

The Frontier Complex

Kyle J. Gardner reveals the transformation of the historical Himalayan entrepôt of Ladakh into a modern, disputed borderland through an examination of rare British, Indian, Ladakhi, and Kashmiri archival sources. In so doing, he provides both a history of the rise of geopolitics and the first comprehensive history of Ladakh's encounter with the British Empire. He examines how colonial border-making practices transformed geography into a political science and established principles that a network of imperial frontier experts would apply throughout the empire and bequeath to an independent India. Through analyzing the complex of imperial policies and practices, *The Frontier Complex* reveals how the colonial state transformed, and was transformed by, new ways of conceiving of territory. Yet, despite a century of attempts to craft a suitable border, the British failed. The result is an imperial legacy still playing out across the Himalayas.

Kyle J. Gardner is a nonresident scholar at the Sigur Center for Asian Studies at the George Washington University.

The Frontier Complex

*Geopolitics and the Making of the India–China
Border, 1846–1962*

Kyle J. Gardner

George Washington University



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For Amanda

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>List of Maps</i>	x
<i>List of Tables</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvii
<i>A Note on the Text</i>	xx
Introduction	1
I.1 Space	6
I.2 Geography and Territory	10
I.3 Frontiers, Borders, and Borderlands	15
I.4 The Frontier Complex	20
1 Territory before Borderlines: Trade, Cosmology, and Modes of Seeing in Precolonial Ladakh	26
1.1 Modes of Seeing	29
1.2 Ladakh: Crossroads of High Asia	45
1.3 Where Traders, Mountains, and Empires Meet: William Moorcroft to Zorawar Singh	50
1.4 Enter the Dogras	54
1.5 Conclusion	57
2 Surveys: Boundary-Making Principles, Mapping, and the Problem with Watersheds	60
2.1 Bounds of Nature: Water, Law, and Humboldt's New Geography	65
2.2 From Valley to Ridge: The First Boundary Commissions and the "Water-Parting Principle"	71
2.3 Securing the Perimeter: Scientific Frontiers and the Indus Watershed System	76
2.4 Conclusion	88
3 Communication: Roads, Regulation, and the British Joint Commissioners	92
3.1 Trade, Servitude, and the Hindustan–Tibet Road	96
3.2 The Treaty Road and the British Joint Commissioners	106
	vii

viii	Contents	
	3.3 The British Invasion of Tibet and the Regulation of Himalayan Roads	122
	3.4 Conclusion	131
4	Reading the Border: Gazetteers, Tribute Missions, and the Problem with Goats	133
	4.1 Top-Down Information	138
	4.2 Reading from the Ground Up: Sovereignty, Territory, and Tribute	155
	4.3 Conclusion	175
5	Trans-frontier Men: Invasion Anxieties and Frontier Heroes	179
	5.1 Beyond the Frontier	184
	5.2 The Macartney–MacDonald Line and the Problem of No-Man’s Lands	193
	5.3 Soviet Penetration	199
	5.4 Conclusion	202
6	The Birth of Geopolitics: Frontier Experts, Boundary Commissions, and Trans-frontier Information	204
	6.1 Thomas Holdich and the Expansion of Boundary Commissions	207
	6.2 Trans-frontier Information	212
	6.3 Shimla and the McMahon Line	218
	6.4 The Birth of Geopolitics	222
	6.5 Conclusion: India’s Inheritance	230
7	Lines of Control: From Empire to Nation-State	233
	7.1 Bakula Rinpoche, Sheikh Abdullah, and Jawaharlal Nehru: The Dual Specters of Communism and Communalism	236
	7.2 Geopolitics and Nationalism	244
	7.3 Conclusion: The (Postcolonial) Frontier Complex	248
	Epilogue	251
	<i>Archives</i>	256
	<i>Bibliography</i>	257
	<i>Index</i>	273

