

Book Review

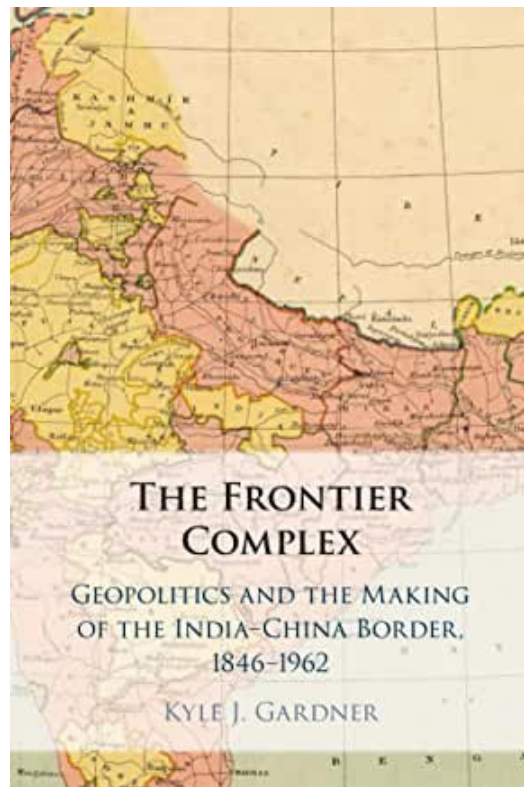
## Review of *The Frontier Complex: Geopolitics and the Making of the India-China Border, 1846-1962* by Kyle J. Gardner

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 280 pages. ISBN 9781108840590

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2218/himalaya.2022.7226>

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### Recommended Citation

Kaplanian, P. (2022). Review of *The Frontier Complex: Geopolitics and the Making of the India-China Border, 1846-1962* by Kyle J. Gardner. *HIMALAYA* 41(1): 149-151.



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The starting point for this excellent book on boundary-making practices is a large map of independent India produced by the Survey of India just after partition in 1947, which bears the words ‘boundary undefined’ on a line running from the eastern tip of the Wakhan Corridor to the Nepali border. *How could a country of such size, long colonized by a power that had access to the latest technologies, end up with an entire sector of its border undefined?* This is the question Gardner tries to answer.

The author begins by recalling the concepts a country and a nation-state. While a country consists of a number of important geographical points, the modern nation-states is conceived by a closed line marking a territory. Thus, a single border point was defined between Ladakh and Tibet (defined in the 1684 Treaty of Tingmosgang between the former kingdom of Ladakh and Tibet, and reconfirmed in the 1842 Treaty of Chushul between Tibet and the Dogra Rajas of Jammu and Ladakh). When the British created the state of Jammu and Kashmir in 1846 and aggrandized the Dogra Raja to Maharaja, they also asked the Chinese emperor of the Qing dynasty to send a team in order to delineate the border between Ladakh and Tibet, but they were met with refusal and misunderstanding. For the Chinese, the single point defined by the treaties of 1684 and 1842 was sufficient (p. 73).

The British, however, wanted a clearly defined border. Attempting to draw it, they relied on new theories of Alexander von Humboldt, who specified that the ideal border is marked by the limits of a watershed—a drainage basin forming a coherent unit that should not be divided. Accordingly, for the British, the Indus River drainage basin should belong entirely to Jammu and Kashmir.

A first British Boundary Commission was sent to Ladakh in 1846. Very quickly it became disenchanting. With regard to the border between the new state of Jammu and Kashmir and the territories, colonies or protectorates of his most gracious majesty, a member of the commission noted:

A line of high snowy peaks may doubtless be traced in a direction nearly parallel to the plains of India, but these are separated

from one another by deep ravines along which flow large and rapid rivers, and *therefore afford no tangible line of demarcation between the two countries* (p. 74).

The Boundary Commission was far from a clear watershed, and despite real progress in mapping, the problem of drawing a tangible line of demarcation between the two countries persisted until 1962.

In 1865, Johnson, the future District Administrator (*wazir-i-wazarat*) of Ladakh on behalf of the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir, made a reconnaissance trip to the Aksai Chin plateau and drew a map that was authoritative until the end of the nineteenth century and formed much of the basis for India’s claim to this plateau. But it was impossible to apply the watershed rule to this stony, arid, and desert plateau. This is why some later maps did not hesitate to add a mountain range to the north to maps depicting the Aksai Chin plateau.

Attempts for delineating the border were made with greater accuracy in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, but surveyors still clung to the water-parting principle. In 1907, Lord Curzon remarked that “the water divide is not identical with the higher crest” (p. 85).

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- Patrick Kaplanian on *The Frontier Complex*

After discussing the various attempts to survey and define the border, the author speaks about the significance of roads in controlling border regions. Two roads are important, the Hindustan-Tibet Road, which connects Kinnaur to Tibet via the Shipki Pass, and the Indo-Yarkand Treaty Road, which leads from Srinagar to Kargil, Leh, the Karakoram Pass, and Yarkand. The former was the work of the British and required considerable work. From 1850 to 1855 alone, one million workers were employed. The latter, which connects the plains of India to Sinkiang via Kashmir and Ladakh, depended primarily on the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir. But in 1870, the Maharaja agreed to the installation of a British Joint Commissioner in Leh to monitor traffic and improve the road. This interest in

roads suggests that Britain, at least for some time, was more interested in controlling crossing points than in delineating a linear border.

Gardner also discusses gazetteers, the official handbooks that senior colonial officials compiled and used as guides for defining the territory they oversaw. Gazetteer usually began with a geographical description in which each district, province, and protectorate was seen with fixed borderlines. Afghanistan, described by Elphinstone, and Ladakh, described by Cunningham, served as models for other gazetteers.

The author then recounts the murder of the Scottish merchant Dalglish in 1888 on the Karakoram Pass. Because of the vastness of the pass, the main question was who had jurisdiction over the geographical site of the murder scene. Once again, the conundrum of the exact border line appeared. This isolated murder case illustrated a much larger problem—that of the difficulty in controlling the many people crossing this border: traders, pilgrims, migrants, criminals, and even spies.

In 1899, Swedish political scientist Kjellén coined the term geopolitics. From then on, “geographical information fused with political and military policy” and “[t]erritory and the state were now co-terminus entities, and the border the *sine qua non* of the state’s existence” (p. 222). Once again, Gardner speaks of the return to identifying the water-parting principle while avoiding the task of dealing with a vast no-man’s land. To define a border, after all, both parties must be present, but once again the Chinese did not show up. Finally, the new McMahon line was no more conclusive than previous lines.

In 1957, India was confronted with the fact that China had built a road through the Aksai Chin, but it was not until the Sino-Indian war of 1962 that a border was finally demarcated. The author writes: “While historians have fruitfully explored the technological and political roles that surveying and mapping played in crafting colonial borders, few have examined the crucial geographical concepts resting beneath these border making practices” (p. 61). Well, here is a gap that is now well filled.

Kyle Gardner’s work is not only of interest to scholars of Ladakh and the Himalayas. Through a careful analysis of imperial politics and practices, it also informs us about the transformation of geographical thought in the 19th and 20th centuries. It therefore is an excellent contribution to the history of geography as a discipline.

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