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International relations and the Himalaya: connecting ecologies, cultures and geopolitics

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ABSTRACT

This article examines international relations (IR)'s approach to the Himalaya. We argue that the possibility of violent conflict over contested international borders is not the region's primary international challenge. Rather, slow violence inflicted by state-building and militarisation, intimately connected to geopolitical tensions, threaten the region's ecologies, cultures and languages. The Himalaya is home to three biodiversity hotspots and a mosaic of ethnic groups, many of whom speak threatened languages. Its ice-deposits feed most of Asia's large rivers. In recent years, India and China have pursued large-scale infrastructure development in the region, enabling greater militarisation and extraction, and a tourist rush. These threats are amplified by climate change, which is occurring in the Himalaya at twice global averages, contributing to landslides, flooding, and droughts. However, the region's complexity is not matched by IR's theorisations, which overwhelmingly focus on the possibility of violent conflict between state actors. We argue that IR's analysis of the region must go beyond a states-and-security, Delhi-Beijing-Islamabad centred approach, to look at the numerous interconnections between its geopolitics, cultures and ecologies. We suggest this can be accomplished through incorporating more interdisciplinary analysis, and through focusing on the interaction between the organisation of political authority and the region's environment.

Introduction: the transformation of the Himalaya

In the middle of the twentieth century, the Himalayan passes that traders, pilgrims and nomads had passed for millennia were blocked by a series of international border disputes. Some trade and exchange has restarted across these multiple divides, but the states involved have exerted an exponentially greater effort to solidify control within their borders. They have deployed troops to protect or project their claims and enabled

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large-scale transport, resource extraction and tourism to reach further into this culturally diverse and ecologically fragile region.

The 2,400 kilometres of the Himalaya range mark several state borders. It begins on the disputed Pakistan-India border in Kashmir, curls Southeast through the disputed China–India border, the disputed India-Nepal border, the resolved China-Nepal border, the disputed China-Bhutan border, and finally the Eastern section of the disputed China–India border. Since the contemporary Indian, Chinese and Pakistani states emerged in the 1940s, they have struggled to solidify their control of the Himalaya. India and Pakistan have fought three wars over Kashmir. The region remains restive. Aksai Chin, between Ladakh (India), the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) (China), and Xinjiang (China), is administered by China and claimed by India. In the East, Arunachal Pradesh is administered by India and claimed by China as Zangnan (Southern Tibet).

Sino-Indian tensions were strained during the 1950s as the People's Republic of China (PRC) annexed and occupied the Tibetan Plateau and stationed troops in the high-altitude grey zones between India and China. The brief 1962 India–China border war shattered their cooperation, and tensions have remained. Since then, China (1964), India (1998), and Pakistan (1998) have all become nuclear-armed states. Nuclearisation and disputed borders have combined to produce entrenched low-level tensions and persistent militarisation.[1]

In particular, tensions between China and India have placed the smaller Himalayan states between them in difficult positions. India incorporated the small kingdom Sikkim into its territory in 1975. It underwrites Bhutan's security. Nepal has had close ties to India but has recently shown a geopolitical turn towards China. Pakistan has been closely aligned with China since the 1950s. The normalised state of tension escalated in 2017 with the Doklam standoff, when China tried to wrest Bhutanese territory from Indian troops. China's Belt and Road (BRI) development plans in Nepal and Pakistan have exacerbated these tensions. In 2020, Chinese soldiers entered Indian-administered territory in Ladakh and Sikkim.

State-to-state tensions have led to the militarisation of the region and also intensified the region's development. All its states, and particularly China and India, have engaged in ongoing state-making and infrastructure projects in their border regions aimed partly at solidifying territorial control. Hundreds of thousands of troops are now stationed across the mountains. The militarisation of the Himalaya is relatively well understood, if not adequately critiqued, within IR scholarship (for a visual guide, see: O'Donnell and Bollfrass 2020). Due to its broad emphasis on great power politics, IR scholars have tended to see the Himalaya primarily as the space in which India, China and their allies meet, contest, occasionally fight, and eventually compromise. The region's environment and cultural diversity are usually presented as secondary to state security. In IR literature, Himalayan geopolitics has been seen as a struggle between nuclear-armed neighbours whose Delhi, Beijing and Islamabad-based elites make decisions about the mountains, based primarily on mutual enmity. This aspect of the situation is integral but, ultimately, we argue, insufficient to understand the Himalaya. It erases the importance of the physical environment and the agency of its diverse inhabitants.

How, then, are we to think about the region, when IR's theorisations do not match its cultural, human and environmental complexity? We argue for a multi-faceted approach that can still be presented under the banner of 'IR'. This approach focuses on the interplay

between structures of political authority (through state and non-state sources, including language and culture) and its dramatic environment. It requires interdisciplinary influences, and engagement with IR's theorisations of identity, particularly from constructivism and postcolonialism IR, and from Green IR's understanding of the environment and the planet as an agent in international affairs.

We take this cue partly from a series of studies that argue IR is most effective as a diffuse interdisciplinary field, rather than a distinct academic discipline. Vitalis (2015), for example, has noted that IR had a long history as a transdisciplinary field before it became seen as a discreet subfield of political science. After the Cold War, IR has changed again, opening up further to influences from feminist, historical and poststructuralist studies. Particularly from the early 2000s onwards, postcolonial IR has critiqued the Eurocentric origins of the discipline and its theorisations. As a result, interdisciplinarity has now become relatively commonplace in IR.