Figures

1.1	<i>lha.tho</i> (“deity-residence”) above the village of Basgo	page 34
1.2	An array of old <i>mchod.rten</i> in Nubra Valley, northern Ladakh	36
1.3	Srin.mo, the “supine demoness”	38
3.1	Samuel Bourne, “The view from the new road at Pangi – the Great Chini Peaks in the background” (1866)	99
3.2	Total import and export figures via Ladakh (1863–1946)	112
3.3	Jawaharlal Nehru, Louis and Edwina Mountbatten, and an unknown woman in a car on the Hindustan–Tibet Road in Shimla (1948)	127
3.4	A typical sign from HIMANK	132
5.1	Talbot Mundy, <i>King of the Khyber Rifles</i> (1916)	190
6.1	Bourne & Shepherd, “A survey group in the Kurram” (1879)	208
7.1	Ladakhis and Indian Army soldiers posing next to an Indian Army DC-3 at the hastily constructed airfield near Leh (1948)	238

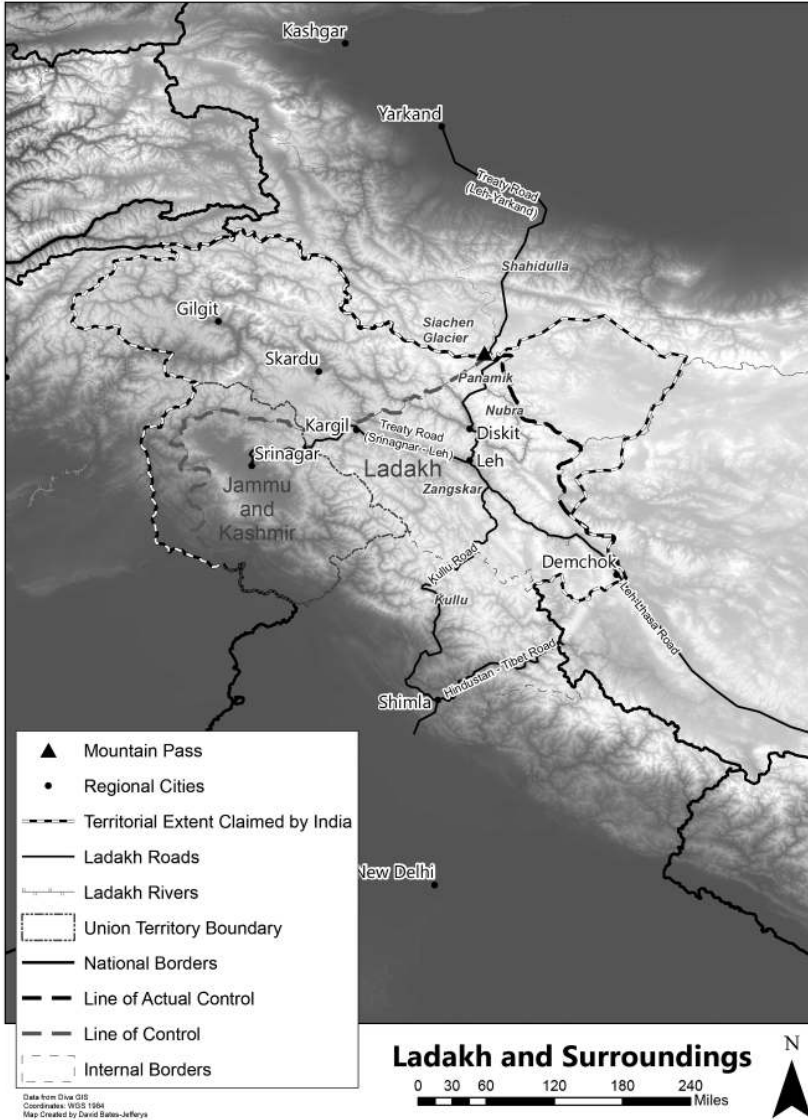
Maps

0.1 Ladakh and its surroundings	<i>page</i> xii
0.2 “India: Projects in Hand” (1947)	xiv
0.3 Detail of Map 0.2, showing “boundary undefined”	xv
1.1 dGe.rgan bSod.nams Ts’e.brtaṅ’s map based on the <i>La.dwags rGyal.rabs</i>	31
1.2 Details of Map 1.1	32
2.1 “Map of the Districts of Rukchu, Lahul and Piti, Showing the Boundary between the Territories of Maharaja Gulab Sing and British India” (1848)	75
2.2 “Index Chart to the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India” (1870)	77
2.3 “Map of the Country between Leh and Ilchi Showing the Routes Taken by Mr. Johnson Civil Assist. G. T. Survey in 1865” (1867)	78
2.4 “Index to Degree Sheets of the North West Himalaya Series” (1876)	79
2.5 “North West Himalaya Series degree sheet 36–38” (1877)	80
2.6 A Google Maps image of the lower Aksai Chin	81
2.7 “Map of India (Showing Provinces and Districts)” (1936)	89
2.8 Detail of Map 2.7	90
4.1 “Six sheet map of Hindostan” (1804)	142
5.1 Detail of “Territories of the Maharaja of Jammoo and Kashmir” (1903)	183
6.1 Detail of “India Showing Provinces, States & Districts” (1947)	217
7.1 Quarter-inch maps index by the Survey of India (1958)	234

Tables

3.1	Ney Elias's compilation of the "number of men and cattle composing the inward caravans of 1882"	<i>page</i> 115
4.1	Comparison of contents of Elphinstone's and Cunningham's texts	149
4.2	Initial contents and section descriptions of provincial and district gazetteers	153
4.3	Contents of preliminary report of Ladakh Settlement (1908)	154

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 Kyle J. Gardner
 Frontmatter
[More Information](#)



Map 0.1 Ladakh and its surroundings. © David Bates-Jeffreys.

