

THE BORDERS OF ASIA: THE LIMITATIONS OF THE WESTPHALIAN MODEL

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Abstract

European expansion throughout the world brought with it the spread of its model of the sovereign state, born in the Peace of Westphalia (1648), through which the international community relates to each other. In Asia, however, this model has shown less capacity for adaptation since it was applied to a continent that had its own system of relations, the so-called "tributary system." This, combined with the lack of legitimacy of some borders drawn by imperialism and the rise of the great Asian powers, has turned enormous territories, sometimes recognized as sovereign (for example, the two Koreas or Sri Lanka), into mere frontiers or transition areas between neighboring great powers. This article explains the causes of this situation and the particular circumstances of those territories that have become "Asia's frontiers".

Keywords

China; Japan; India; Asia; Westphalian System; Tributary System; Asian Frontiers; International Relations.

Resumen

La expansión europea por todo el mundo llevó aparejada la difusión de su modelo de estado soberano, nacido en la Paz de Westfalia (1648), a través del cual se relaciona entre sí la comunidad internacional. Sin embargo, ese modelo ha mostrado en Asia una menor capacidad de adaptación al aplicarse sobre un continente que poseía sistema de relaciones propio el llamado "sistema tributario". Ello, combinado con la falta de legitimidad de algunas fronteras dibujadas por el imperialismo y con el auge de las grandes potencias asiáticas ha convertido a enormes territorios, en ocasiones reconocidos como soberanos (por ejemplo, las dos Coreas o Sri Lanka) en meras fronteras o áreas de transición entre las grandes potencias colindantes. Este artículo expone las causas de dicha situación y las circunstancias particulares de aquellos territorios convertidos en "fronteras de Asia".

Palabras clave

China; Japón; India; Asia; Sistema Westfaliano; Sistema Tributario; Fronteras de Asia; Relaciones Internacionales.



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1. Introduction

Borders are a line on the map, however, this categorical and basic statement became debatable while I was researching the writing of the manuscript of the book *History of Contemporary and Contemporary Asia* (Universitas, 2017). The objective of that book was very clear. The aim was to study the history, culture and current affairs of Asia through the great Asian powers, China, Japan, India and, as a set comparable to the above, the countries of Southeast Asia. But, we soon saw that there were countries that were left out of that general framework. For example, where to frame Pakistan? and Nepal?, etc...

At that time, this idea emerged: "the borders of Asia". Gigantic regions and even sovereign states that appeared before us as huge empty spaces, in the shadow of history, and in dispute. When we asked ourselves about the essence of these countries, the intuitive concept arose that the Asian borders were not really a line on the map, but that we could consider enormous extensions of territory as such: Transition zones between the Asian State-Civilizations or between them and the West. How was it possible that even sovereign states appeared to us as mere areas of transition? How in Asia, supposedly, the continent of promise, of the future of Humanity? How in the twenty-first century, the era of globalization?

Reflecting on this idea, we turn to the readings and theories that will explain the configuration of this twenty-first century. The works Robert D. Kaplan, who highlights the prominence of geography to understand contemporary reality; John Mearsheimer, the prophet of "realism" in international relations; Henry Kissinger, the best dissector of the "World Order" and the functioning of the "Westphalian" nation-states; Samuel P. Huntington, the visionary who announced how "culture", and not economics or ideology, would be the engine of future history and Francis Fukuyama, the disciple of the former, who dazzled the Western elites in the "happy nineties" by announcing the global liberal-democratic paradise and who has evolved towards positions in which he highlights how "identity" has become the structural axis of politics in the 21st century.

On the other hand, to understand this particular circumstance of Asian geography we should also try to remember the laws of history, remembering as the Annales school pointed out that history moves in cycles of different durations, but also as Professor Zhu



Zhenghui, from East China Normal University, pointed out, that history does not repeat itself, it is not circular, but "it moves in a spiral", because "all generations know what happened in the past, and avoid, as far as possible, repeating the same mistakes" (Ramírez Ruiz, 2016, pp. 141-168).

2. General theoretical framework for understanding "the frontiers of Asia"

Let us begin, then, with the laws of history. Braudel (Braudel, 1976), within the Annales school, founded in 1929 (Trevor-Roper, 1972, pp. 468-479) made a definitive contribution to the way in which he perceives history with the concept of varied temporal lengths. First, he defined the periods of "*longue durée*," a slow, barely perceptible geographical time of "enabling and constraining environments." Second, the "*conjonctures*" or "intermediate cycles", a faster wavelength i.e. systemic changes in demographic statistics, the economy, agriculture, society and politics. These are impersonal collective forces that are often limited to no more than a century. And thirdly, "*l'histoire événementielle*", the shortest cycle, the daily vicissitudes of politics and society.

These spaces that we are going to define with "borders of Asia" are the result of cycles of "*longue durée*" that make up the basic structures, largely hidden, in which human life develops and explain permanence as mere spaces of transition and friction of enormous territories in Asia. Not even the "*conjoctures*" of about a century in duration are useful to us. What was the Soviet Union if not a "juncture" in the history of Russia?

