emerge. These anomalies are the neat lines' awkward gifts. An enclave may be a pocket of one country entirely surrounded by another, complicating everything from education to emergency services. Over time, states may swap enclaves to tidy the map, but the human consequences of such swaps can be profound. In some places,

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enclaves become symbols of national identity; in others, they are burdens that residents seek to escape through migration or naturalization. The result is a patchwork of belonging that defies simple narratives of territory.

Borders are also sites of economic extraction. Resource frontiers—oil fields, mineral deposits, fishing grounds—often sit near or on contested lines. The temptation to push a border a few kilometers in one direction can be enormous when the subsoil holds valuable assets. Maritime boundaries are especially prone to such disputes, as overlapping claims over seabed resources turn legal principles into high-stakes contests. The map becomes a tool for locking in economic rights, and negotiations often hinge on technical arguments about geology and hydrology as much as on politics.

Security considerations loom large in the making and maintenance of borders. States fortify frontiers they fear they may lose and patrol those they believe are vulnerable. The logic of defense often favors holding natural features—rivers, mountains, deserts—because they are easier to describe and defend. This preference has shaped countless Asian boundaries, but it also creates new vulnerabilities. A ridge that offers a defensive position might also become a trigger for escalation if both sides claim it. The border becomes both shield and spark, stabilizing some conflicts while igniting others.

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The legibility of the border is not just a matter of lines but of systems. Modern border management relies on databases, biometric checks, and integrated customs platforms. A border is now as much a set of rules and files as it is a physical place. For travelers, the experience of crossing is defined by checkpoints and paperwork; for goods, it is defined by tariffs and inspections. These systems are invisible on old maps but define the border's modern character: an interface between jurisdictions, governed by standards and protocols as much as by terrain.

Borderlands develop their own cultures, economies, and politics. Markets thrive just inside or outside the line, catering to arbitrage between legal systems. Smuggling is not only criminal; it can be a rational adaptation to arbitrary lines that sever local economies. Border guards and traders develop relationships, sometimes antagonistic, sometimes cooperative. These micro-politics of the border reveal that lines are not just imposed from above; they are lived from below. The border is a social space, not just a political one, and it evolves through the daily interactions of those who make their lives near it.

The management of borders involves a constant calibration of openness and closure. States sometimes relax controls to encourage trade or to build diplomatic goodwill. In other moments, they harden borders to assert sovereignty or respond to security panics. The COVID-19 pandemic reminded the world how quickly borders can be repurposed as barriers to disease control. In Asia, border closures have been used for political leverage in disputes, to punish neighbors, or to signal displeasure. The line

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becomes a lever, pulled in and out as political needs change.

Despite their fixed appearance, borders can be surprisingly dynamic. River boundaries shift course, and states must decide whether to follow the movement or hold to the original line. In coastal areas, rising sea levels can submerge features that serve as baselines for maritime boundaries. Glacial retreat exposes new ridgelines and complicates watershed demarcation. These environmental changes are slow but cumulative, and they invite legal arguments about whether borders are fixed in time or follow the physical world. The politics of climate adaptation will increasingly intersect with the politics of borders.

The idea of the border has also become part of everyday life. Citizens encounter it in the symbols on passports, in the maps on school walls, and in the rhetoric of politicians. The border is invoked to define who belongs and who does not, to justify development projects, and to rally public opinion. This symbolic power is distinct from the technical reality of surveying or the legal text of treaties, but it is no less real. It shapes elections, foreign policy, and social attitudes. In short, the border is both a location and an idea.

Borders have a memory, and that memory is selective. States commemorate certain boundary agreements and ignore others. Old surveys are celebrated as foundational, while inconvenient treaties are shelved. Historians and cartographers are deployed to argue for continuity or change. This memory work matters because it determines which arguments are considered legitimate. The border is not just a line but an archive, and the politics of borders is often a politics of what counts as history.

The making of borders in Asia is therefore a story about how the world was translated into maps and how maps came to rule the world. It is a story of how local landscapes were turned into national territories, and how local communities learned to live within and across these new lines. It is also a story about the limits of this translation: the ways in which ground truth resists the map, and the ways in which people improvise around the edges of state control. These improvisations—from trade to migration to resource sharing—do not erase the border, but they do complicate it.

What, then, is the idea of the border? It is a hybrid of law and landscape, of power and pragmatism. It is a commitment to a line that is never quite as simple as it looks. It is the point where sovereignty meets its neighbor, where maps meet mountains, and where national narratives meet local realities. In Asia, the making of borders has been a process of negotiating between these opposites: between imperial legacies and postcolonial ambitions, between ethnic claims and administrative needs, between strategic imperatives and everyday life. The following chapters trace how this negotiation played out in specific places and times, and why it continues to shape the continent’s politics.

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