Journal of ELT and Education
ISSN (Print): 2618-1290, ISSN (Online): 2663-1482
2025, Volume 8, Issue 4, Page: 146-160
Center for Academic Research and Development (CARD)

The Politics of Cartography in South Asia: A Contemporary Perspective

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Abstract: This research paper explores the questions: why do some states in South Asia and their neighbours resort to the politics of unilateral cartographic assertion? and what consequences may result for these countries from such practice? Based on a qualitative methodology, combining the expert opinions from scholars of the relevant field, and studying several cases from South Asia through extensive analysis of the available literature, this study illustrates that the practice of unilateral map-making is deployed by the South Asian countries and their neighbours to serve domestic political purposes, and secure geopolitical and strategic interests. Correspondingly, it also contends that engagement of the states in a psychological warfare using cartography in the South Asian context deteriorates the fragile inter-state relations and consequentially, may culminate in instigating large-scale military confrontations in a region which is already plagued with a historical legacy of regional conflict and confrontations.

Keywords: Cartography, linkage of unilateral map-making with politics, psychological warfare, war by cheaper means, South Asia

Introduction

Historically, Cartography has long transcended its traditional role as a technical practice of representing geographical and territorial reality. Being tethered to power, identity, and territoriality for centuries, maps have become a formidable political instrument adept at shaping worldviews, legitimising authority, and projecting strategic intent. Cartographic practices have been deliberately mobilised to make territorial claims, influence perceptions, and manufacture geopolitical narratives in all eras, be it during the age of colonial expansions or the era of Cold War tumult. Even today, the political instrumentalisation of maps both in domestic and global politics has not only persisted but intensified, particularly in regions with countries having contentious borders and unresolved territorial disputes. South Asia, one of the least integrated and most volatile regions of the world due to asymmetric power relations, perpetual rivalries, and a historical legacy of colonial border demarcation that left behind numerous contested frontiers, has been a geopolitical hotspot over the years. In such an embroiled reality, this region has now typified itself as a subtle yet consequential battleground where some of the countries of this region and their neighbours have been unilaterally resorting to cartography as a political instrument of asserting the territorial claim, stretching the geopolitical influence, and engaging in symbolic provocations.

In contemporary South Asia, the unilateral cartographic exertion for political purposes has proliferated alarmingly. Both powerful and smaller South Asian states namely India, Pakistan, and Nepal, and extra-regional neighboring states namely China and Myanmar have deployed maps and other cartographic expressions as tools of reinforcing territorial narratives both in domestic and global

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Citation: Alif, A. R., Easha, S. S., & Shuvo, M. S. H. (2025). The Politics of Cartography in South Asia: A Contemporary Perspective. *Journal of ELT and Education, 8*(4), 146-160. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17849986
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arena, waging a war in papers than in battlegrounds by cheaper means, 'tit for tat' attempt, domestic political mobilization, and geostrategic signaling. The consequences of the politics of cartography in the context of this region, however, can be far-reaching. Further to the fueling of psychological warfare, such unilateral and provocative actions have augmented the levels of mistrust, deteriorated already bittersweet bilateral relations, and nonetheless, in the case of the neighbours with nuclear capabilities, they can be a menace of ominous military confrontations with potentially dreadful implications.

Against this backdrop, understanding the contemporary dynamics of the politics of cartography in South Asia has become critically important. This research paper makes an investigation to identify the causes behind the surge of unilateral cartographic exercises, and how such practices shape the dynamics of the inter-state relations and security architecture of this region. Drawing on qualitative analysis of expert opinions, prominent case studies, and prominent literatures including books, journals, newspaper and website articles, and policy documents etc., this study argues that the politics of cartography in South Asia epitomizes a deliberate political and strategic behavior of the South Asian states and their neighbors which is deeply rooted in both domestic political calculations and broader geopolitical ambitions. Ultimately, the research paper underscores that although the maps may lack evidentiary legal value in territorial adjudication, cartography can be a potent political instrument whose unilateral production can aggravate regional tensions and subvert the prospects for cooperation in an already fragile region.