The second factor that we have to take into account is the geography itself. Robert D. Kaplan (Kaplan, 2017) states that geography is the backdrop of human history and a map is only the spatial representation of human divisions (Kaplan, 2017, p. 59). Despite cartographic distortions, geography reveals both the realities and the long-term evolutions of a nation, government, or state (Mackinder, 1942, p. 90). That is why Kaplan speaks of the revenge of geography (Cohen, 1980, pp. 79-83). In the "happy nineties of the twentieth century" with the worldwide expansion of the process of globalization, the most accurate definition of which is described as "*the growing interdependence of all the countries of the world, caused by the increase in the volume and variety of transactions in goods and services of international capital flows, and the generalized and accelerated dimension of technologies, economic, political, technological, social, and cultural exchanges*" (Fukuyama, 2019, p. 112). They made people believe that distances were disappearing and that geography, together with all the ethnic, religious and economic conditions that it implied, had ceased to be a determining factor. It was at that moment that Francis Fukuyama's optimistic theory of the "end of history" (Fukuyama, 2019) appeared. In it, he argued that the global expansion of participatory democracies with division of powers, free market and human rights as the universal moral basis, signaled the end point of the sociocultural evolution and political struggles of humanity.

However, as the twenty-first century progressed, nationalist, sectarian and ethnic conflicts erupted everywhere. As Kaplan says, "in this way we were sent back to the demoralizing basic principles of human existence, of nations and states, according to which, instead of the constant improvement of the world that we had imagined, we



returned to the struggle for survival was restricted by geography (Kaplan, 2017, p. 60). Fukuyama, as history showed that his theory had failed, justified this failure with three basic reasons. First, that it was not understood: the term "End" had a Hegelian-Marxist sense, which meant that it was "completion" but "goal" or "objective". That is, development or modernization. In addition, secondly, two unforeseeable problems appeared. On the one hand, the difficulty of developing a modern and impersonal State. And on the other, the possibility that a modern liberal democracy would decline or regress. No one wanted to see that he insisted that neither nationalism nor religion were about to disappear as forces in world politics (Fukuyama, 2019, pp. 14-15).

What Fukuyama fails to acknowledge in his *"excusatio non petita"* is that as his theory decayed, he reinforced his former teacher's theory of the "Clash of Civilizations." Samuel Phillips Huntington became one of the most controversial intellectual figures of the early 21st century when he launched his theory that what globalization was really bringing was not the end of borders but the beginning of a confrontation between the Western system, with the Islamic and Asian ways of thinking and government. His hypothesis is based on the fact that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or economic, but cultural. Nation states will continue to be the most powerful actors on the international stage, but the major conflicts of global politics will occur between nations (or groups of nations) of different civilizations. The conflict between civilizations will be the next phase in the evolution of conflict in the modern world" (Kaplan, 2019, p. 235).

This dynamic has led to a reinforcement of the "realist" vision in international relations, to the point that John Mearsheimer's *"The tragedy of the Great Power Politics"* (Mearsheimer, 2001) is considered one of the three great works of the post-Cold War period, along with Fukuyama's "End of History and the Last Man" (1992) and Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations and the Reconfiguration of the World Order" (1996) (Betts, 1996). 2010, pp. 186-194).

"Realism" is based on the recognition of the most absolute, uncomfortable, and deterministic realities of all: those of geography (Mackinder, 1942, pp. 15-16). That is why it is consciously immoral because it focuses more on interests than on values in a world, it reflects the correct way in which states really behave behind the façade of their rhetoric of values. This school of thought denies the possibility of perpetual peace, since the state of anarchy in the international system guarantees insecurity regardless of the individual mode of action of each State. Mearsheimer ascribes himself to what we might call "offensive realism" because he denies the existence of the so-called "powers of the status quo": all the great powers permanently take the offensive, although they may take obstacles that prevent them from expanding their territory or their influence. Therefore, and it is important to understand the balance of powers that the "borders of Asia" signify and the role of the current great hegemonic power, the United States, the "central objective of American foreign policy only, and to prevent the rise of a similar power in the Eastern Hemisphere" (Kaplan, 2017, pp. 241-253).



3. Asia: The conception of its states, borders and sovereignties

Let's stop for a moment and review what has been said so far. In the previous pages we have explained how in Asia there are a series of extensive territories (sovereign or not) that function as "borders" or transitional spaces between the great civilizational states that are located there. We have pointed out that this responds to long-term historical dynamics and how globalization, far from blurring particularisms, is reinforcing them. Finally, we have affirmed, like Huntington, that the sovereign nation-state remains the main historical subject. Therefore, now, in order to continue to outline this concept of "the borders of Asia" we must stop, for a moment, on another important point. The application of the concept of nation-state and international order in Asia.

Henry Kissinger affirms that the Peace of Westphalia outlined what a modern sovereign state is and the way in which they relate to each other. This agreement was based on a system of independent countries refraining from interfering in each other's internal affairs and controlling each other's ambitions through an overall balance of power. Each state was assigned the attribute of sovereign power over its territory. Division and multiplicity became the hallmark of a new system of international order (Kissinger, 2021, p. 15).

But at the other end of the Eurasian landmass, China was the center of its own concept of order, hierarchical and theoretically universal. This system had been applied for millennia and was based, not on the sovereign equality of states, but on the unlimited power of the emperor. In this concept there was no sovereignty in the European sense because the emperor exercised his dominion over *Tianxia* "all under heaven". It was the summit of a definite and universal political and cultural hierarchy, radiating from the center of the world over the rest of humanity. It was classified for the rest of humanity into varying degrees of barbarism based on knowledge of Chinese writing and institutions. From this perspective, China had to lead the entire world until it achieved the desired goal of "harmony under heaven" (Ramírez Ruiz & Pinto Salvatierra, 2024, pp. 219-242).