Nevertheless, IR scholarship is yet to capture the complexity of the Himalaya or recognised the mountains' vital role in earth systems. Burke *et al.* (2016, 505) called for more 'interdisciplinary dialogue' to enable the IR discipline to engage with planetary-level challenges. As they put it, this requires the 'recovery of an earlier notion of IR as an interdiscipline comprised of multiple research programmes, intellectual traditions, and normative perspectives—this time with the Anthropocene as its spur to innovation' (506). Given the Himalaya's complexity and centrality to the global environment, its presents a clear need for interdisciplinarity. Any attempt to analyse the Himalaya should break IR open, and flood the discipline with knowledge from other sources that highlight the interconnection between its environmental, political, and cultural transformations.

To illustrate the argument, we utilise scholarship from, among others, environmental history, anthropology, linguistics, ethnographic research, political ecology and political geography. We do so to reveal the interconnections between international politics, ecology and culture in the Himalaya, and the inadequacy of statist framing to comprehend the region. Engagement with environmental history, political geography and political ecology can bridge the divide between environmental conditions and state-level geopolitics (see, for example, Murton and Lord 2020; Shneiderman 2013). Likewise, ethnographic, anthropological and linguistic scholarship offers more localised, textured readings of Himalayan geopolitics and its effect on local cultures and languages.

In this article, we use our interdisciplinary backgrounds to show that India and China's militarised development and extraction projects in the Himalaya are enacting 'slow violence' (Nixon 2011) on the region's ecologies and cultures. This slow violence represents a clear threat to the mountains'—and the broader region's—environmental and sociocultural wellbeing. We argue that through engagement with these literatures, there is an important role for IR to play, that can encompass the international nature of the region's struggles, without obscuring its minoritized populations and ecological destruction. Ultimately, it is more urgent to understand slow violence in the region, than it is to analyse the Himalaya from a statist, cooperation-or-conflict Delhi-Beijing lens.

The mountains constitute the headwaters of many large rivers, including the Indus, Ganges, Brahmaputra, Irrawaddy, Salween, Mekong, Yangtze and Yellow Rivers. The Himalayan icepack feeds these rivers and moderates the monsoonal rains. Together, these two water sources provide much of Asia's freshwater, and the rivers deposit fertile sediment on Asia's lowland, agricultural river plains. Plains populations use this

freshwater and silt for drinking water, agriculture and manufacturing, supporting approximately 47% of the world's human population (Pomeranz 2013). The interconnected projects of militarisation and intense development among these rivers' headwaters is transforming their environments and contributing to above-average warming in the globe's most hydrologically important node. The construction of large hydropower projects, by all regional states, is adding to this hydrological and ecological degradation.

The transformation of the mountain's sociocultural fabric is equally profound. National language and other assimilation and development projects promote English, Putonghua (Modern Standard Chinese) and increasingly Hindi. Along with eliminating languages, these policies also cause many smaller-scale but equally important, linguistic shifts. These linguistic transformations bring with them cultural shifts, and they are being accelerated in the mountains as developments in technology and infrastructure allow India and China to assert more influence in the borderlands. Cultures and societies are being simultaneously polarised and erased. This process is also deeply intermingled with environmental destruction.

We begin by looking at how IR has examined Himalayan geopolitics. We then examine the region's interlinked environmental and political history. Finally, we show how linguistic transformation has also been a tool of state-making, how the Himalaya's linguistic diversity is being erased by increasing state assertiveness within and across borders, and what consequences this has for socio-ecological systems. Throughout, we argue that environment, language and politics are intimately connected in the Himalaya, and that the central drama of Himalayan geopolitics is the slow violence of cultural and environmental destruction, rather than the possibility of dramatic, 'fast' state-to-state conflict.

How does the Himalaya look in IR?

When looking at the Himalaya, IR scholars have tended to focus on contested borders and examined the region from a state-centric perspective, investigating the likelihood of border tensions escalating. This limited focus means that there is a strong tendency to centre on the Pakistani, Indian and Chinese states' experiences in the Himalaya, and to neglect the region's historical experience, environment, and diverse peoples. Only limited, theoretically informed IR analysis has centred on the mountains or their inhabitants (see, for example, Baruah 2005, 2020). When linguistic, cultural and environmental issues are discussed, they are placed as secondary to state security and the potential for violent conflict.

Brahma Chellaney (2013, 309), who has written extensively about the area, suggests that without intergovernmental agreements, the Himalaya would become Asia's 'treacherous new battleground'. Chellaney's analysis emphasises the region's environment but simplifies its complex issues into state-based environmental arguments. He blames the mountains' ills on China, arguing that grassroots activism has checked India's development projects and prevented environmental destruction (Chellaney 2018). This argument is made in the face of much contradictory evidence (Joshi 2011; Ling and Lama 2016) and presents a statist analysis of a regional problem for which India and China bear similar levels of responsibility. Like China, India is not only militarising the region but combining this militarisation with tourism promotion and large-scale infrastructure and extractive projects.

Chellaney further argues that there is and can be 'environmentally responsible' dam building in the region (2013, 281–286), but as a much analysis—including Huber (2019) Gergan (2017)—has shown, it is challenging to achieve this aim in a region as ecologically, hydrologically and seismologically fragile as the Himalaya. The 'environmentally responsible' use of the region's hydropower would require a network of low-impact, micro-hydropower stations that would primarily benefit local communities. The large dams that are being built with sand dredged from the rivers they block are the antithesis of 'environmentally responsible' hydropower. Moreover, instead of benefiting local people, they displace communities and direct their accrued energy to downhill population centres.