Review of Literature

The Politics of Cartography as a Global Phenomenon in the Academic Discourse

International Cartographic Association (ICA) in its Strategic Plan (2003-2011) defines map as a symbolised representation of geographic reality that presents selected features or characteristics, resulting from the creative effort of its author's execution of choices for the purpose of depicting relevant spatial relationships. However, the limitation of this definition comes from the use of the phrase 'geographical reality' since the production of maps entails many other elements apart from the geographical reality. Kraak and Fabrikant (2017) defined a map as the "visual representation of an environment", where the word 'visual' refers to a visual interface that projects an abstraction of the envisaged environment. The environment could be a dynamically evolving geographic or perceived reality of an artificial or simulated environment, etc. (Midtbø et al., 2021).

As an academic discipline, the study of maps is called cartography. To illustrate more, the art or the science of making, designing and studying maps is called Cartography. Cartography, as an academic discipline, not only represents reality but also facilitates the understanding of political elements such as power relations, territoriality and sovereignty in the global system. From history, it has been evident that cartographic expressions, especially maps, were both used and misused to dominate the views and understandings of people about the world and regulate the dominant discourses surrounding international relations. Because the maps are not merely used just to disseminate cartographic information but to deliver narratives with a purpose and agenda, they have always been used as a key instrument for the cause of nation building, colonial power projections, the control of distant imperial lands and claiming disputed territories. But the most important use of maps involves the territorialization of a definite space by which the true image of a state is portrayed, since territory does not precede a map; rather. space attains territorial status through bounding practices that include mapping (Dodge et al., 2009).

Instrumentalisation of maps for cultural and political purposes started during the Renaissance, which is more identical to the contemporary phenomenon of cartographic propaganda that is seen in today's world. During that era, competition over the limited resources among the city-states of the Italian heartlands instigated the use of maps for military and strategic purposes (Barber & Harper, 2010). Even today, maps are often considered an important instrument of power to reflect the changing geographical and political imagination of a state. Modern states now have rigorous control over the

production and circulation of maps since cartography is recognised as a powerful tool against neighbours with disputed boundaries and territories. In many cases, mapping is carried out by defense forces and militaries. For instance, Argentina and India carry out the production of maps by their militaries (Dodds, 2007). Besides the political and cultural instrumentalization of maps, the use of cartographic representations in international politics is an age-old phenomenon since it dates back to as early as the 19th and the 20th century when postcards, maps, giant images of animals, and cartoons were used by many countries for communicating and projecting the idea of territoriality and identity, for claiming disputed territories, and even for striking fear in the minds of their adversaries (Carlson, 2009).

One of the major concerns regarding cartography is that maps not only need to be selective with the representation of truth but also can exclude and exaggerate reality in a partisan manner. Moreover, since maps have the power to construct an image in the minds of the users, they can often be misleading if they are used malignly as a weapon of propaganda. With the rise of modern states, the use of cartographic representations and propaganda maps increased significantly. In the course of time, the use of propaganda maps surged to a significant extent during the interwar period in Germany. Such use became more rigorous during the Second World War in the hands of the Nazis as an efficient instrument of geopolitics (Boria, 2008). However, the more overt use of maps as propaganda weapons was seen during the Cold War period when US cartographers intentionally made the Soviet Union larger to exaggerate the rise of Communism, making it more intimidating and threatening to other states (Black, 1997).

Historically, the idea of Europe that never existed before emerged during the Renaissance, not only as a definite territorial space but also of a particular civilisation inhabiting it through the decisive use of maps as a political discourse that configured the evocative political idea of a modern political authority based on strict territorial boundaries. The persistent cartographic expressions depicting the borders of Europe have been drawn and redrawn to portray the territorial ambitions, rally support for the geopolitical projects of conquest, border and resources and diffuse a tale of Europeanness. Cartography has played an instrumental role in naturalising these arbitrary political and geopolitical actions that have been undertaken for the sake of Europeanisation. Since power and geography have always been intimate bedfellows throughout history, mapmaking has strolled together with the political desire of territorial control and geopolitical conquest to tailor the historical-cartographic dresses around the imagination of Europe as a prestigious territorial and geopolitical entity (Lacy & Houtum, 2015).

During World War I, which was fought mainly but not exclusively in Europe and the Near East, both the central and allied powers received momentous support from the Department of Cartography, although the primacy of cartography of the battlefields was not conceived after the first shot was fired. Rather, to the contrary, official cartography and mapping exercises became important to identify and depict the ‘theatres of war’ at the outbreak of hostilities and destruction in most involved nations (Demhardt, 2018).