Preface

Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things.¹

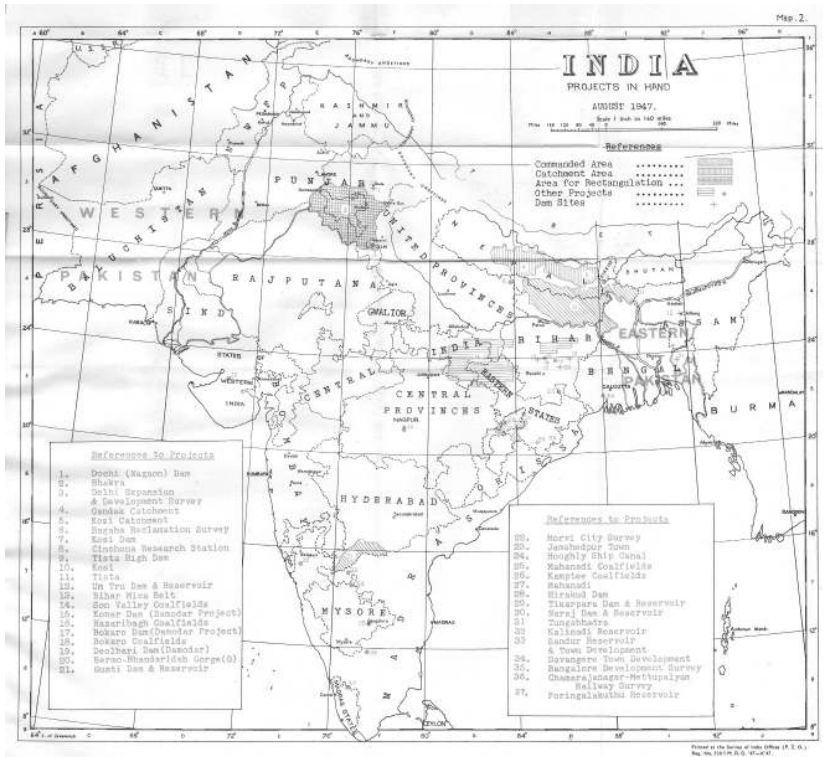
– Robert Browning, 1855

In a dark corner of the main reading room at the National Archives of India in New Delhi hangs an unusual map. Rendered in the standard colors of political maps of the late British Empire, this 1950 Survey of India production contains one peculiar feature. In a large segment of its northern extreme, there is no sign of a border. Instead, the ubiquitous pink wash signaling territorial control gradually fades into the empty white space of northwestern Tibet. In this Switzerland-sized high-altitude region, now generally referred to as the Aksai Chin, the map shows no borderline and no stark color contrast to delimit territorial control – nothing but an official acknowledgment of absence. For the colonial and early postcolonial governments of India, the northwestern Himalayan border was a “known unknown,” to evoke a hierarchy of ignorance from a more recent moment of geopolitical hubris.² Numerous maps produced by the Survey of India, from the late nineteenth century through (and shortly after) independence and Partition in 1947, include similar details (Maps 0.2 and 0.3).