Chellaney's concern that future wars might be fought over water is, in this sense, misplaced. The militarisation of the region is already leading to a Himalayan hydrological crisis without the need for violent conflict. The primary issue is not that water *may* be a cause of conflict, but that it *is* being unsustainably exploited for hydropower. The people and environments most affected by these changes are not given sufficient chances to reject them. Along with Huber and Gergan, other scholars in political geography and elsewhere have repeatedly critiqued such claims (Gohain 2017; McDuie-Ra and Chettri 2019, 7–8). Like elsewhere, these large hydropower projects and water extraction projects are occurring in and from minoritised regions, damaging local ecosystems and displacing disempowered local peoples.

Beyond Chellaney's work, much IR scholarship has focused on tensions within the India–China relationship. Malone and Mukherjee (2010, 137–158) frame the relationship as one of conflict or cooperation, arguing shared civilisational links and the desire for a multipolar world order might enable the two states to transcend their border conflicts. In a recent article, Srinath Raghavan (2019) examined the extent to which the 'security dilemma' governs India's relationship with China. His command of the Indian state's archival material is excellent. Still, his solutions to tensions focus on the international level, emphasising the need for restraint from decision-makers in New Delhi and Beijing.

Elsewhere, constructivist approaches to Himalayan geopolitics, which have a role to play in addressing these issues, sometimes fall into IR's statist trap. Joe Thomas Karackattu (2013) discusses the challenges and opportunities of India–China border trade, without considering the environment of the India–China border, or its minoritised inhabitants. Lora Saalman (2011, 114) looks at how Chinese foreign policy analysts view India's army, noting that India is more concerned about border conflicts than China. Shashank Joshi (2011, 2559) presents the border dispute as the key cause of India–China tension, arguing that their shared security dilemma has 'hardened' each state's stance. Elsewhere, Joshi argues that as India and China simultaneous 'rise' they have both increased their assertiveness. He also notes that India's media has become ferociously anti-China (2011, 161).

Constructivist scholarship, particularly that which emphasises the deep historical construction of the national interest (Weldes 1999), tells us much about how state actors perceive one another, and where these perceptions come from. If such analysis centred on borderland populations, how they have been folded into state and national identities, and, coupled with local ethnographies of how these populations experience international politics, constructivism can assist us in understanding the international politics of the Himalaya.

Even IR scholarship that opposes Eurocentrism or encompasses postcolonial approaches tends to minimise Himalayan peoples' experience. Vincent Wang (2011, 437–469) for example, notes India and China's shared civilisational heritage and argues that both states' foreign policy discourses tend to oppose the same international hierarchies. Swaran Singh (2008, 83) has called for the 'indigenisation of [India and China's] mutual exploration and policy formations' in the study of their relationship. This 'indigenisation' only extends to traditions of thought associated with the mainstream of these state's foreign policy elites.

There are some exceptions to this state-centric approach to the Himalaya. Itty Abraham's (2014, XV) work on territorialisation of India argues that:

> The 'body politic' comes to be internally divided and hierarchically organized on political, social and economic lines through the boundary-making actions of foreign policy … the boundaries that mark majorities and minorities and that exclude populations from the national centre on the basis of ethnicity, class, religion, gender, and civilization, are found to follow inevitably from the particular political intersection of territory and sovereignty.

Abraham was writing primarily about India. But his statement could be equally applied around the Himalaya to China and Pakistan, and even Nepal and Bhutan. The territorialisation of the Himalaya, and the cartographic obsessions of its states, have played a crucial role in the current situation.

In a useful intervention, LHM Ling *and Mahendra Lama.* (2016) rejected the great power contestation model and its focus on competing, territorially marked states. They sought to ask questions beyond 'cooperation and conflict'. They instead referred to 'India-China' as 'civilizational twins' with various shared inheritances, many of which emerged from the Himalaya (2–3). They described borders as capillaries and opportunities, emphasising ongoing cross-border connections between India and China (Ling and Lama 2016, 3). In the same volume, Abdenur (2016) looked at the history of borderland interconnections between India and China through the Himalaya, from the Silk Road to the reopening of the Nathu La in Sikkim in 2006, noting that this pass has been an essential channel between India and China for both trade and cultural exchanges. They closed on a hopeful note, suggesting that the reopening of the pass might produce renewed relations across the Himalaya.

Their optimistic analysis was, however, overcome when Nathu La was closed due to the 2017 Doklam incident. It has since been opened and closed again during the 2020 military standoff. Uncertainty about its future operations shows how vulnerable it is to rising tensions. Elsewhere, along the Ladakh-Tibet border, and the Arunachal Pradesh-Tibet border, international passes have been permanently closed. This history of connection between China and India across the Himalaya is doubtless crucial. It was never completely closed off and should not be forgotten. However, this long history of interaction was traditionally mediated by local peoples who have since been excluded from these interactions (Harris 2013; van Spengen 2000). While elite interactions between capital cities may have increased, the militarisation of highland borders has severed many traditional trade routes and split families and communities. Trade in material and symbolic goods would ultimately be far stronger and more inclusive of minoritised groups if borders were softened. Shneiderman's (2013) study of the China-Nepal border corridor demonstrates this point. Her study documented how limited cross-border movement is allowed now that China

and Nepal have an agreed border. Currently, the China–India and India-Pakistan borders being hardened and are much less porous.