On an invitation from the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) in 2015, the prominent cartographer Philippe Rekacewiz shared his views on use of colors in mapmaking in context of the display of USSR in red or in pink by the European mapmakers since the World War I to the end of the cold war for representing an ideological view of the world (Lacoste, 2015). In contemporary Europe, cartography has been used as a propaganda tool to spearhead the hybrid warfare in the Context of Russia’s recent aggression against Ukraine. The experience of using tendentiously falsified maps for depicting, as well as distorting the borders of Ukraine inaccurately on various cartographic images of certain world-famous map producers and distributors by Russia, also falls in the category of an example of ‘Mapaganda’ that connotes the use of cartographic products for propaganda purposes (Lepetiuk et al., 2024).

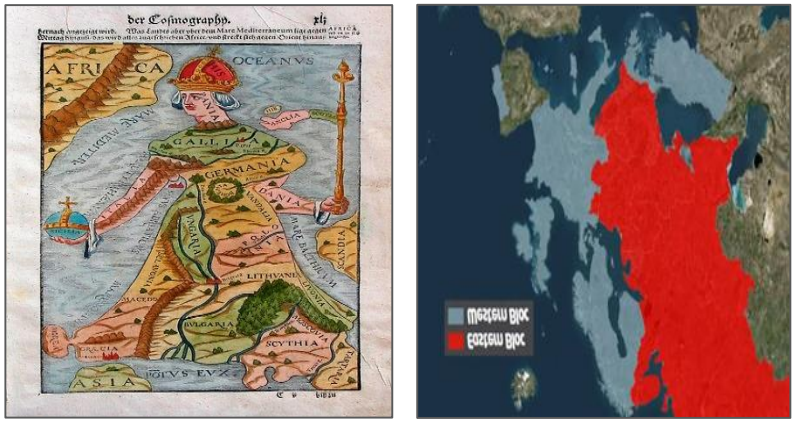


Figure 1. Territoriality of Europe defined with 'Europa Regina' in the left (Alvarez, 2025) and use of propaganda map during the Cold War in the right (What was the Cold War?, 2019) of the figure.

Cartography, as the processes and contexts of the production and use of maps, played a monumental role in shaping the colonial encounters of the continent and the worldview regarding its geographic reality. There was a cyclical coherence in the relationship between cartography and colonialism that helped to frame the colonial design and visions of the African territory and spatiality (Braun, 2024). One of the most prominent global maps used for educational and commercial purposes, called Mercator projection, originally published by a cartographer by the name of Gerarus Mercator for maritime navigation in 1569, is one of such cartographic pieces that portrayed distorted land masses, magnified regions near the poles, such as North America and Greenland, while shrinking Africa and South America. Although the criticisms of the Mercator projection, in which Greenland and Africa appear to be about the same size, albeit the size of the continent of Africa is fourteen times larger than Greenland, it is not new; it is still commonly prevalent in classrooms, commercial and tech platforms (Banchereau, 2025). However, the African Union has now backed a recent movement and advocacy campaign that demands the replacement of the 16th-century Mercator world map with the 2018 Equal Earth projection, designed to portray the relative sizes of countries and continents more accurately (Agbetiloye, 2025).

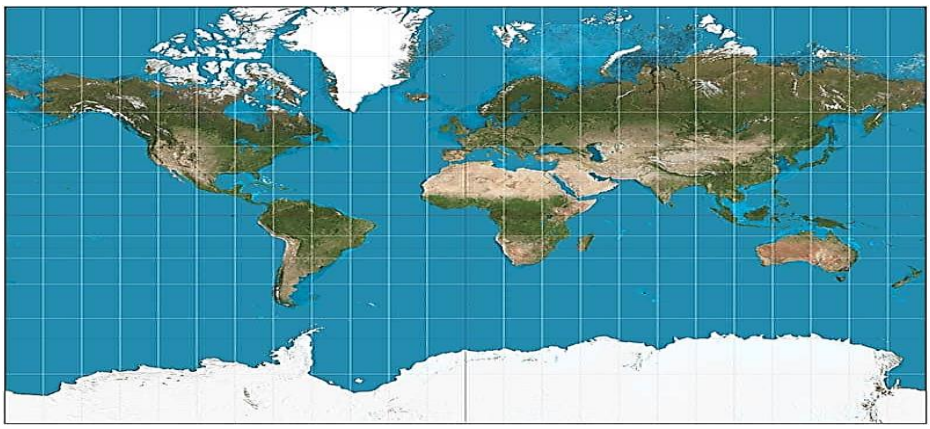


Figure 2. The prominent map known as 'Mercator projection' was used for educational and commercial purposes (Mukunth, 2025).