With the preponderance of the West, the Westphalian system has been consolidated and imposed on the whole world to the point of being what we now colloquially call "the world community". The system of States now encompasses all cultures and regions. Its institutions have provided a neutral framework for the interactions of diverse societies, regardless of their respective values.

In Asia, the sovereign state model has been fully adopted: historical, and often historically antagonistic, peoples are organizing themselves as sovereign states and organizing their states as regional groups. Sovereignty, obtained in many cases not long ago from colonial rule, here acquires an absolute character. The goal of state policy is not to transcend the national interest but to pursue it energetically and with conviction.

But, even so, the weight of the own, previous models persists, giving a special configuration, not perceptible at first glance to the existing international order in Asia. Hierarchy, not sovereign equality, was historically the organizing principle of Asia's international systems. This is the key point to understand this concept of the "borders of Asia". Power was demonstrated in the deference shown to a ruler and to the structures of authority that, once their supremacy was recognized, not in the drawing of specific borders on a map (Kissinger, 2021, pp. 180-181).



Empires projected their power, requesting the alignment of smaller political units. For peoples existing at the crossroads of two or more imperial orders, the path to independence often consisted of nominally declaring themselves subordinate to more than one foreign sovereign (Ibid., pp. 225-237).

Whether the historical diplomatic systems of Asia were based on the Chinese or Hindu model, the monarchy was an expression of divinity with a kind of paternal authority; it was believed that the superior countries should receive tangible tokens of tribute from their inferiors (Pye, 1985, p. 184). In practice, this formal submission was applied with remarkable fluidity and creativity.

Against this backdrop of subtle and diverse legacies, the network of Westphalian sovereign states on the map of Asia offers an oversimplified picture of regional realities.

4. What is Asia?

Before moving forward, we must once again ask ourselves a question that hovers over the whole approach to the "borders of Asia", and this is none other than: What is Asia?, what are we talking about when we talk about Asia? According to the classic definition, Asia is the largest and most populous continent on the planet, with approximately 44 million square kilometers (30% of the emerged territory) and with its 4,000 million inhabitants, 60% of the human population. It is bordered to the north by the Arctic Ocean and to the south by the Indian Ocean; the Urals to the west and the Pacific Ocean to the east.

But this definition leads us to remember Otto von Bismarck and say that Asia is only "a geographical expression". Well, one of the most basic characteristics of Asia is its multiplicity. The term Asia attributes a misleading coherence to a very diverse region. Until the arrival of the modern Western powers, no Asian language had a word to define "Asia"; none of the peoples that today constitute the almost 50 sovereign Asian states conceived of themselves as inhabiting a single "continent" or region that presupposed solidarity with all the others (Bowring, 1987, p. 1-4).

Asia is an immense continent where it is difficult to delimit spaces, cultures and civilizations. This geography has defined different geo-historical, cultural and regional groupings, modified and differentiated, even more, by their respective colonial legacies. In such a way that Asia is configured in five geo-historical areas:

East Asia -or Far East-, made up of China, Mongolia, the two Koreas, and Japan. South Asia, made up of India and its borders. South-East Asia, which comprises diverse peoples and countries with very different ethnic, cultural and colonial heritages. Central Asia, which is part of the Russian-Soviet world. Southwest Asia, made up of the Arab and non-Arab Islamic countries of the Near and Middle East (Ramírez Ruiz et al., 2017, pp. 16-17).

The mere enumeration and description of these five geographical, cultural, and historical blocks reinforces our previous statement "Asia is just a geographical concept." In view of the above, we could say that there is a Geographical Definition of Asia that covers the continent described on the maps, from the Urals to the Pacific, from the Arctic to the Indian Ocean and Indonesia. A Cultural Definition that would subtract from that definition



the European nations of Asia, that is, basically Russia, Armenia and Georgia. And, finally, an Essential Definition that would reduce Asia to the areas, civilizations and nations born and developed on the margins of the Mediterranean world. That is, the areas of diffusion of Confucian-Buddhist and Hindustani culture would be included as "cultural Asia". We should exclude the Arab, Persian and Turkish world, which has been called the ex-Soviet Middle East and Central Asia, as its culture, fundamentally Muslim, is strongly linked to Mediterranean culture and tradition (Ramírez Ruiz et al., 2023, pp. 23-24).

Because, in essence, when we refer to Asia, almost unconsciously, we are talking about the civilizations and peoples that were born and developed disconnected from Western civilization, that is, from that born in the Mediterranean. There is a short strand of thread that connects the Mediterranean to the Indian world, but nothing like it to Confucian civilization. Therefore, we consider Asia in the regions of East Asia or the Far East, South Asia and Southeast Asia: China, Japan, Korea, India, Viet Nam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and the Philippines; as well as states that are located on "its borders" such as Mongolia, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan and, even Pakistan.

Therefore, in this article we are going to present which are those territories and states that we define as borders between the great civilizational nations of East and South Asia: China, Japan, India and Southeast Asia. As well as between this Asian world and the West. There are four "border lines" that we are going to present: The Borders of China and India; The Borders with India (and China); The borders of China and Japan; China's borders with Southeast Asia (and the West) and The borders of China and Russia.