Postcolonial IR scholarship, which has a developing but firm foothold in the discipline (see, for example, Chacko 2012; Krishna 1993; Seth 2011), has the potential to help us understand the ongoing colonial logics and legacies at play in Himalayan geopolitics. Moreover, environmental or 'Green' IR has begun to theorise the planet itself, as an actor (Burke *et al.* 2016; Harrington 2016) and has looked at how climate change and environmental destruction are caused by human (and state) actions (Dyer 2018). The Himalaya, however, has yet to be thought through from these IR theoretical perspectives.

High-altitude state making

To comprehend how the contemporary situation arose, we need to understand the region's intertwined environmental, social and political histories. The history of state-making in the region was informed by colonial understandings of mountains as 'natural borders' and of Himalayan peoples as insufficiently 'advanced' to govern their own affairs. The placing of lowland cartographic norms over the region has contributed significantly to the environmental and cultural crisis they face. Until their recent transformation, the middle and high altitudes of the Himalaya tended to be ruled through political communities based on sometimes overlapping allegiances rather than fixed sovereign states or empires. Even when the vast, highland-based Tibetan (618c–843c CE) and Gurkha (1559–1768 CE) empires arose, and the Mongols and Mughals imposed themselves on the region, its subjects often maintained tax and tribute connections with other polities (Schwieger 2015, 146–185), and did not always stay in fixed settlements.

Himalayan people had previously transformed their environments—primarily through deforestation and irrigation—in the service of agriculture and pastoralism, creating anthropogenic landscapes that needed to be maintained. But the landscapes these communities created were, in the main, sustainable (Storozum *et al.* 2017), and they did not interfere with the delivery of water and fertile soils to lowland settlements.

Like most slow violence, the profound political, social and environmental transformations of the Himalaya has taken a long time to unfold. Its roots lie in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During this period, two, large, plains-based empires arose in the south and east of the Himalaya: the British in South Asia and the Qing in East Asia. The British pushed into the mountains from the south, and even as they and other European powers ruthlessly colonising China's eastern seaboard, Qing bureaucrats and warlords adopted colonial tactics to push their southwestern frontier into the eastern Himalaya (Relyea 2015).

The British, for their part, took the Himalaya, as they did most mountainous regions (Goettlich 2019), to be their 'natural' Northern border. This perspective legitimised their casting of this biologically and culturally diverse area as a buffer zone, which could be bullied into submission or cajoled into unequal treaties. During the same period the Qing Dynasty was sinicising eastern Tibet (Giersch 2006; Tsomu 2013), the British were turning Sikkim and Kashmir into dependent princely states (Naik 2014) and forcing uneven trading treaties on Nepal and Bhutan.

These two empires in the lower Himalaya did not, however, occupy the region's high altitudes. The terrain was too rugged, and the altitude too high, for these empires to

survey or administer the territory. The Qing Empire, headed by a Manchu rather than Han emperor, had developed a religious relationship with Tibet's most powerful Buddhist rulers, the Dalai Lamas. The Dalai Lama's court understood this relationship as one of equals (Schwieger 2015). The Qing sent an army to defend the Dalai Lama against the eighteenth century Gurkhas invasion. Following this incursion, they crucially did not govern, occupy or control the Himalaya (McGranahan 2019). The British only influenced the area indirectly through their relationships with the Himalayan rulers, and by conducting expeditions there to garner geographic information. Both empires' activities at high-altitudes were restricted by technology and cost (Gamble 2019). As such, the region escaped the colonial transformation of the environment that occurred in the Northern Indian river plains and the lower Yangze River Basin in the nineteenth century (D'Souza 2006).

Instead, the transformation of the Himalaya has been a product of the region's incipient territorialisation by its newly formed states. This territorialisation began in the first decade of the twentieth century. By this stage, the Eastern Himalaya had become a sphere of competitive imperial influence between the British and Qing, and both empires sent troops to secure their influence.

The 1903–4, British expedition headed by Francis Younghusband (1863–1942), was followed by increasing Chinese influence in the Eastern Himalaya (Tsomu 2013), and the warlord Zhao Erfeng's (1845–1911) rule of Tibet between 1905 and 1910. Zhao Erfeng's soldiers travelled south to the borders of British India and placed Qing flags to mark the frontier. The British later replaced them with their own flags (Guyot-Réchard 2016). Zhao Erfeng was decapitated when the Qing Empire fell in 1911, and following this, the thirteenth Dalai Lama, Thubten Gyatso (1876–1933) declared Tibet an independent state. Chinese Republican rulers did not accept this declaration.

The controversy over Tibet's status continued to circumscribe the region's geopolitics into the next decade when British, Chinese and Tibetan delegates met at the 1913–14 Shimla Conference to decide their common borders. The British, whose insistence on territorialisation and defined borders had been the impetus for the conference, came prepared with a surveyor's map that marked the 'natural' border between 'Outer Tibet' (Tibetan ruled) and 'Inner Tibet' (Chinese ruled), and their Indian territories in the Western and Eastern Himalaya. All these lines were drawn along mountain ranges by British cartographers. The borders between 'Outer Tibet' and British India proved to have lasting consequences as they were later to mark the international border between China and India. Surveyor Henry McMahon created a line in the eastern Himalaya, skimming the region's highest peaks. William Johnson, a boundary commissioner for the British Empire, created a map establishing the external boundaries of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, which he insisted included Ladakh and the un-inhabited high-altitude plain of Aksai Chin. These surveyed lines were then presented as the natural borders between British India and the Chinese sphere of influence, including Tibet.