There are several other cases of use of cartographic politics from Latin America and Asia where states resorted to cartographic expressions against their neighbouring countries. Most recently, the Latin American state Venezuela held a referendum to reassert its territorial claims on Guyana's Essequibo region. Immediately after the referendum, the Nicolas Maduro-led government changed the official map of Venezuela to include the Essequibo region as its territory and threatened the people to prosecute any Venezuelans who would use the old map. To make the tone more hostile, The Venezuelan government insinuated in many occasions that it would be willing to take Essequibo by force and to underscore the threat, the Venezuelan military conducted exercises simulating an invasion along the border, rebuilding border infrastructure and facilities, conducting naval patrols in the river, and moving Iranian-made missile boats closer to Guyana's Atlantic coast (Bosworth, 2024). In the historical context of the territorial dispute and conflict between Israel and Palestine, it has been evident that both Israel and the Palestinian Authority use cartography and maps in their educational systems to foster the national identity and solidarity among the students, since people see maps as identical to territory and as the accurate representation of the geographical and political reality (Medzini, 2012). Likewise, cartography has been used by states in territorial disputes which is evident in several other cases including the showcasing of the entire Belize as part of central American Guatemala in maps kept in Guatemalan historical museums, and the inclusion of the 'Islas Malvinas' in the maps printed in Argentina even after their humiliating defeat in Falklands war (Neuman, 2012). Correspondingly, cartography has evolved into a potent instrument in East Asia, where states compete over not only land and sea, but also over historical narratives and symbolic representation of cartography. In fact, the East Asian nationalist politics is shaped by this growing role of cartography (Nieuwenhuis, 2013).



Figure 3. Cartographic assertion of the Essequibo region of Guyana by Venezuela (Phillips, 2023)

Methodology

There are several methodologies available for research in Social Sciences. Out of them, since this research mainly depends on the scholarly views and perspectives from the relevant fields including Political Science, International Relations, Geography, Legal, and Strategic Studies etc., qualitative methodology is used in this research to gather both the expert opinions of the scholars from the relevant fields, and other relevant information regarding the prominent cases of the unilateral cartographic adventurism in the South Asian context.

This research paper is based on both primary and secondary data drawing on Key Informant Interview (KII) of the scholars from the relevant field, and the extensive analysis of the relevant literature including relevant books, journal articles, newspapers and website articles, policy and issue briefs etc. to answer the research questions and substantiate the arguments in the above-mentioned context.

Results and Discussion

South Asia, the southern subregion of Asia defined by both geographical and ethno-cultural terms, consists of the countries, namely Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. It is one of the most heterogeneously volatile and least integrated regions of the world due to the asymmetry of its geography, perpetual rivalry between India and Pakistan, lack of intra-regional connectivity, and the absence of an effective regional mechanism for fostering regional cooperation. In addition, most of the countries in this region are plagued with territorial disputes with their regional neighbours that arose from the historical legacy of colonial demarcation of borders (Reza, 2015). Further to that, the geopolitical scenario of this region has become tight and competitive due to the growing hegemonic rivalry among regional and global superpowers, including the USA, China, and India, for establishing geostrategic control over the region. In such a tumultuous environment, the use of cartography as an instrument for political purposes has become a new source of instability in this region. Through the unilateral publication of newer forms of maps and the inclusion of provocative cartographic expressions in postcards, cartoons, e-passports, visas, murals, etc., some countries from South Asia and some of their extra-regional neighbours are waging war against one another with cartography and maps. The country-wise cases of the unilateral production of cartographic expressions and newer versions of maps by the South Asian countries and their extra-regional neighbours are illustrated here in this part of this research paper.

China: It is often said that China has no parallel in terms of using cartography against its neighbours, with whom it shares territorial and maritime borders. Historically, from the case of the South China Sea to the Arunachal pradesh of India, China has resorted to numerous mapmaking and other cartographic exercises to claim the disputed territories, and they are mostly directed against India since both countries have disputed territories between them. However, newer forms of cartographic assertions by China have only been manifested since the beginning of the last decade. For example, China claimed Arunachal Pradesh of India as part of Chinese territory in the Chinese E-passport with watermarks issued in 2012. A few years later, in 2014, following a border stand-off with India in Northern Ladakh, China took another carto-political attempt by publishing a 'Vertical Atlas' where Arunachal Pradesh of India was depicted as part of its South Tibet region. Yet again in 2015, the state-owned Chinese Central Television (CCTV), while telecasting a program, kept a morphed map of India without the entire then state of J&K in the background, and quite interestingly, the same cartographic practice was exercised during the State visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to China.

