1 *The Problem of Colonial Borders*
Myth and Reality

In the dark of night, on 15 June 2020, the Chinese and Indian armies fought hand-to-hand with fists, stones, and clubs wrapped in barbed wire in harsh high-altitude weather and pushed each other off the 14,000-foot cliffs of the Himalayan Mountains into the Galwan River.[1] It was the first time in almost fifty years that soldiers of these nuclear-armed countries, with the world's two largest populations, had killed each other. For many senior officers of the Indian Army a major factor was the fact that the Line of Actual Control, which forms the north-western part of their boundary, has never been officially agreed or marked.[2] As the former Indian foreign secretary said: 'The Chinese line has kept shifting. There is always scope for redrawing, and we have never had the chance to look at their maps'.[3] Yet at the time of writing China still has not proposed any other model for the border which could serve as an alternative to the linear type of boundary which is generally expected.[4]

Many observers of various perspectives agreed the events were somehow linked to the history of colonial boundaries. For the state-run *China Daily*, India showed its British-inherited 'colonial mentality' in seeking a geopolitical 'buffer zone'.[5] For the Chennai-based English daily *The Hindu*, the Galwan River skirmish was a result of the 'colonial ambiguity' of the 'undemarcated border'.[6] For the *Financial Express* of Dhaka, the Galwan incident revealed India's territory as a whole to be 'a British colonial construct'.[7] In one way, then, the China–India

[1] Mandhana et al. 2020. China claims that senior commanders had reached an understanding on 6 June 2020 that the Indian army would not cross eastwards of the estuary of the Galwan River, but India denies this. *The Wire* 2020.
[2] Kumar 2020; Pannu 2020; Panang 2020; Malik 2020. [3] Krishnan 2020b.
[4] There are limited signs that alternative arrangements might be emerging spontaneously at a local level, but there is no indication that any systematic model is being conceptualized (see Chapter 7).
[5] Fu 2020. [6] Sanwal 2020. [7] Mahmood 2020.

boundary dispute is like many others across the world. The colonial past is similarly considered a key background condition in border disputes from Cambodia to Cameroon, Nicaragua to Northern Ireland, and Sudan to Syria. Indeed, the critique of colonial borders is so familiar that in many cases there was no need to explain why the China–India boundary being 'colonial' made it inherently problematic.

At the same time, China's inability or unwillingness to suggest an alternative model to the linear border points to something more fundamental that all contemporary border disputes have in common, postcolonial or not: the modern state imaginary is inescapably linear.[8] What often evades sustained critical examination is the expectation, no matter how unrealistic, that borders separating state territories should eventually become linear, and that territorial claims and counter-claims must inevitably be articulated in precise cartographic terms in order to be taken seriously.

There are, of course, many kinds of territory routinely referred to in political discourse which are never expected to be, and cannot be, defined with any precision. Where, for example, does a nation's 'homeland' become its 'periphery'? How far outwards does its 'sphere of influence' extend? It would be difficult to give a complete answer to these questions by listing coordinate points of latitude and longitude or by drawing exact lines on maps. But when we are asked to imagine an international system which is made up of sovereign territorial states, the territoriality referred to is not of that vaguer kind.

The China–India dispute, then, points to two general features of territorial politics in today's world. On the one hand, in most cases, the history of colonialism still looms large, casting doubt in varying degrees on either the legitimacy or the efficacy of inherited borders. On the other, the degree to which it has been virtually impossible for states to assert control over territory without claiming precisely specified borderlines has made it easy to forget that this too is a distinct, historically particular theme running throughout all modern territorial politics.

This book is a theoretically driven historical inquiry into those two features of territorial politics and the relationship between them. We might begin by asking whether colonial rule really was notable, above all, for the ambiguous and artificial borders it left behind. But this question,

[8] Goettlich 2019.

which is often posed in public discourse but not taken seriously enough by scholarly literature, is posed in the wrong way. As we will see, the idea of colonial borders being ambiguous and artificial does not come from critical awareness of the various different types of territoriality and borders seen throughout history. Instead, it is a critique that comes from within colonialism itself. It tells us more about the type of rule that certain colonial and imperial officials tried, with some amount of success, to impose on the colonized world than it does about anything else.