The Republican Chinese withdrew from the conference before the Shimla Accord could be signed and refused to acknowledge the Tibetans' right to sign an international treaty. Both sides of the intermittent Chinese Civil War (1927–1949), the Nationalists and the Communists, rejected the Shimla Accord and claimed all areas where 'Tibetans' lived as part of their territory (McGranahan 2003).

State-making in the Himalaya

The post-WWII process of decolonisation transformed the governance of the Himalaya. The partition of British India into two new republics, India and Pakistan, split the Western and Eastern Himalaya, isolating the Northeast from the rest of India. Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim were able to maintain or increase their international identities. Sikkim, though, was placed in a particularly precarious position.

India's push to territorialise grew out of fear among some of its leaders about its ethnic/racial diversity in the Himalaya, and the 'racial affinity' between Himalayan people and the Chinese. Its first Home Minister, Sardar Patel (1875–1950), who was responsible for integrating the princely states into India (Raghavan 2010, 65–100), expressed these concerns to India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964) in a letter in 1950: 'China is no longer divided. It is united and strong. All along the Himalaya in the north and northeast, we have on our side of the frontier a population ethnologically and culturally not different from Tibetans and Mongoloids' (Patel 1950). In contrast to Patel, Nehru (1949) believed that a hearts and minds campaign would win over the 'backward' borderland people. Discussions about the Himalaya swung, therefore, between Patel's racialised nationalism and Nehru's paternalism. With these terms of debate, the postcolonial Indian state began to reproduce imperial geopolitics at home, despite its more strident international anticolonialism abroad. Similar debates about race, frontiers and loyalty continue to frame India's Himalayan policies today (Gergan 2020; Gohain 2018).

The largest of the Himalayan states that Patel was tasked with bringing into the new Indian state was Kashmir. Included within the Kashmir dispute was the majority Tibetan-Buddhist, high altitude region of Ladakh. Ladakh had been conquered by the Dogra dynasty, and after partition was administered by India and claimed by Pakistan. Colonial understandings of its geography and culture played a crucial role in determining its borderland status (Gardner 2019). Its links to Tibet, however, also meant that parts of it would be claimed by the next new state to arise in the Himalaya, the PRC. The PRC was declared in 1949, two years after Indian and Pakistani independence. Shortly after, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) occupied Tibet, and slowly made their way to Western Tibet, taking control of the Aksai Chin. A decade later, the fourteen Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso (1935–) fled Lhasa for exile in India via Tawang.

Like their imperial Qing and British predecessors, China and India agreed that the Himalaya was a 'natural boundary' between two large plains-based states, rather than a region with a mosaic of distinct polities and peoples. They disagreed, however, on where this boundary should be drawn. Nehru accepted the British-era boundaries and repeatedly stated that the Himalaya reflected a cultural and geographical divide (Chacko 2012, 95). The PRC's new ruler, Mao Zedong (1893–1976) accepted the Himalaya was the divide between China and South Asia, but not the British-drawn boundaries. His government made claims to territory based on imprecise conceptions of Tibetan ethnicity; wherever there were Tibetans, they claimed, was Chinese territory. Tensions were driven by both sides' lack of knowledge and engagement with these high-altitude areas.

This disagreement meant that the process of decolonisation in India, China and Pakistan became a fight over the territories of newly minoritised peoples. Bérénice Guyot-Réchard (2016) suggests that, without an obvious or agreed-upon border, and local peoples being outside of each state's 'core citizenry' (3) India and China became one

another's 'shadow' in the Himalaya during the 1950s, competing for the loyalty of mountain peoples.

In the end, however, loyalty was demanded by war rather than sought by favours. India and Pakistan fought a war before establishing a Line of Control in Kashmir in 1947. The 1962 India–China war produced the Line of Actual Control along their Eastern and Western borders.

One way that this loyalty was pursued was through the provisioning of new infrastructure such as roads and airstrips. These not only enabled Chinese and Indian troops and later administrators to access the region, they also signalled the various states' possession of territory. A road dispute in the Aksai Chin led to the 1962 China–India war. Both sides have engaged in developing borderland infrastructure ever since.

These unresolved borders remain seventy years later, and those between China and Bhutan and the now-Indian state of Sikkim remain militarised. Seventy years of the region's military-led development has had a profoundly negative effect on its environment and its people. Many Himalayan peoples experienced post-WWII decolonisation as colonisation, becoming minorities in their own lands.[2] The environmental changes in the mountains during this time have mirrored those noted in other colonised countries.

The contemporary environment

The Himalaya's pre-colonial human occupation has been rendered insignificant by the changes that accompanied post-1960s territorialisation. China, India, Pakistan, Nepal and to a lesser extent Bhutan all began to build roads, railways, airfields, and larger urban centres in the region. The developments carried out in the 1960s–1990s sought to provide military access to disputed borders and to emphasise the various states' presence in border regions.

These twentieth-century changes have been, in turn, rendered insignificant by the environment's transformations of the twenty-first-century. Driven by the interconnected incentives of nationalism and development and fuelled by a combination of economic growth and technological advances, twenty-first-century Himalayan development has included increased militarisation, large-scale development projects, intensified agriculture, resource extraction, population shifts, and exponential increases in pollution.