Not all political maps of the newly independent state were as revealing as Map 0.2 or the 1950 Survey of India map that hangs in the National Archives of India. But whether represented on maps or not, the ambiguity of the northwestern border proved intolerable to the young nation-state in the decades after its independence. This imperial legacy of an undemarcated boundary culminated in a deadly face-off across the desolate Aksai

¹ Robert Browning, “Bishop Blougram’s Apology,” in *Browning’s Men and Women, 1855* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), 141. The “dangerous edge” Browning describes is moral ambiguity. As this book will argue, ambiguous edges are equally applicable to the history of border making.

² Though earlier instances of the phrase exist, it was made famous by US president George W. Bush’s secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld, during a Department of Defense news briefing on February 12, 2002. Rumsfeld used the term to defend evidence (later debunked) linking the Iraqi government’s alleged weapons of mass destruction to terrorist groups.

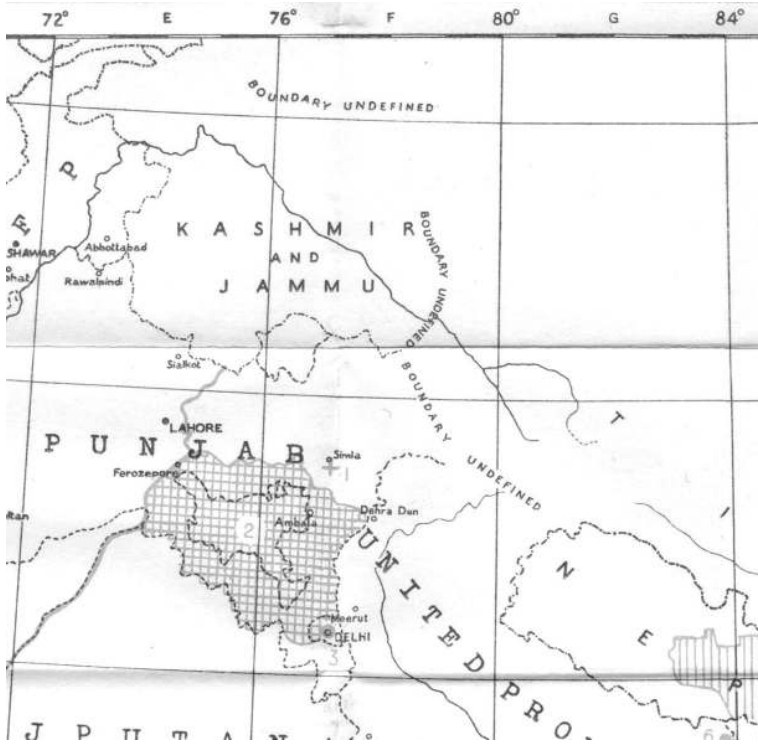


Map 0.2 “India: Projects in Hand” (August 1947). Survey of India. PAHAR/Mountains of Central Asia Digital Dataset.