5. The borders of Asia

5.1. The borders of China and India

Of all the conceptions of world order in Asia, China has produced the most enduring, the most clearly defined, and the furthest of Western ideas. The idea of China's central position in the world order is still so entrenched today that China is looking for ways to redefine "Everything Under Heaven" (Mancall, 1968, p. 63). From their perspective, the world order reflects a hierarchy, not a balance between sovereign and equal states (Palacios & Ramírez-Ruiz, 2011, pp. 26-31).

The drama of China's encounter with the developed West was the impact of the great powers, organized as expansionist states, on a civilization that initially saw the signs of the modern state as a humiliation. The "rise of China" to twenty-first-century supremacy reestablishes historical patterns (Kissinger, 2021, p. 225). But China's participation in aspects of the Westphalian international structure is experienced by China as a contradiction since it has not forgotten that it was forced to accept this model that is absolutely contrary to its tradition. Therefore, he hopes that sooner or later the system will evolve and this will allow him to review the rules to play the central role he believes corresponds to him (Ramírez Ruiz & Pinto Salvatierra, 2023, pp. 237-238). China does not consciously seek to build an empire, but as it strengthens it generates needs that lead it to expand. For the time being, it has established beneficial relations with its



neighbors and has an ultra-realistic foreign policy (Wu & Lansdowne, 2008, p. 267) that tends to Finlandize East Asia (Ross, 2010).

The borders of China and India are, quite possibly, one of the "hottest" spots on the planet. These two nations have been separated for millennia by the immense natural border that is the Himalayas, but time and technology have made them neighbors and rivals (Myint-U, 2011, pp. 77-78).

In theory, the border between the two powers is the McMahon Line. That is, on the border route agreed between the Raj of India and the puppet state of Tibet (1912-1950), which China has never recognised and which India assumes. But this is not the real border. This is the "line on the map", along the Himalayan ridges, around which Chinese and Indian soldiers periodically confront each other, unarmed, to prevent the incident from spilling over (Ramírez Ruiz et al., 2017, pp. 123-127).

The border but India is four large regions on both sides of the Himalayas that create, perhaps, the most unstable continental area in the world: the conflict regions: Tibet, Xinjiang, Kashmir and the Indian Northeast. And the small Himalayan buffer states: Nepal and Bhutan.

5.2. Conflict regions

Tibet

The conflict in Tibet is based on a problem of transmitting Western concepts to a space where they had not existed, nor until the twentieth century, had they been necessary: sovereignty.

Tibet was first assimilated into Chinese power during the Yuan Dynasty in the 13th century. Since then, with lapses, the power installed in Beijing has intuited that Tibet was part of its "*Tianxia*" administration. After a power vacuum, again in the 18th century the Qing sent a commissioner to Lhasa to take over the government. Not without local resistance, Chinese sovereignty was effective until the decline of the dynasty. China's central power was dramatically weakened by the defeat, the Sino-Japanese Wars, and the Boxer Rebellion. Taking advantage of the power vacuum, in 1904, the British occupied Lhasa and in 1906, they turned Tibet into a British protectorate. In 1912 they immediately recognized their independence, which was maintained until 1950. In 1950 the PLA "liberated" Tibet. India did not intervene. In 1951, the Plan for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet was drafted, a kind of autonomy accepted by the Dalai Lama (Ramírez Ruiz, 2018, pp. 187-188). In June 1956, Tibet revolted. China suppressed the rebellion in 1959 and the Dalai Lama had to flee to India.

In 1965 China dispossessed the lamas of land ownership and introduced compulsory secular education. It was only the first step in the drama that was the Cultural Revolution. Over the years, rebellions continue to be periodic, and China is unable to assimilate the region through demographic overflow, which is its traditional method, due to the inability of the *Han population* to adapt to the heights. Even so, China's dominance over the territory is unquestionable. India gives refuge to dissidents, and maintains tension, but lacks the capacity to go further.



Xinjiang

The Xinjiang Autonomous Region is the People's Republic of China's other border and problematic region with India. Like Tibet, the effective dominance of Chinese power over it throughout history has been intermittent and scarce, but it has always been within its strategic plans. Aware of the importance of the Silk Road, the Chinese have always intended to advance on their oases that gave access to Central Asia, since the Han Dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD).

The traditional name of the region, East Turkestan, is due to the fact that the majority people in the area are the Uyghurs, a people with Turkic roots, related to Uzbeks and Kazakhs with whom they share Sunni Islam. Therefore, we could have considered this region as the "border between China and Russia" because it is the natural and cultural continuity of Soviet Central Asia and Russia/USSR was the power that pressed on it during the time of the century of humiliation. However, the implosion of Russian power and the atomization of Soviet power into the dysfunctional *Central Asian "tanes"* states meant that the new determining power in this area was India. In fact, the 1962 war between China and India was caused by China's desire to control Askai Chin, a stony region that allows direct communication between Xinjiang and Tibet.

The Uyghur insurgency, almost without external support and strongly repressed, and the colonization *that has* been concentrated in modern Chinese-style cities, are building a dual society with serious dangers of falling into a de facto ethnic apartheid (Rodríguez Merino, 2016, pp. 29-54). The *Han* plus Chinese Hui Muslims have already caught up with the Uyghur natives in percentage. The tension will continue and this unites the destinies of Tibet and Xinjiang with those of the next conflictive region, Kashmir, as scenarios of the latent conflict between China and India (Ruiz Arévalo, 2024, pp. 1068-1082).