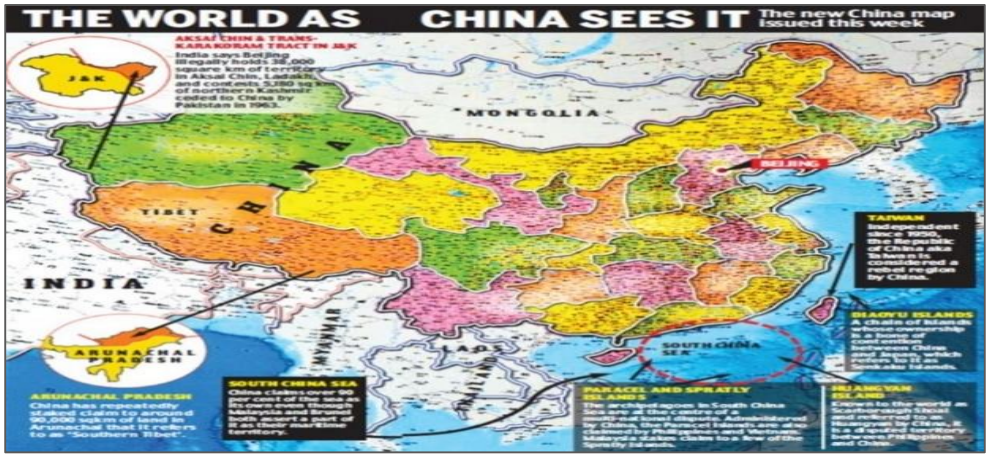


Figure 4. The 'Vertical Atlas' of China (MC & Shukla, 2020).

After two border stand-offs in Doklam (2017) and Eastern Ladakh (2020), Sino-Indian relations hit a new nadir during the last few years. However, China's cartographic adventurism through distorted maps continued even in such tumultuously contentious bilateral relations when Sky Maps – China's authority on digital maps released some controversial maps that claimed Indian territories twice in the year 2020 (MC & Shukla, 2020). To do the same again what China has been regularly doing since at least 2006, the rising superpower published the 2023 edition of standard map on the website of the standard map service hosted by its Ministry of Natural Resources where it reclaimed Arunachal Pradesh as a part of southern Tibet after releasing a map renaming 11 places of Arunachal as being within southern Tibet in Chinese in April that year (Chopra, 2023). Last, but not the least, China has most recently released a new list of names for 27 locations in Arunachal Pradesh of India, that is believed by the Indians, not merely a cartographic endeavor but instead a part of the wider Chinese approach of using symbolic assertion in territorial disputes to legitimize the contested claims and challenge India's administration of the area (Iyer, 2025).

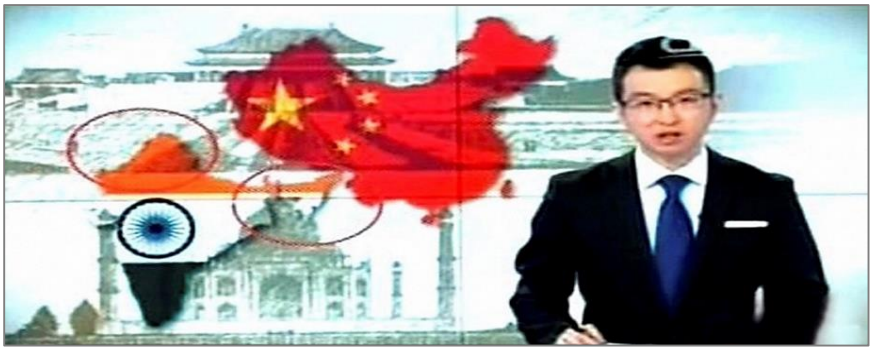


Figure 5. The state-owned Chinese Central Television (CCTV), while telecasting a program, kept a morphed map of India without the entire then state of J&K in the background (MC & Shukla, 2020).