Chin in 1962.³ The brief Sino-Indian War imposed the first effective borderline in the region, referred to in India as the Line of Actual Control (LAC) – though that line has yet to be demarcated by actual boundary commissions from either side.⁴ The vast territory of this virtually uninhabited region remains a bone of contention between the world’s two most populous nations. Not unexpectedly, its cartographic representation has thus become a major concern for the Indian state. In 2015, the Indian government banned Al Jazeera from television airways for five days in response to that network’s failure to label as a part of

³ The 1962 war also witnessed fighting in the northeastern Himalaya, in the region now known as the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh – but referred to by the Chinese government as Zàngnán (South Tibet).

⁴ Shaurya Karanbir Gurung, “India and China Need to Demarcate LAC,” *The Economic Times*, September 6, 2017.



Map 0.3 Detail of Map 0.2, showing “boundary undefined.”

India certain territories now occupied by Pakistan and China in the northwestern Himalaya. The government labeled this failure a “cartographic aggression.”⁵ A year later, legislation was introduced in India’s Parliament to strengthen existing laws that criminalized maps for failing to represent India’s claimed border.⁶ In responding to these “aggressions,” the government of India was also confronting a legacy of colonial border making and the inheritance of an imperial frontier.

The history of the undefined border in the Aksai Chin also reveals a more pronounced fault line: the temporal divide between empire and nation-state. The British Empire had long tolerated a degree of vagueness in its frontiers and borders. Its management of these spaces involved practices that varied according to economic interests, proximity of rival

⁵ Avaneesh Pandey, “India Bans Al Jazeera for 5 Days over ‘Incorrect’ Kashmir Map,” *International Business Times*, April 23, 2015.

⁶ Officially titled the Geospatial Information Bill of 2016, which failed to pass the Lok Sabha.

powers, and apparent threats posed by indigenous peoples. Though often cause for administrative anxiety, territorial ambiguity could be accepted. But the new Indian nation-state could not accept this ambiguity. This intolerance was in no way lessened by the fact that much of the land surrounding the western Himalayan borders in question was uninhabited: a barren, high-altitude plateau “where not even a blade of grass grows,” according to India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.⁷ For India, the border possessed existential significance, reflecting the limit of what Thongchai Winichakul has aptly called the “geo-body” of a nation.⁸

But besides this dramatic shift in how frontiers and borders were viewed by empires and nation-states, the imperial legacy of border making reveals a global shift in how states view their territory. This book contends that the twentieth-century global preoccupation with borders was not simply a by-product of decolonization and the proliferation of nation-states. Rather, this preoccupation resulted from a new way of envisioning political space, one that bound the abstract notion of sovereignty to the concrete practices of geographical science. It is the purpose of this book to show how colonial border-making practices, rooted in changing conceptions of geography, actively shaped conceptions of territory and produced postcolonial borderlands. The coeval development of border-making practices, geographical science, and imperial security reveals a new means of envisioning space: geopolitics.

⁷ Nehru made this comment in the Rajya Sabha on September 10, 1959, during a discussion of growing tensions with China. Madhavan K. Palat, ed., *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, vol. 52 (1959), Second Series (New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, 1984), 186.

⁸ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994).

Acknowledgments

This book emerged from a decades-long fascination with the Himalaya. Its genesis had no central research question or problem, no guiding hypothesis, and certainly no awareness of what archival records might exist to give it life. But it has emerged, nonetheless, thanks in no small part to mentors, colleagues, and friends who have advised, challenged, and helped me to refine my ideas along the way.

I first visited Ladakh in 2005, toward the end of the School for International Training's Tibetan Studies semester program during my junior year at Wesleyan University. I returned to spend one very long winter in Sabu village, helping the Ladakhi scholar Nawang Tsering Shakspo compile his *Cultural History of Ladakh*. The hospitality of Nawang's family made the winter much warmer. After leaving Ladakh to start graduate school at the University of Chicago, I was able to return to Ladakh with some regularity between extended archival trips to Jammu and Shimla and, of course, lots of time in Delhi. Nawang and his family have made Sabu feel like a second home, and I am deeply grateful to them all: *Ama-le* (Yangchan Dolma), *Meme* Phuntsok, Rinchen, Dhondup, Stanzin, Kuney, and, of course, Chondrol. Sonam Wangchuk Shakspo, Rinchen, and Norbu have been wonderful hosts in Delhi, and thanks are also owed to Sonam for giving me access to Bakula Rinpoche's unpublished autobiography.