Cachemira

On the other side of the Himalayas is Kashmir. Indian Kashmir is integrated into the federal state of *Jammu and Kashmir*. A region of 222,236 km² and eleven million inhabitants, around 80% of Iranian ethnicity and Muslims.

Kashmir was an integral part of original Pakistan. In fact, the "k" in the acronym with which the country's name was formed corresponds to the initial letter of its name. However, the high strategic value, on the control of the rivers and against China, pushed Nehru to annex his homeland to the Union of India. The successive wars and the sustained tension between India and Pakistan have Kashmir as one of their root causes. Historical Kashmir, after the 1947 war, is divided between Pakistan and India by the "line of control" and part of the territory has been annexed by China. Both Hindustani states consider the entire territory as their own and China, from the other side of the Himalayas, supports Pakistani claims. The Muslim insurgency is constant and makes Indian rule insecure.



The Far East of India: Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura

The insurgent movements in northeastern India are secessionist in nature, caused by the ethno-religious differences of its inhabitants with the majority of the Hindustani population and by a sense of physical separation from the rest of the country. In fact, this area of the Union, which occupies 254,947 km², is only linked to the rest of India through the "*chicken neck*" corridor, a narrow passage 24 kilometers wide that separates Nepal from Bangladesh.

The insurgency in East India stems from the demand for independent states in the tribal areas of Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur and Tripura and in Assam (non-tribal area) (Kaplan, 2017, p. 318). The separatist movement first started in Nagaland in the 1950s, and from there spread to Mizoram in the 1960s, to Manipur in the 1970s, to Tripura and Assam in the 1980s. The insurgents operating in these areas have received financial aid, training and weapons from the secret services of Pakistan and Bangladesh. The separatists of Nagaland and Mizoram also received Chinese support between 1968 and 1979. The Nagas and the Mizos, mostly Christians (mainly Baptists), receive help from Western Baptist missionary organizations.

The separatists of Manipur, Tripura and Assam are mostly Hindus but consider themselves ethnically distinct from the rest of the Indians. The failure of successive governments in New Delhi and the federal states to curb large-scale illegal immigration of Muslims from Bangladesh is another reason for the existence of separatist movements that fear that the Islamic religion and the Bengali language will become the majority in their own country.

5.3. The Himalayan States: Nepal and Bhutan

Nestled in the middle of the Himalayas, lie two small states, Nepal and Bhutan, separated by the Indian state of Sikkim. Located on the border line of the two Asian giants, they are becoming pieces of diplomatic "play" and influence of both powers. Their cultures are a crossroads between Tibetan and Hindu and in them, the political influence of India has always predominated. In recent years, however, China's strategic advances are weakening that historic *status quo*.

Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal

Nepal, despite being so close to the Indo-Gangetic heart of India, always knew how to play with the Chinese counterweight so as not to be absorbed by its neighbour and periodically sent tributes to Beijing (Kissinger, 2021, pp. 217-225). The modern Nepalese nation has been configured as such since the unification of the regions under the direction and influence of the Gurkha king Prithvi Narayan, in 1768.

In 1816, through the Treaty of Sugauli, it became a dependent state of the British. After the Nepalese Gurkhas helped the English crush the Sepoy mutiny in 1857, their incorporation into the British system was accelerated, safeguarding their independence from the Raj. In 1948 it achieved independence and fell under the influence of India.



In May 1991, Nepal held its first elections and in 1996, the Maoist-inspired Communist Party of Nepal launched an armed insurrection. On June 1, 2001, Crown Prince Dipendra murdered his parents and other members of the royal family. The instability ended up causing the overthrow of the monarchy in 2008 and the constitution as a democratic Federal Republic in 2015, with a very strong weight of Chinese influence (Raj Gautam, 2022, pp. 19-22).

Bhutan

Bhutan is a small constitutional monarchy in the Himalayas (about forty thousand square kilometers and eight hundred thousand inhabitants) of Sino-Tibetan language. The origins of the country date back to the eighth century with the introduction of Buddhism by the Tibetans. In the 17th century, the Tibetan warrior Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal unified the country. It was incorporated into the Raj in British India after the "Bhutan War" (1864-1865). In 1907, Ugyen Wangchuck was unanimously elected as crown king by an assembly composed of Buddhist monks, government officials, and heads of prestigious families. Immediately, the British government recognized the new monarch, so a treaty was signed by which the United Kingdom was in charge of the country's foreign affairs (Rosillo Rodríguez, 2021, pp. 63-95).

On August 8, 1949, after independence, a similar treaty was signed but with India, by which it undertook to maintain the country's international relations. Stability is its main feature, but it is nestled next to Arunachal Pradesh which would leave it surrounded by China in the event of border changes on the MacMahon Line.

5.4. The borders of India (and China)

When British power collapsed in India, the Raj fractured at its border marks. To the west with the regions around the Indus and to the east with East Bengal Pakistan was formed. At the southern tip of the subcontinent, the island of Ceylon, never incorporated into the Raj, became the state of Sri Lanka. Meanwhile, the heart of the British Empire remained within the nascent Union of India.

British imposition transformed a civilization without defined borders into a modern state. Diversity was the great characteristic of the Hindustani world, castes, races, languages, religions, rivers and varied landscapes made it difficult to define a "we" in that world (Radhakrishnan, 1997, pp. 60-62). The decision to administer India as a single whole, the railway lines of communication and Western ideas, soon assimilated by the enlightened elites, created this common identity.