India: One of the most prominent features of the South Asian region stems from the centrality of India in the region, which makes it distinct from the other regions of the world. India is the largest country in terms of geography, demography, economy, and military power compared to other countries of this region (Singh, 2025). Such centrality has put India in an advantageous position to pursue a hegemonic aspiration of becoming the uncontested leader of the region through relevant cultural and political approaches. While realising the hegemonic potential, during the last two decades, India has come into limelight in the global arena alongside its regional pole position by demonstrating their desires and efforts in assuming leadership and customising the region. However, the role of India as a regional leader has not been celebrated widely by its small neighbouring states and eternal rivals (Mabrur, 2025). Besides, on several occasions, India has gone to the extent of making unilateral cartographic exercises to claim the territories of the neighbouring states. The recent episode of the use of unilateral cartography from India came up with a new political map in 2019 that showed Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (POK) and the Gilgit-Baltistan region of Pakistan, China-occupied Aksai Chin, and the disputed Kalapani region as the Indian Territory. Such a unilateral cartographic endeavour by India was strongly resented by its neighbours, namely China, Pakistan, and Nepal. The release of a new political map by the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs has been followed by the installation of a map in the parliament building of India that includes parts of Afghanistan, and the entire Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Such cartographic maneuvering in the newly made legislative infrastructure of India riled its South Asian neighbours, including Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan. It is not unusual for the legislative edifice of a country to be adorned with historic symbols of the nation's greatness. However, when India launched the new Sansad Bhaban in New Delhi by unveiling a cartographic mural that claimed territories of the neighbours, its neighbours were highly agitated and in uproar (Aowsaf, 2023).



Figure 6. Assertion of the Akhanda Bharat map in the parliament building murals by India in the left (Aowsaf, 2023) and the political map of India published in 2019 in the right (NH Web Desk, 2019) of the figure.

Pakistan: Pakistan, the eternal rival of India in South Asia, has mostly been at odds with it since their emergence as an independent country from the British Empire in 1947, and these two South Asian rivals have had several wars fought against one another to date. As that historical rivalry underscored, the India-Pakistan bilateral relationship has deteriorated remarkably in the last decade, especially since the ascension of Narendra Modi as the Indian Prime Minister in 2014 (Ganguly, 2022). As the episodes of contention progressed, when India abrogated Article 370 and published a new political map in 2019, Pakistan also unveiled its new political map on August 4, 2020, being provoked by the unilateral cartographic move of India on the first anniversary of the abrogation of Article 370, with which Jammu and Kashmir was granted special status. This unilateral publication of the political map of Pakistan claiming the entire Jammu & Kashmir and parts of Gujarat as its territories was denounced by the Government of India without any delay by calling it a 'political absurdity' and 'ridiculous assertions having no legal validity or international credibility (Rao, 2020).

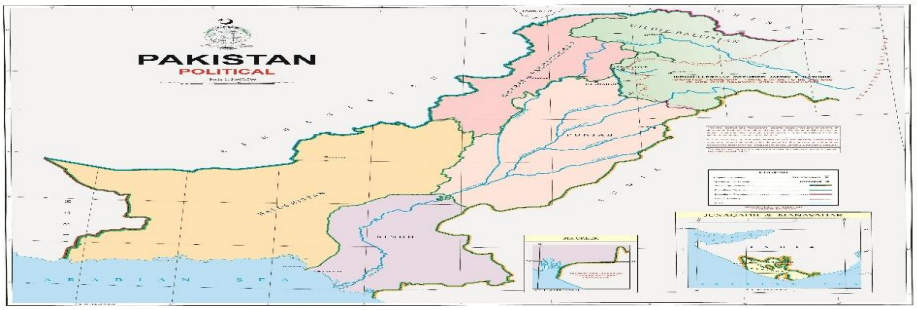


Figure 7. The political map of Pakistan unveiled in 2020 (Siddiqui, 2020).

Nepal: Small states are always constrained by dilemmas and limitations regarding their foreign policy choices. Nepal, a miniature South Asian country that is landlocked by India, has a historical relationship with its landlocking neighbour, largely embedded in deep-rooted history, geographical linkages, socio-cultural, economic and people-to-people affiliations. Despite such multi-dimensional ties, the bilateral relationship between these two nations has been bittersweet as Nepal thinks that India's historic treatment of Nepal as its subordinate is highly dominating. The bilateral relationship between Nepal and India reached the rock bottom after the 2015 economic blockade by India, which was a result of India's hegemonic assertion over Nepal's new constitution promulgated in September 2015 (Thapa, 2020). A few years later, after the publication of the map in 2019, and the inauguration of a strategically important link road by India through Lipulekh in 2020, Nepal published a new political map encompassing the areas of Limpiyadhura, Kalapani and Lipulekh as its territory. With the addition of these disputed territories that are currently occupied by India, the total area of Nepal

rose from 147,181 to 147,516 square kilometres, adding another 335 square kilometres of land to its territory (The Kathmandu Post, 2020).