Rather than asking whether or not linear colonial borders were artificial or arbitrary, this book asks where linear borders historically come from and what they do to international politics – how we can explain their appearance and why they matter. Contrary to themes appearing explicitly in public discourse, and more implicitly in scholarly literature, the book reveals that the historical relationship between the linearity of modern territorial borders and their colonial history is one of tight interconnection. Borders of the modern kind that we take for granted today were not simply exported along with Europeans as they travelled across the world to trade with and conquer other peoples, nor were they imported into Europe from the colonies.

Instead, in the first part of the book I show how they emerged at different times and in different ways as an outcome of the production of certain kinds of technical expertise integral to colonial politics and society. In some contexts, for example, especially settler colonies, it was the habitual surveying of private property boundaries which resulted in territorial boundaries also being fixed in a linear fashion. By contrast, the surveying activity which grew up in British India and made boundary surveys possible in a large part of Asia was part of a wider transformation of information-gathering practices amid rising distrust of the 'natives', intensifying around 1790. In both cases, what drives boundary-surveying activity are implications of technical expertise largely particular to the colonial context and not simply diffusion from Europe or factors held in common with Europe.

Then, in the second part of the book, I examine the particular type of knowledge and expertise that was required for and came as a result of the global linearization of borders, now known as boundary studies. Here Europe comes back into the picture as I show how boundary experts who shaped and were shaped by the global linearization of borders made an impact on the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, which redrew the boundaries of Europe.

The basic argument of the book, then, is that the origins and consequences of modern territoriality have less to do with sovereignty or the nation-state than commonly thought, and still less to do with the political theories of sovereignty or the nation-state. Instead, the history of modern territoriality is the history of a technical practice, and in much of the world, originally a technical practice of colonialism. As a result, its origins can be traced not primarily in terms of what drove states to solidify their own borders but in terms of how certain types of experts and expertise became available and what social forces enabled them to become more involved in precisely defining boundaries. And likewise, important consequences of modern territoriality stem from its technical nature, as a result of which I argue there is always at least a potential for experts to play an important, underappreciated role in territorial politics.

Myth and Reality in Scholarship and Popular Narratives

Such a theoretically driven historical inquiry is necessary not only because popular misconceptions of the history of border-drawing surface and resurface more often than historians can debunk them factually, but also because scholarly literature does not yet offer sufficient resources to engage with them at a conceptual level. Of course, in one sense it is well known that colonialism in much of the world played a central role in the drawing of a new type of border, and that many of these borders fixed by colonial officials were later inherited as the boundaries of independent postcolonial states. These colonial borders were precise and linear, unlike what were previously more 'fuzzy' boundaries or frontier zones. Consider the confusion of a colonial official by the name of D. D. Daly sent in 1875 to find the boundaries of some of the independent principalities of Malaya:

> [I]n reply to inquiries I received answers such as these, 'The boundary of our State extends as far as the meeting of the fresh water with the salt water of the river;' or, 'If you wash your head before starting, it will not be dry before you reach the place;' or, 'The boundary may be determined on the river, as far as the sound of a gunshot may be heard from this particular hill'.[9]

In place of those types of boundaries, Daly set to work laying baselines, measuring distances, taking latitudes and longitudes, and so on,

[9] Daly 1882.

in order to 'fix' and map them as linear borders. Transitions analogous to this occurred in one way or another on a global scale over several hundred years, and colonial rule was central to that process.