On the ground, this transformation has manifested differently at different altitudes and in different states. Historically, the frozen upper altitudes were uninhabited or lightly inhabited. Some high-altitude sites are now visited seasonally by tourists from all over the world. Others are continually occupied by troops. Tourist impacts on frequently visited mountains such as Chomolungma (Everest) (Guzella *et al.* 2016) and Gangotri (Sati 2018) have been well documented. They have led to litter, black-carbon or soot pollution on the ice, and glacier contraction. Tourism in high-altitude sites is facilitated by state-built rail, roads, and airports. Until recently, high-altitude travel was most concentrated in Nepal. Now, however, growing numbers of domestic tourists from India and China are visiting both sides of the Himalaya (Angmo and Dolma 2015; Zhang and Zhang 2019).

What has been less well-articulated has been the influence of military occupation on the cryosphere (Baghel and Nüsser 2015). Much of the disputed border between China, India and Pakistan in the Western and Eastern Himalaya is located on either permafrost or

glaciers. The military presence is exaggerating ice and snow loss and is being threatened by this loss and other manifestations of climate change such as avalanches and landslides from increased rainfall (Zhan *et al.* 2017). Moreover, in places such as Ladakh in the Western Indian Himalaya, Tawang in the Eastern Indian Himalaya, and the north-face of Chomolungma in the TAR, associated infrastructure development, including the building of war memorials as tourist sites, has facilitated and arguably increased, tourism.

Roads are the most common large infrastructure projects in the high-altitude Himalaya. They are made and remade with a focus on troop movement rather than local transportation or environmental impact. In the Chinese-administered Himalaya, road construction is supplemented by railroad works, which are used to bring in tourists, workers and troops. These railroads cross permafrost, follow river courses, and travel through long tunnels. Higher tourist numbers have created a plastic pollution crisis, and further strains on limited water supplies (Wang 2019). In some areas, local rivers and lakes are even being dammed or otherwise altered, and mass, monoculture plantations are being established to provide more attractive vistas (Wei 2015).

As discussed above, the other dominant form of infrastructure in the Himalaya is hydropower dams. Much of the world stopped building large dams following the release of the condemnatory World Commission on Dams Report in 2000, but Himalayan states Nepal, Bhutan and Pakistan, and particularly China and India bucked this trend.[3] Since this time, they have become world leaders in dam construction, responsible for an exponentially larger number of new large dams than elsewhere in the world (Mulligan, van Soesbergen, and Sáenz 2020; Wang, Dong, and Lassoie 2013, 2). This growth in dam building, like other Himalayan development projects, has been underpinned by economic and technical advances and encouraged by competitive territorialisation. These two states are racing to dam Himalayan rivers and stake their claim on its hydropower potential. This competition has encouraged the multiplying of dams on single rivers on either side of international borders, their relatively quick construction, and a lack of transparency about hydropower projects and their environmental consequences (Gamble 2019, Drew 2017).

The race to build dams often plays out in third countries. India's largest single foreign-aid project is a dam in Bhutan. China's BRI has funded dams in Nepal (Murton and Lord 2020). In the last decade, the proliferation of hydropower projects has also been encouraged by hydropower's inclusion within the international Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). This scheme has subsidised dam-building as 'carbon offsets', despite the overwhelming evidence that large dams cause hydrological and ecological damage (Erlewein and Nüsser 2011, 293). According to the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), there are at least 550 hydropower projects either built, under construction or planned in China, India, Pakistan, and Bhutan (Sharma *et al.* 2016).

Regional environmental change is exaggerated by climate change, which is occurring at above global averages across the Himalaya (Krishnan *et al.* 2018, 79). Even slight changes in the region's climate have dramatic impacts on regional (and global) climatic, hydrological and ecological systems. Glaciers are melting, and rain patterns are shifting, increasing the likelihood of flash floods and landslides that are killing soldiers as well as civilians. Changes in these earth systems and their effects are, in turn, destabilising the region's economy and security.

International cooperation and the engagement of local peoples is needed to mitigate the effects of climate change on both local environments and the Greater Himalayan Watershed. Instead, geopolitical tensions have fed into, and been exaggerated by, water crises in Pakistan, India, and China. Rather than co-focusing their efforts on the cooperation that is needed to ensure the region's climate change is mitigated, its rivers' flows are stabilised, and its local people are adapting to climate change, Himalayan states are primarily involved in competitive and controversial, large-scale development projects. There have been examples of successful regional cooperation on environmental issues. India and China have cooperated in green-focused Confidence Building Measures (CBMs), and ICIMOD's circulation of scientific knowledge between all the region's states is also very positive. But along with these successes, there have been severe setbacks. One recent example of this has been the construction of three large dams in quick succession within short distances of each other in three different states' territories on the upper Indus River. Another example was the breakdown of the waterflow data sharing agreement between China and India after the Doklam incident (Deka, Gulati, and Barua 2019).

When the region's land and resources are treated as state property rather than integrated, transboundary ecological systems, these environments become degraded, and this degradation is beginning to have a profound effect on the billions who live downstream from it. Ultimately, Himalayan ecologies cannot sustain this level of militarisation and state competition, and environmental degradation will undo the political dispute.

Languages and diversity across borders in the Himalaya

The same slow violence that is degrading the Himalayan environment is also affecting its most vulnerable populations: the Himalaya's Indigenous and minoritised peoples. One of the most effective ways of examining this dynamic is through the region's linguistic diversity. Language endangerment (Rehg and Campbell 2018), language shift (Pauwels 2016), and the underlying political drivers of these phenomena are all impacting the region's peoples.