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My family might not have instilled in me the practical skills to push me toward a profitable career, but they always indulged my intellectual curiosity. This book takes that indulgence to its logical extreme. Thanks to Mom, Diane, and Ed for their love and support over the years. My father, the one family member who would have actually enjoyed reading this book, did not live to see me go to graduate school. But I can still probably thank or blame him more than anyone else for my academic pursuits.

Most of all, I owe thanks to Amanda. I have graduate school to thank for our happy chance meeting during math camp. I didn’t sharpen my math skills, but I did find a partner with whom to explore the world.

¹ Kyle Gardner, “Moving Watersheds, Borderless Maps, and Imperial Geography in India’s Northwestern Himalaya,” *The Historical Journal* 62, no. 1 (2019): 149–70.

² Kyle Gardner, “The Ready Materials for Another World: Frontier, Security, and the Hindustan–Tibet Road in the Nineteenth Century Northwestern Himalaya,” *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies* 33, nos. 1–2 (2013): 71–84.

³ Kyle Gardner, “Elphinstone, Geography, and the Specter of Afghanistan in the Himalaya,” in *Mountstuart Elphinstone in South Asia: Pioneer of British Colonial Rule*, ed. Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, 205–21 (London: Hurst, 2019).

A Note on the Text

Tibetan Script

At least on paper, standard Tibetan and Ladakhi are the same language. As spoken languages, however, they are not mutually intelligible. Spoken Ladakhi pronounces many of the prefixes, suffixes, and superscripts that fall silent in most modern Tibetan dialects. Debates in Ladakh have simmered for decades over whether to reflect these differences by employing a simplified script better suited to colloquial Ladakhi pronunciation. Fortunately, I do not need to wade into this fraught territory for the purposes of transliteration.

For Tibetan and Ladakhi, I have generally followed the American Library Association–Library of Congress (ALA-LC) romanization of Tibetan letters derived from the Wylie transliteration system. To reflect the Tibetan/Ladakhi use of a mark (*tsheg*) to separate syllables (regardless of whether it falls within or between words), I have inserted periods to mark multisyllabic terms (i.e., *rgyal.po* [king] rather than the Wylie version, *rgyal po*). For readers unaccustomed to Tibetan, I hope this will render these terms slightly more readable.¹ For proper nouns without common romanized versions, I have capitalized the first pronounced letter. I have used common spelling conventions for those words commonly known in English (yak, as opposed to *g.yag*, or Lhasa, as opposed to Lha.sa). Finally, I have used the modern English spellings for commonly known place-names, for instance, Ladakh instead of its Ladakhi and Tibetan transliteration (La.dwags), its common Urdu transliteration (Ladākḥ or Laddākḥ), or the many colonial-era English renderings (Ladak, Latac, Ladag, Ladec, and so on).

¹ The complicating exception to this practice will be to follow Wiley in using a period to distinguish between a small number of subscribed letters and prefixes. For instance, I transliterate “yak” as *g.yag*, to distinguish the prefix *g* from the conjoined letter formed with *g* and *y*.

Arabic and Devanagari Scripts

Transliteration is more straightforward for Urdu, Persian, and Hindi. I have generally followed ALA-LC rules, except for commonly romanized words. For instance, I have simplified transliterations of the nasalization mark in Devanagari (known as Anusvāra), utilizing “u” (the ALA-LC’s transliteration of Urdu’s nūn gunnā) instead of the six variations preferred by the ALA-LC for Hindi romanization.