But because nineteenth-century conceptual frameworks survive in contemporary discourse, if only in fragmented and incoherent forms, the history of the global linearization of borders has been obscured in many ways, such that no scholar has attempted systematically to explain it or its effects.[10] At the same time, the colonial history of borders is used in many different ways in contemporary politics: to justify claims, to debunk opposing claims, or to build alliances and solidarities. These narratives have been useful in some particular contexts, particularly in articulating anti-colonial politics, and in some cases their effects may have been beneficial in some ways. But in a deeper sense they do not achieve the decisive break with colonial politics that they typically intend. Basic to many of these narratives is the idea that borders drawn by colonial powers failed to reproduce European ideals, and that they should do so better. They tend to frame the political situation as a choice between the status quo and something closer to the classic European model of the nation-state.

To show why this book is necessary, then, this chapter begins by exposing some prominent confusions in public and academic debates about colonial borders and how they originated. These are: first, that colonial borders were especially imprecise; second, that colonial-inherited borders are problematic because they do not line up with ethno-national divisions; third, that precise, linear borders originated first in Europe and then came to other regions by a process of diffusion; and fourth, that linear borders were created primarily by drawing them on maps.

Lack of Precision

One narrative that is particularly common in popular discourse is the idea that the colonial powers left debilitating ambiguities in the territorial arrangements they passed on to their postcolonial successors. This narrative is not only seen in the China–India dispute referred to earlier but is also central to the African Union's current strategy for dealing with

[10] The closest scholars have come is Michel Foucher's (1988) painstaking work in characterizing, classifying, and analysing the emergence of linear borders in all parts of the world, but Foucher's focus is not on overall, systematic explanation.

territorial conflict, which has as its centrepiece the complete and precise delimitation and demarcation of all borders throughout the continent.[11]

The idea that colonial border agreements suffered from a systematic ambiguity or lack of basis in accurate geographical knowledge was a recurrent argument of Thomas Holdich, who was named Superintendent of Frontier Surveys in British India in 1892 and considered an authority figure on the border issues of the British Empire.[12] Serious geographical ignorance threatened the efficacy of the political agreement and could result in unnecessary conflict. Ill-informed agreements, he thought, often referred to 'topographical features by name which either do not exist at all, or which may exist in too great a quantity'. He spoke from personal experience on the monumental Russo-Afghan Boundary Commission of 1884–1886, which was instructed to find the non-existent post of Khwaja Sala, or the two rivers of the same name which were found in the same area between Kafiristan and Chitral. These dangers were among the main reasons why Holdich promoted the institutionalization of geography as a distinct discipline, for example by contributing to the establishment of the School of Geography at Oxford University in 1899.

Others before, such as Emer de Vattel, Voltaire, and Jeremy Bentham, had blamed imprecise colonial boundaries for unnecessary wars.[13] But it was Holdich in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, more than any other writer, who imagined this as one of the primary concerns of imperial policy. Fixing borders and making them precise may be useful in certain circumstances, but it makes little sense to portray it as addressing the problem of a colonial legacy. Rather, as I argue in the book, precise and linear borders in much of the world are central to the colonial legacy. The general concern for delimiting and demarcating borders clearly, as a priority, has to be seen as a completion of the colonial legacy, then, not a correction of it.

Methodological Nationalism and 'Artificial Colonial Borders'

Perhaps even more widespread is the claim that colonial borders are arbitrary because they cut across some type of pre-existing boundaries,

[11] African Union Border Programme 2013.
[12] Holdich 1899; Hudson 1977. See Chapter 5.
[13] Vattel 2008, 308; Voltaire 1850, 174; Bentham 1843, vol. II, 539n.

typically ethno-national boundaries. For example, in 2014, when Islamic State proclaimed the 'end' of the Anglo-French Sykes–Picot Agreement of 1916 by bulldozing the Iraq–Syria border, which 'arbitrarily' divided Sunni Arabs, they were appropriating for their purposes a long-standing narrative about the artificiality of borders in the region.[14] Many Western observers, as much as they deplored Islamic State, accepted some of the basic premises of this narrative and similarly called for a redrawing of borders in the region.[15] The idea of artificial colonial borders was also important for anti-colonial movements, particularly in Africa. The 1958 All-African People's Congress, attended by delegates from states and colonies all over Africa, denounced the 'artificial frontiers drawn by imperialist Powers to divide the peoples of Africa' and called for 'the abolition or adjustment of such frontiers at an early date'.[16]

