



L. H. M. Ling, Adriana Erthal Abdenur, Payal Banerjee, Nimmi Kurian, Mahendra P. Lama, Li Bo. *India China: Rethinking Borders and Security*. Configurations: Critical Studies of World Politics Series. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016. 192 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-472-13006-1.

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Fifty-five years after China and India fought a war over an ill-defined “colonial” border in 1962, war clouds have gathered again during this monsoon season on the contested Himalayan ridges and valleys between contemporary Asia’s two demographic and economic giants. In 2017 the competing nationalisms in Beijing and New Delhi are focused on Doklam where the borders of Bhutan, China, and Sikkim meet. There is talk of war in both countries and there is more talk of once and for all settling the border dispute between India and China, both highly militarized nuclear power states, by armed force. It seems all moderation has drowned in the cacophony of jingoism because the media on both sides ceaselessly fans the fire of ultra-nationalism.

Serious students of history know that the past is replete with instances of border disputes, fired by nationalism, escalating into major or even world wars. Above all, was it not Germany’s desire to achieve its expansion up to its “natural” borders and beyond that was one of the main causes of the Second World War? No one can dispute this. This is notwithstanding the fact that in 1939 Germany was a relatively new nation, united and created in 1870, compared with the older nations of Europe like France and Britain. The case of Germany and Italy suggests that the newer the

nation the greater the grip of the Westphalian model, repudiated by the volume under review, on the historical imagination of its people.

The voice of moderation and humanism continues to be raised in some sections of the Indian media. In this context, the ideas page of the July 29, 2017, issue of *Indian Express* makes for interesting reading. It contains two analytical pieces on the India-China border related to the current Doklam crisis. One article by Praveen Swami, well-known defense expert, calls for “creative dialogue” between Beijing and New Delhi because the “price of a single misstep can be mass death.” It is not difficult to see why and how a nuclear war between India and China will destroy much of Asia and possibly usher in the end of humanity. Swami warns against a war almost made possible by “India’s melodrama addicted television anchors.”[1]

The other article in *Indian Express*, by Tenzing Lamsang, draws our attention to the economic and political relations between Bhutan and India. Lamsang underlines the dialogical nature of a border. So far, Bhutan has no diplomatic ties with China and has stoutly resisted all Chinese attempts to resolve its border disputes with Thimbu. Bhutan has also stayed away from the One Belt One Road (OBOR) economic initiative taken

by China. According to Lamsang, Bhutan does all this and more in accordance with a philosophy called *Driglam Namza*, in other words, the “ability to stoop and conquer” and remain neutral between two ambitious powerful nation-states. But things can change if India does not keep the economic interests of Bhutan in mind while dealing with Thimbu in the future. In that event, Bhutan “would have to really explore a host of economic opportunities to sustain its economy in the long run.”[2] Unfortunately India’s record of treating its mountain neighbors with the respect they deserve as strategic allies against China is not something to write much about.

In short, the mountain borders remain problematic and the geographical, social, and economic realities of the borderlands continue to pose a “threat” to their construction in the national imaginations practically everywhere. In this context, the volume reviewed here comprises a timely warning against the fetish of national borders imposed on people worldwide since the birth of the modern state system in Westphalia in 1648. It is an admirable attempt to take the thinking on borders and security out of the Eurocentric Westphalian paradigm, which conditions the modern “national” mind. As Payal Banerjee and Li Bo point out in their essay, “Dialogue across Borders,” this volume is an epistemic break “from the statist border-centrism of [the] Westphalia World” (p. 80). According to the authors of this book, the frontier between India and China is a dialogical social, economic, and cultural terrain.

This book was written by a group of academics who believe that a world without borders is not only possible but also preferable to the one that is based on the Eurocentric Westphalian straightjacket of the modern nation-state. In general, the reader is informed, the modern national border across the world is a construct of the elites who dominate the countries in their own interest. In contrast, a close look at the history of civilizational borderlands reveals several axes along

which civilizations interact to mutual benefit: trade, medicine, development, environment, languages, and culture. It seems the closer we move to the borders the less rigid the notion of the “self” and “other” becomes. This volume offers one such look at the politically problematic India-China border and highlights the fact that the high altitude Himalayan border is both porous and live. The essence of the Westphalian nation-state centered worldview is to be found in the binary of the imagined national “self” and “other,” which first developed in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Popular thinking woven around this binary was imposed on the non-European world by Western imperialism and colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In sum, the hegemonic discourse of the nation-state is clearly a derived discourse in the postcolonial world of the nation-states that came into existence after World War II. The border lands initiative, involving academics and nongovernmental organizations interested in open and dialectical borders, to which the writers of this volume have contributed a great deal of work helps us see borders as fluid, social, and cultural rather than merely geopolitical.

This book is recommended to the specialist and lay public alike in the era of rising masculine, muscular nationalism in both China and India. It must specially be read by the saber rattling “strategic” and “defense” experts in China and India who dominate the mainstream media and are bent upon influencing state policy in the wrong direction. If the advice offered by this volume is taken seriously by the policymakers in New Delhi and Beijing the border between China and India might become a zone of regional and cultural exchange between the communities on both sides of the border, now divided by an arbitrary and artificial national frontier. The volume underscores the point that there are numerous ways in which the India-China border can be perceived and understood. Political and military conflict is only one and the most unproductive of these ways. By

keeping an open border, the Chinese and Indians can learn much more about what is common between them and avoid the mistakes of the past. The alternative to this will be a repeat of the numerous conflicts inflicted on the modern world by its erroneous belief in the Westphalian nation-state model.

Notes

[1]. Praveen Swami, “Doklam Is Not about a Road,” *Indian Express* (July 29, 2017).

[2]. Tenzing Lamsang, “More Than the Doklam Issue, Bhutan Worried about Hydropower Deficits,” *Indian Express* (July 29, 2017).

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