The way in which India achieved independence defined the role it was to play in the international arena. India had survived the period of colonialism by combining cultural impermeability with an extraordinary ability to handle the occupiers. The greatest example of this was as Mahatma Gandhi. For this reason, India saw its independence not only as the triumph of a nation but as that of universal moral principles. This allowed him to lead the project of the non-aligned countries and, through the Afro-Asian Conference



in Bandung (1955), to lead the nascent Third World with a message of purely Hindu roots: the *Pancha Shila* (Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence) (Mesa, 1993).

But India's role in the post-Cold War world order has been complicated by the support that emerging China gives to Pakistan and Bangladesh, while its shadow lengthens over Sri Lanka. In addition, Beijing is openly using the ports of these three countries to build the nodular part of the "string of pearls", a chain of naval installations that would ensure Chinese control of the sea routes to the Persian Gulf and, in fact, would surround India denying it dominance of the Indian Ocean. So these three sovereign states become India's true borders with China.

Pakistan

The English created India and before leaving, they broke it. The coexistence between "different" people was a daily reality. But Western ideas, and the imperialist state, encouraged these differences to have a political meaning, "communalism", the tool of *divide et impera* with which *Britannia* tried to prolong its domination (Ramírez Ruiz et al., 2017, pp. 106-107). He did not succeed, but he made it impossible for the Muslim-majority provinces to be inserted into the nascent secular Hindu-majority Union of India.

Pakistan is not a country, it is an acronym, say its enemies, because the name of the country was "invented" in 1933 by Choudhry Rahmat Ali, joining the initial of the names of the five regions of northern British India: Punjab, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Sindh and Baluchistan.

These regions are not ethno-linguistically homogeneous, but Pakistan is inhabited by four peoples, principal, different, without positive historical relations behind them. The Punjabis, the majority ethnic group, dominate the army; the Sindhis, around Karachi, business and civil politics; the Balochis, with Iranian roots, feel oppressed in this state; and, on the northeastern borders, the Pashtuns, never well integrated into the state, generate an ungovernable continuum with their ethnic brothers in Afghanistan. On this puzzle were settled the *Mohair*, some eight million Urdu-speaking emigrants from the continent, who in their elite, occupied the leadership positions of the new state (Ahsan, 1996, p. 18).

A state without a nation, created with the beautiful name of "the country of the Pure", but whose only *raison d'être* is to provide Indian Muslims with a state capable of opposing polytheistic India. Only religion and hatred of the Hindu give coherence to the country. This has led to three large-scale conventional wars since independence 1947, 1965, 1971, plus a dangerous incident in 1999, known as the Kargil War. But, above all, it has pushed both to equip themselves with nuclear weapons. In all these incidents, in Pakistan's rearguard, there has always been China, benefiting from Pakistan's recognition of its conquests over India in the Sino-Indian War of 1962 and which is building a naval base in the port of Gwardar that closes India's passage to the Persian Gulf (Kaplan, 2017, pp. 303-310).



Bangladesh

As we have already pointed out, Pakistan was born as an artificial structure that united the provinces of the British Raj with a Muslim majority. This included East Bengal. While West Pakistan lay in western India around the Indus River Valley, in the east, near the mouth of the Ganges, with a thousand kilometers of Union India territory in between, there was East Pakistan, inhabited by Bengalis.

The artificiality of this state structure was hardly maintained until 1970. Bengalis originally accounted for 60% of the total population, but they felt that power was in the hands of the Western Punjabis. Nationalist postulates were gaining affection to the point that in 1970 the *Awami League won the elections*, which triggered Pakistani repression. Indira Gandhi played her cards well. Before intervening, he ensured the neutrality of the Western powers and signed a military cooperation agreement with the USSR. The objective was to neutralize any possibility of Chinese intervention. Once these guarantees were obtained, the Indian army attacked Pakistan, it was the war of 1971, and caused the independence of Bangladesh.

Since then, Bangladesh's relations with India have not been positive. In fact, East Bengal was born in 1905 in the midst of sectarian pogroms (Bianco, 2002, pp. 156-159). China has taken advantage of this to become the main support of this country, turning the port of Chittagong into another of its "pearls" with which to surround India.

Sri Lanka

The *Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka* is a sovereign island country. Its insular character and cultural specificities meant that it was never part of the Raj. Their language is Indo-European like those of northern India, but unlike the subcontinent on the island Buddhism triumphed. This religion was introduced in the third century BC. After the arrival of Arahata Mahinda Thera, son of Emperor Asoka.

The entire island was occupied by the British Empire in 1796 and officially became a colony in 1802, through the Peace of Amiens. Ceylon gained its independence in 1948. In 1972 it changed its name to Sri Lanka and became a republic, severing its last ties with Britain.

Sri Lanka has enjoyed, along with India, the longest period of parliamentary democracy in a non-Western country. But the island has an internal wound that dates back to historical times. In the north of the island, bordering the south of the subcontinent, there is a minority of Tamil language and Hindu religion. The Tamils are the Dravidian inhabitants of southern India, for generations they have settled on the island as tea pickers.

Tensions between the Sinhalese Buddhist majority and the Tamil Hindu minority began in 1983 with a general uprising. Tens of thousands died before a ceasefire was signed in 2001. In 2005, the peace process received a major boost when the Tamil Tigers and the Government signed a cooperation agreement to jointly access and share aid to the tsunami-affected areas. But the government did not comply and in 2008 the ceasefire was broken. Between January and February 2009, a major offensive by the government



army re-established government power over Tamil-controlled areas (Forrester, 2021, pp. 154-158).