The Himalaya are a global centre of linguistic diversity, following general patterns that correlate linguistic diversity and mountainous topography around the world (Axelsen and Manrubia 2014). Unsurprisingly, this diversity is not neatly patterned: state, ethnicity, language and cultural practices are not correlated, and thus knowing where someone lives or the identity they profess does not necessarily indicate the languages they speak.

State-making in the Himalaya has been particularly effective at encouraging monoglot nationalism, which has had significant impacts on the mountains' residents. In the PRC, for example, the state aggressively promotes the national standard language, Putonghua, while providing much weaker support for other languages. The promotion of Putonghua has acutely intensified since the language was nominated as the national tongue in 2000 (Legislative Affairs Commission of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China 2000). The concerted focus on a single national language has had a drastic impact on the PRC's linguistic diversity—half the country's languages are currently endangered (Xu 2013), leading many 'minority' language speakers to protest (Cabras 2017; Thurston 2018). Tibetans, for example, have taken to the streets to protest the removal of Tibetan language from schools

(Robin 2014), and many of the testimonies of the 156 Tibetan self-immolators focused on language rights (Roche 2020).

India, too, has seen language protests, including self-immolations, during the building of the contemporary state (Mitchell 2009). However, unlike the PRC, the Indian state has explicitly promoted linguistic diversity, both in discourse and policy. India does not have a national language (Hindi and English are official languages), and individual states have a high degree of latitude to design and implement language policies.

Recently, however, Hindi has been increasingly promoted as a 'unifying' language and a pillar of Hindutva, prompting a backlash from speakers of other languages. The drafting of a national educational law in which a three-language model (Hindi, English, and local languages) was proposed, for example, led to fears Hindi would be made compulsory and local languages would suffer (Kumar 2019).

Hindi is taught in schools throughout much of Himalayan India, and as a consequence often acts as a *lingua franca*. The circumstances of its use, however, vary between states. In Sikkim, it plays a secondary role to local languages and the state language, Nepali. Until the creation of the Union Territory, the state language in Ladakh was Urdu, which is orthographically and politically distinct from Hindi but mutually intelligible. This meant that Hindi/Urdu was often used as a *lingua franca*, but locals would often choose to write it in the Latin script rather than the Hindi or Urdu scripts. In Arunachal Pradesh, which is home to over 30 languages, English is the official literary language, and Hindi has become the *lingua franca* for the state's linguistically diverse peoples.

In addition to promoting unifying, national languages, the Himalayan states also recognise (or erase) other languages within their territories. This is achieved in different ways. Nepal's constitution recognises 123 'national' languages, including Sherpa, Yolmo, and Nubri (Constitute Project 2019), but Nepali is the state's 'official' language. Other languages receive little support. China 'lumps' different languages into single categories, demoting distinct languages to the status of dialects. Tibetans in the PRC speak at least 16 different varieties of Tibetan (Tournadre 2014), which elsewhere would be considered languages, and at least another 26 non-Tibetan languages that are only distantly related to the Tibetan language group (Roche and Suzuki 2018). But in the PRC, even these widely divergent languages are lumped together by the state as a single language, their existence erased from policy discourses, bringing about their gradual elimination (Roche 2019). Although India is not as guilty of 'lumping' as the PRC, its laws still refuse to acknowledge the existence of languages with fewer than 10,000 speakers (Kidwai 2019), a policy that effectively erases smaller Himalayan language groups. These policies and practices of erasure overlook the fact that small languages are a global norm and have proven sustainable historically.

While these Himalayan states differ in their approach to minority languages and their promotion of national languages, India, China and Nepal, along with Pakistan and Bhutan all strongly promote English. Bhutan, in particular, has been described by linguist George van Driem (2007, 311) as Asia's 'most anglophone country', and provides an example of how the promotion of international Anglophone integration impacts smaller languages. With English as the medium of education at all levels, and Dzongkha (the national language) taught as an additional subject, the rest of the country's 19 languages are excluded from the education system, and most other formal public institutions.

Along with English, the Himalaya's other important transnational *lingua franca* is Nepali. Despite Nepali's minority-language status outside Nepal, it is nonetheless demographically and politically dominant over many smaller, Himalayan languages. As the state language of Sikkim, it not only acts as a *lingua franca*, but is replacing many small languages (Turin 2011). Meanwhile, in the Himalayan town of Darjeeling, West Bengal's promotion of Bengali in response to 'Hindi imposition' led first to Nepali speakers protesting for mother tongue education, and then counter-protests from the local, Indigenous Lepcha population, for whom the promotion of Nepali was seen as a threat to their already-threatened language (The Telegraph 2011).

The region's other important transnational language is—despite not having strong state backing—Tibetan. Unlike Nepali, Tibetan is a minoritised language in every country in which it is used. Nonetheless, because of its important religious role, and its legacy of imperial patronage, the written Tibetan language, in particular, continues to be influential. Written Tibetan's prestige represents not only a vestige of the lost and often forgotten Tibetan state and religion's influence throughout the region, but also a problem for those communities who seek to differentiate themselves from Tibetans. Samuels (2018) explains, for example, that the Tamang people had to downplay their historical and cultural connections with Tibet to be recognised as a discrete minority by the Nepali state. The Tamang and other Buddhist groups in Nepal are sometimes lumped together too because of antipathy towards Tibetans from the dominant Hindu community (Ramble 1997).