Claims that colonial borders are artificial or arbitrary are not necessarily always compromised by methodological nationalism – the assumption that the nation or the nation-state is the natural unit of social scientific analysis – but they are often closely related to it. In order for the idea of an 'artificial' boundary to have any meaning, it must be the opposite of something that could be called a 'natural' boundary. And here typically what is meant is a state boundary which is in alignment with those of underlying ethnic or national groups. What makes boundaries such as the Iraq–Syria boundary appear artificial, in other words, is that it misses what is presumed to be the key function of boundaries, to separate organic social groups. Likewise, it is often thought that nation-states are more able to, and have better reason to, delimit and demarcate their borders clearly than empires. Nations are thought to care deeply about every inch of territory, particularly of the homeland, while far-flung empires historically may not have known or cared much about the details of their furthest reaches.

Many scholars, of course, reject methodological nationalism, as a way of assuming the givenness of nations, whose existence should instead be explained historically.[17] Most scholars today avoid the terms 'artificial' or 'natural' borders, with some notable exceptions.[18] But although scholars use different terms, the distinction between the

[14] Tran and Weaver 2014. [15] Bâli 2016. [16] Ajala 1983, 182.
[17] Agnew 1994, 53–80. [18] Alesina et al. 2011.

kinds of borders one normally expects to be a natural part of nation-states on the one hand, and the artificial borders drawn through colonialism on the other, appears in scholarly literature in different forms. For I. William Zartman, many of the world's borders are 'the walls and moats of history, natural defence lines whose traces mark the military conflicts and diplomatic compromises of the past'.[19] But the boundaries of Africa, almost all of which are colonial creations, apparently operate by a different logic than that which is normally expected of nation-state boundaries because, according to Zartman, they possess 'none of the legitimacy of national history'. For Richard Jackson and Carl Rosberg, similarly, '[t]he juridical state in Black Africa is a novel and arbitrary political unit; the territorial boundaries … are contrivances of colonial rule', and this is a fatal deficiency in its legitimacy, making it a mere 'quasi-state'.[20] This raises the question of whether or not the persistence of these inherited colonial boundaries, which seem to be sustained not by anything in the states themselves but instead simply by the good graces of international norms, is beneficial or harmful.[21]

Global historians have, of course, long been at the forefront of efforts to dislodge methodological nationalism, particularly by seeing the national and the imperial as mutually implicating. But in global history, too, there appears sometimes a tendency to assume as a default that states, or nation-states, aim at a certain kind of border which is not necessarily important for empires and colonies. For example, for Charles Maier, the 'space of states aspires to frontiers stabilized by treaty', unlike the 'space of empire', which is more 'restless and contested at its perimeter'.[22] While Ann Laura Stoler critiques the common tendency to see empire 'as an extension of nation-states, not as another way – and sometimes prior way – of organizing a polity', the important difference for her between the two is that '[b]oundaries matter to nation-states in ways that for vast imperial states in expansion they cannot'.[23] Seen in this light, when hard and fast lines are drawn at the edges of empire, this will seem an artificial imposition on a frontier which we should expect normally to be left vague.