Meanwhile, Chinese infiltration of the Sinhalese economy reached the point of investing large amounts in the Magampura Mahinda Rajapaksa Port (also known as Hambantota Port), which since 2010 has become dependent on China for a hundred years lease. This port is another of the "pearls" with which China surrounds India. In 2022, an inflationary crisis, related by the population to Chinese investments, provoked a revolt, with synophobic connotations, that overthrew the government. But the new government quickly had to repair relations with Beijing.

5.5. The borders of China and Japan

The Japanese archipelago has a characteristic that China lacks: adaptability. Japan, a relatively small archipelago, is characterized by ethnic homogeneity and an official ideology that promulgates the divine ancestry of the Japanese people. The enormous awareness of its particularity has provided the country with great flexibility to adjust its policies and structures to the national needs of each moment. This has allowed it to adopt the techniques and institutions of other societies, reinforcing its personality rather than diluting it. This self-confidence led him to refuse to pay tribute to the Emperor of China, thus consciously placing himself on the margins of the Chinese world hierarchical order (Kang, 2010, pp. 77-81).

Its adaptability allowed it to go from being a victim of imperialism to being an aggressive imperialist power in the brief period from 1868 (Meiji Revolution) to 1914 (World War I). Its dominance of the East Asian space was in crescendo: the 1870s, expansion into nearby islands; 1895, Sino-Japanese War and occupation of Korea and annexation of Taiwan; 1905 Russo-Japanese War, annexation of Korea and occupation of Manchuria; 1914, entry into World War I and annexation of German territories in China and the Pacific. After the Great War and until the Second World War, continued aggression against China and defiance of the West. All this ended in 1945. After that, Japan gave another one of its enormous cohesion, becoming in a few decades the second largest economy in the world.

But the wounds that its militarism of those fifty long years of the twentieth century left in its neighbors still remain unhealed. And now, when it is China that seems to be on its way to dominating the future, J. M. Domenach wondered, does China intend to bring Japan to its knees? (Domenach, 2005, p. 167) It is possible, or sometimes it seems so. Japan is aware of this, and is preparing on the other side of the border from China, in this case, after Korea and the island of Taiwan, in the company of the US.

Korea

Korea is the Poland of the Far East, *a small country with a perfectly defined identity surrounded by two large aggressive empires that seek its assimilation and disappearance.* As a result of the influence games of China and Japan and the Cold War between the



USSR and the United States in the space of the Korean Peninsula, there are today two states that defend their legitimacy to rule over the entire nation.

North Korea is officially called the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, with its capital in Pyongyang, covers a territory of 120,540 km² and has a population of 26,072,217 inhabitants. South Korea is officially called the Republic of Korea, has its capital in Seoul, an area of 99,260 km² and a population of 51,966,948 inhabitants.

Two Confucian countries that have triumphed. In South Korea it is evident, it has become a new Japan of technological development and high standards of living. But North Korea, with its oppressive, archaic, autarkic regime, has also triumphed. He has achieved the "atomic bomb" despite the great sacrifices imposed on his own people. South Korea is a supervised and apparent democracy. North Korean socialism actually responds to an endogenous version called *Juche*.

The militarized border between the two is a residue of the cold war. But its reality corresponds to the current world order. And this will precisely prevent the Peninsula from being reunified in the near future. They will not be unified because it is not in anyone's interest. No one wants dynamic and modern South Korea with the North's atomic weapons. Everyone fears that this new Korea will fall on the side of the "other" (Nam-lin Hur, 2024, pp. 6-13).

Although Japan backs South Korea against the North, it knows that a unified Korea considers it its first enemy. Although the United States is South Korea's main protector, Japan remains its main ally and does not want an anti-Japanese Korea while being wary of Seoul's strong economic ties with Beijing. China is North Korea's main economic supporter, but its relations with South Korea are better, both politically and economically, and it is wary of a unified Korea that wants to reassert its personality by strengthening ties with the US and Russia. And finally, Russia has a privileged relationship with North Korea and is not willing to jeopardize it.

On the other hand, we must not forget that the two Koreas, like Taiwan, are also the border of China and the West.

Taiwan

Taiwan is actually the Republic of China, founded by Sun Yat sen in 1912, built by Chiang Kai-sek between 1926 and 1937 and moved to the Island of Formosa in 1949. For fifty years it was a Japanese colony (1895-1945). Japan, in its proverbial racism, did not try to Japanize it, although it did create strong economic ties that have survived and that make it one of the main supports of the Taipei regime. As in South Korea, the Japanese play a secondary, but necessary, role in this scenario after the Americans. These, through three joint communiqués (1971, 1979 and 1982) subscribed to the "One China" policy, but in parallel sabotaged the possibility of reunification through the guarantees given to Taipei with the *Law on Relations with Taiwan* (1979) and "the six guarantees" (1982) (Ramírez Ruiz, 2023, pp. 52-55).

China's goodwill towards Taiwan, seen in the application of attraction policies such as the "One Country, Two Systems" model, can do little in the face of the geostrategic pulse that is being played out today on the island. Taiwan has become the Berlin of this incipient



Cold War. Whoever dominates the island will dominate the South China Sea, and whoever controls it will be the power that dominates the future. The United States is increasingly focused on preventing China from winning that game, and Japan is an indispensable soldier in this game.