This combination of contemporary power structures and legacies may also explain why other Nepali ethnic groups such as the Syuba chose a modified version of Nepali's Devanagari script to write their language despite its historical relation to classical, written Tibetan (Gawne 2017). The complicated legacies of the previously powerful Tibetan polity's relationship with other Himalayan ethnic groups can also be seen by the Lepcha people of Sikkim's current campaign to remove Tibetan loanwords from their written language (Charisma Lepcha, personal communication).

While some groups move away from Tibetan influence, others seek to draw on its historical prestige. In Himalayan Pakistan, for example, the Muslim Balti people have instigated a movement to write their language in Tibetan script as part of wider efforts to carve out their distinct local identity within the contested Kashmir region (MacDonald 2006). In India, activists have been campaigning to have Tibetan, which is called Bhoti in India (Shakspo 2005), recognised in the national constitution as an official language (Rigzin 2016), and promote its use in Tibetan Buddhist community schools. This promotion is welcomed by groups with significant religious and historical ties and cultural affiliations with Tibet, but it has created controversies and placed pressure on smaller languages (Gohain 2012). Those seeking to nurture smaller, non-Tibetan languages in these communities also face pushback from the Indian state, which seeks to create a Tibetan Buddhist buffer in the high-altitude Himalaya as a deterrent against Chinese influence (Gautam, Panda, and Hussain 2012), and sometimes promotes Tibetic languages to do this (Pillalamarri 2014).

Although the Himalayan super-states are marginalising minority languages through the promotion of national tongues, states are not the Himalaya's sole linguistic oppressors. Languages like Tibetan and Nepali, through their local demographic dominance, official recognition, cultural prestige, and transnational support, also contribute to the

marginalisation of the Himalaya's smaller languages. Their dominance of other languages is not necessarily encouraged by states, but neither is it moderated by them. The production of vulnerability facilitates this lack of moderation that the states' practices of recognition, erasure, and subordination produce.

The states' combination of neglect and active negation means that speakers of Indigenous and minoritised languages not only experience the domineering states that have carved up their cultures, but also a complex and constantly shifting fabric of local and transnational actors that wreak the slow violence of enforced language shift upon them. General indifference towards these populations only dissipates when strategic interests cynically exploit them or when they become objects of open hostility. Speakers of these languages will be the first to lose and the last to benefit from the mounting tensions, increasing militarisation, and degrading environment of the Himalaya. Like the gradually degrading environment, they are subject to the slow violence of the state and its debilitating effects.

There is, furthermore, a growing body of evidence that suggests language and cultural loss can contribute to environmental degradation. This link has been documented in the Tibetan grasslands (Cencetti 2011), and in many other places around the world (Flint *et al.* 2011; McGregor *et al.* 2010). Language and cultural loss leads to the loss of local environmental knowledge. The importance of minoritised languages and their relationship to local geographies is still under-reported and under-studied in the Himalayan region. While this degradation is a consequence of securitisation and militarisation, it is hard to see how sociocultural and environmental turmoil will bring security.

Conclusion: a new Himalayan research agenda for IR

This article has sought to show how cultural, political and environmental changes intersect in the Himalaya. Militarisation and the resultant surge of troops into the mountains threaten the region's fragile ecologies, and the region's territorialisation has a symbiotic relationship both with increased numbers of tourists and hydropower projects. India's and China's competitive dam building, in particular, threaten their shared water resources and preclude their proper management. Along with this linguistic destruction comes the destruction of environmental-custodian cultures. Resurgent, developmentalist nationalism and competitive state-making are eliminating the region's smaller languages and associated cultures. These people and environments are threatened in interdependent ways.

Despite this, in IR theory, the Himalaya has, with few exceptions, appeared as the site of India–China-Pakistan contestation. Questions of security are doubtless a key constitutive element of what is taking place. But any attempts to resolve the region's unsustainable tensions must grasp how its environment, culture, language, and security are interrelated. State-making and militarisation in the Himalaya is already creating disastrous results for local peoples and for the global climate. Analysis of India–China-Pakistan tensions that do not take these circumstances into account distorts its realities.

These issues are all emerging across disputed borders. They are inseparable from one another. They are intensely international. IR needs to engage in a new, interdisciplinary research agenda, to interrogate and unpick the cultural and environmental

destruction that are accompanying international politics in the Himalaya, in ways that no longer subordinate local peoples and environments to the security of the international state. This can be accomplished, for example, through taking in constructivist insights on state identity formation, postcolonial understandings of imperial legacies in contemporary international affairs, green IR's emphasis on environmental destruction, to examine the interaction between political authority in the region and its environment.

Notes

1. Partly due to space constraints, we focus on the China-India region of the Himalaya. We acknowledge, however, that similar issues exist on all disputed borders, particularly India-Pakistan region, along with factors unique to that area.
2. This has been well established, particularly in anthropological and ethnographic studies of the erstwhile Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir (Gagné 2017; Smith 2013), and in historical studies of Tibet (Gros 2020).
3. Other states including Tajikistan, Turkey, Egypt and Ethiopia continue to build large dams, with support from international financiers, see: Menga and Swyngedouw (2018). China's and India's construction rate far exceeds the number of dams being constructed elsewhere, see: Mulligan, van Soesbergen, and Sáenz (2020).

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