One of the clearest assertions of the association of distinctly defined and fixed borders with national states, particularly in Europe, comes

[19] Zartman 1965, 155. [20] Jackson and Rosberg 1982.
[21] Atzili 2012; Zacher 2001. [22] Maier 2016, 14. [23] Stoler 2006, 137.

from historians Michiel Baud and Willem van Schendel. According to them: 'The drawing of borderlines and the creation of borderlands are the outcome of the establishment of modern states all over the world. The wish for well-defined, fixed boundaries was a direct consequence of the idea of exclusive and uncontested territorial state power that emerged in the nineteenth century.'[24] In their sweeping vision spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which did much to propel the study of borderlands to prominence, there is no explicit distinction made between 'national borders', 'state borders', and 'borders' as such. What distinguishes colonial borders is primarily that, particularly in Africa and the Americas, they were 'drawn without any regard for local society and in places where no history of state border formation existed'.[25] But, as we will see in Chapter 3, linear borders were quite deeply rooted in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century colonial societies of North America before they were widespread in Europe. And we will see in Chapter 4 that it was precisely a deep concern for local society and history that drove the transition to linear borders in British India.

Where does the distinction between artificial and natural boundaries itself come from? While the idea of natural boundaries per se goes back at least to the Enlightenment, the idea of boundaries as constructed by human and scientific artifice which can utilize well, badly, or not at all certain natural features on the earth's surface is most centrally a late nineteenth-century idea. Such is the argument of Chapter 5. In the Anglophone world at least, this was largely popularized by the field later to be called boundary studies which emerged at the turn of the twentieth century, mostly concerned with fixing and solidifying the British Empire's colonial boundaries. Early boundary geographers such as Lord Curzon and Thomas Holdich pointed out the limitations of the type of boundaries common across much of the colonized and settler colonial world, which are 'indifferent to physical or ethnological features' and 'produce absurd and irrational results'.[26] Curzon, who was viceroy of India and known for carving out India's North-West Frontier Province and for the first partition of Bengal (1905), argued instead that, at least in Asia, 'tribal boundaries … are apt to be observed'.[27] In this respect he was following British colonial thought,

[24] Baud and van Schendel 1997, 217. [25] Baud and van Schendel 1997, 237.
[26] Curzon 1907, 34–35. [27] Curzon 1907, 37.

established since the response to the Indian Rebellion of 1857, that the key to the stability of colonial rule was in stereotyping and fixing 'traditional' society in place.[28]

It was not only British colonialists who thought along these lines of preferring 'natural' borders where possible. For Robert de Caix, the top civil servant of the French mandate in Syria in 1920, the mandate would replace the Ottoman administrative divisions that 'overlapped the natural divisions to mold them into an Ottoman unity' with autonomous regions protecting 'traditional groups', one of which would become Lebanon.[29] By then, moreover, partisans of the French colonial cause had long been attempting to make France's presence in Syria appear natural rather than externally imposed, based on French interventions and sponsorship of Christians there since the Crusades. As de Caix had put it in 1912, it was in a 'sentiment of tradition and culture' rather than 'to mark out … a so-called sphere of influence, that we take an interest' in Syria.[30] By contrast, it was the nascent Arab nationalism forming around the Emir Faisal that was a 'recent and artificial import' nurtured by British imperialism.[31] This critique of artificial borders, then, just as the critique of ambiguous borders examined earlier, comes from within colonial ideas and discourse.

Popular narratives about colonial borders, of course, have not gone without criticism. The idea of natural borders itself has been subject to debate since at least the reaction to the French Revolution.[32] Criticism of the idea reached a height after the First World War, when geographical determinism was widely discredited and, as we will see in Chapter 7, geographers gradually came to accept that there was no neutral way of specifying what a 'natural' border was. All linear borders are artificial, in the sense of being imposed by political authorities on landscapes which do not themselves reveal already constituted linear boundaries, and this collapses the distinction between natural and artificial borders. Western European nation-states, moreover, just as much as states anywhere, have peripheries which were only recently integrated, and the making of colonial boundaries was no less a top-down process.[33]

This line of thought does have some important implications. It suggests that if states in the Global South are in some senses less stable

[28] Owens 2015, ch. 4. [29] Khoury 2006, 200. [30] De Caix 1912, 517.
[31] Khoury 2006, 191, 234. [32] Pounds 1954, 51–62. [33] Weber 1976.