China's borders with Southeast Asia: the South China Sea

We are not going to refer again to the Chinese worldview: a hierarchical world governed from Beijing by the son of heaven and the scant value given by these parameters to the formal borders of European systems. However, China is now using this historical ambiguity to claim all the waters of what is known as the South China Sea as its own.

The space claimed by China cartographically is recorded on the map of the "Nine Strokes". This "line" refers to the demarcation used, initially by the government of the Republic of China and later also by the People's Republic of China, to delimit its claims to most of the South China Sea.

On July 12, 2016, an arbitral tribunal of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague declared that China has no legal basis to claim "historical rights" within its nine-line line in a case brought by the Philippines. But China, making use of a policy of *real-politik* based on its power, continues to occupy space from its neighbors. These are the open disputes:

With Indonesia, the Natuna Islands; with the Philippines, on the Bank of Scarborough; with Viet Nam, the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands (some of these islands are also claimed by Brunei, Malaysia and the Philippines); with Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand and Viet Nam in areas of the Gulf of Thailand; and with Singapore and Malaysia various islets and waters along the Strait of Johore and the Strait of Singapore (Sutter, 2010, pp. 17-67).

What is happening is that China does not recognize the sovereign rights, under the parameters of the Westphalian system, of the island or mainland "small states" that surround the South China Sea. China's ambition in this area has a parallel in recent history. Just as the United States had to dominate the Caribbean, expelling all European powers from it to dominate the Panama Canal and become the hegemonic power of its hemisphere. China knows that it must control this sea, which implies subjugating all the riverside countries and recovering Taiwan to become the hegemon of its hemisphere and control the Straits of Malacca.

5.6. The borders of China and Russia: Mongolia.

The Tsarist empire was left out of the Westphalian system. Its characteristics were that of an empire under an absolute monarch, a unified religious orthodoxy and territorial expansion in all directions (Kissinger, 2021, p. 16). Therefore, the borders between the two empires in the enormous North Asian expanses were always blurred.

The Mongolian people are, together with the Tibetan, the rearguard of the *Han*, the only peoples within their cultural area. Both Tibetans and Mongols share Lamaist Buddhism and their ambiguous and symbiotic relationship with the Chinese state provides



arguments for those who defend the independence or integration of Mongols and Tibetans into Beijing's state structures (Kaplan, 2007, pp. 116-130). The Republic of Mongolia as we know it today owes its existence to the status of a buffer state between Russia and China. If in Tibet this same condition did not take hold, it was due to the remoteness of the metropolis and the border stability that the British imposed on the borders of the Himalayas. The Mongols managed to create a state thanks to the fact that between 1911 and 1917 the two empires that competed to dominate their territory collapsed.

Taking advantage of the chaos, the Japanese empire pressured to become the hegemonic empire in the area and an endless number of Russian, Chinese, communist, nationalist and Mongolian warlords plunged the area into the most absolute chaos from which in a somewhat novelistic way, not without epic, the independence of Mongolia will be born. The latter, in an attempt to preserve its identity, will look more to Russia than to China. "Distant" Russia will allow itself to be loved, every time a Russian power has established relations with China it has imposed the recognition of Mongolian sovereignty. Russia's external weakness forced the US to play the same role as guarantor of Mongolia in the first decades of the 21st century. Because the Mongol state lives in a continuous existential threat. Mongolia is a huge steppe country inhabited by only three million inhabitants. China does not have to be aggressive or militarily invade the territory. A mere demographic movement induced or not avoided from Beijing would saturate Mongolia demographically as has already happened with all Chinese autonomous regions, except Tibet.

6. Conclusions

At the beginning of this article we talked about how the borders of Asia were not a mere line on a map. Asia's borders are huge expanses of sovereignty wholly or partially disputed throughout history, even though they may be configured as internationally recognized sovereign states. As we have tried to demonstrate throughout these pages, there are a number of factors that justify this situation.

First, the geographical reality of Asia. Throughout history, the great landmass of Asia has left large areas sparsely populated and with blurred borders, in the Himalayas, the central deserts or the non-navigable seas.

Secondly, the imperfect adaptation of the concept of Western sovereignty, based on the "Westphalian" model that implies the relationship between independent and equal states with the traditional system of relations in Asia that, fundamentally, was governed by a "tributary" and, therefore, hierarchical system. The relationship between Asian states was unequal, but more flexible.

Thirdly, the emergence of the Asian powers which, if on the one hand fiercely defend their sovereignty under the parameters of the Westphalian system, do not hesitate, based on their strength, to claim historical rights from the "tributary" system if it suits them.

Fourthly, the evolution of the globalization process at a general level in the world. The current drift leads us to cultural diversity and "identity" giving legitimacy to any claim,



also in the case of States. This weakens the defenders of the status quo imposed by the West in Asia.

In such a way that, although there is no general questioning of international borders in Asia, we can affirm that the entire border between China and India is in a convulsive uncertainty of legitimacy. That the border between Japan and China is actually the border of the Asian world with the West. And, in relation to this, in the battle for dominance over the South China Sea, from Taiwan to the Straits of Malaysia, the future of Humanity is at stake. History does not repeat itself, it advances in a spiral, conditioned by geography and previous events (history itself), which is why we can say that the most important border in the world is today in the South China Sea, where Taiwan is playing the same role that a few decades ago corresponded to Berlin.

7. References

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