Figure 8. The new political map of Nepal (The Kathmandu Post, 2020).

Myanmar: Another recent case of cartographic aggression has originated from the Bangladesh-Myanmar bilateral context, where Myanmar resorted to unilateral cartographic exercise on several occasions to claim the Saint-Martin's Island of Bangladesh as its territory. Saint Martin's, the only coral island of Bangladesh, was part of British India when Myanmar got separated in 1937. After the partition of India in 1947, the island popularly known as Narikel Jinjira became a territory of Pakistan, and independent Bangladesh got the ownership after the Liberation War of 1971. In 1974, with a signed agreement between the two states, it was declared that this Island is part of the territory of Bangladesh. Even the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) clearly mentioned that the Island belong to Bangladesh when it became triumphant in the maritime boundary dispute against Myanmar in March 2012. Correspondingly, there exists no historical dispute regarding the ownership of St. Martin's Island to date. So, if it is traced back to history, it can be easily found that the Island was never a part of Myanmar. However, the Government of Myanmar showed this Island as a part of their territory with a similar colour used for Myanmar when its 2015-2018 Myanmar Information Management Unit map was updated on 6 October 2018. The map was then published on two international websites (Bhuiyan, 2018).



Figure 9. Cartographic claiming of the Saint Martin's Island by Myanmar (Bhuiyan, 2018)

The Ambassador of Myanmar in Dhaka was summoned by the Government of Bangladesh following the incident, and a note issuing a strong protest was handed over to him by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Government of Bangladesh. The Myanmar envoy said that St. Martin's Island was mistakenly shown as part of his country's territory. Similar cartographic assertion involving the Island was again directed against Bangladesh by Myanmar in February 2019. Again, the envoy of Myanmar was summoned to convey the strong resentment of Bangladesh regarding the issue, and he acknowledged the mistake to guarantee the rectification of the map (Animrtanjir, 2019).

Causes behind the Surge of the Geopolitical Use of Cartography in South Asia

From the analysis of available literature, it was found that unilateral mapmaking and cartographic expressions in postcards, giant images, cartoons, etc., were used to secure political and geostrategic interests of the powerful states through manipulation of the view of people, projection of power, claim over disputed territory, and territory of the other states, and spread of propaganda. However, Maps do not fall into the category of proof that can be used as evidence, for territorial entitlement, because the correctness of the maps varies from case to case, and they often replicate expressions of the will of the state rather than depicting reality. The evidentiary value of the maps is counted only if they are published before the emergence of the dispute. As the maps do not possess significant evidentiary status in either territorial claim or resolving border disputes, the exercise of unilateral cartography and map-making assertion is regarded as a meaningless exercise by scholars in the relevant field. Then why have the states in South Asia and their neighbours been regularly resorting to such 'politics of cartography' in recent years? To answer this causal skepticism, in this part of the study, the most common causes behind the surge of carto-politics in South Asia have been identified, although these causes are not uniformly applicable to all the cases of cartographic assertions in South Asia.

Territorial Claiming and Influencing Opinions

Use of maps and other cartographic expressions for strategic purposes is usually seen during peacetime, which is more psychological in nature. As the distortion of maps involves the manipulation of the views of domestic and international audiences for perceiving the administrator's claim of a specific territory, it further blurs the difference between legal and factual claims of the disputed territory to give the aggressor state an edge in the territorial dispute (Mc & Shukla, 2020). South Asia, historically, is not only one of the most volatile regions of the world, but it is also a victim of the unresolved territorial disputes among the states of this region and their neighbours. Three regional actors and an extra-regional state, namely India, Pakistan, Nepal and China, respectively, suffer from unresolved territorial disputes with their neighbours as they often do not comply with the border demarcations by the colonial powers that exist till today. As the party states to these unresolved territorial disputes do not acknowledge the border demarcations resulting from the colonial legacy, rather than engaging in violent war or peaceful diplomatic measures, their governments often resort to cartographic assertions to claim the disputed territories as their own. However, only the case of the Saint Martin's Island, which is undisputedly owned and protected by Bangladesh, Myanmar resorted to the unilateral cartographic exercises for claiming the ownership of the island without having a history of previously governing it. Thus, it is conspicuously discernible that claiming disputed or aspired territory has a linkage with cartographic exercises performed by the South Asian states and their neighbour, which is shown by the following table:

Table 1. Prepared by the authors illustrating the linkage of the politics of cartography with territorial aspiration and claiming of disputed territory in South Asia

Disputed / Aspired Territory	Party States	Resorting State	Victim State
Jammu and Kashmir Siachen Glacier Saltoro Ridge Sir Creek Gilgit-baltistan	Pakistan-India	Both	Both
Aksai Chin Arunachal Pradesh Trans-Karakoram Tract	China-India	Both	Both
Kalapani	India-Nepal	Both	Both
Saint Martin's Island	Bangladesh-Myanmar	Myanmar	Bangladesh

When states remain party to unresolved territorial disputes or aspire to claim a territory owned by another state, they always attempt to find ways to claim the aspired or disputed territory as their own. Because a successful attempt to claim the aspired or disputed territory as own enables the government of the disputing or aspiring state influence both the opinions of its own citizens and the global audiences. However, there are no practical ways for a disputing or aspiring state other than resorting to military force and cartographic propaganda for claiming the disputed or aspired territory as its own. As military confrontations for establishing the territorial claim over disputed or aspired territory come with the risk of bloodshed and destruction, the aspiring or disputing states sometimes resort to cartographic adventurism to influence both domestic and global opinions regarding their claim. To typify, all the above-mentioned countries of the South Asian region and their extra-regional counterparts, namely India, Pakistan, Nepal, China, and Myanmar, have performed such unilateral cartographic exercises with a view to asserting claims over a disputed or aspired territory owned and controlled by another state for influencing both domestic and global opinions towards their claim.

Testifying the Will of the Counterpart

As the borders in South Asia remain ghost-like due to a lack of proper delineation on paper and demarcation on soil, there always remain anxieties of military confrontations between the disputing parties. In such apprehensive scenarios that have arisen from the historically unresolved territorial disputes, sometimes the relatively powerful states attempt to assume both the willingness and preparedness of their counterparts regarding military confrontation by claiming both disputed and aspired territories as their own through the publication of fantasy maps. For instance, regionally ambitious states like China and India want to assert and understand the will of their counterpart by claiming the disputed territories as their own through cartographic exercises. Similarly, Myanmar, another militarily growing extra-regional state from Southeast Asia, also ventures similar cartographic practice to measure the military preparedness and mindset of its counterpart, the neighboring state Bangladesh in engaging in military confrontations through the projection of the Saint Martin's Island as own territory in its map amid already having a relation of turbulence and mistrust due to the Rohingya issue between these two countries.

War by Cheaper Means

Since there exist unresolved border disputes among the South Asian states with some of their neighbouring countries, historically, these disputes have resulted in acrimonious relations among these states. If one state unilaterally attempts to occupy a disputed territory using military power, it comes with the risk of horrific consequences, including nuclear escalation, since three states, namely China, India and Pakistan, exercising such cartographic aggression hold nuclear weapons. To illustrate, if Pakistan attempts to capture India governed part of Kashmir or India plans to take back the Pakistan-controlled part of Kashmir, it comes with the risk of a large-scale conflict that may culminate in a nuclear war. Similarly, any Chinese venture to capture parts of Arunachal Pradesh increases the risk of military confrontation with India, which may also end with nuclear escalation. Resultantly, the parties to these border disputes also know that the conventional military balance with their counterpart will not allow them to take any unilateral military actions for capturing disputed territories. Thus, the regionally ambitious states like India and China, and relatively powerful Pakistan, want to be revanchist on paper rather than soil, as cartographic aggression is a war by cheaper means that comes with no risk of bloodshed and demolition (Rej, 2020).

'Tit for Tat' Attempt

As cartographic assertion is a cheaper and safer way of asserting the claim over a disputed territory, there are several historical examples of resorting to cartographic exercise by growing superpower China, especially against India. However, other states such as India, Pakistan and Nepal have not let themselves fall behind in resorting to the publication of the propaganda maps for responding to the unilateral actions of their neighbouring rival states. During the recent episode of cartographic war in South Asia that was initiated first by India, Nepal and Pakistan also deployed a

similar response against their neighbour India by publishing new political maps that claimed parts of India as their own. For this reason, some scholars believe that the escalation of Cartographic assertion through maps in South Asia has been prevalent as part of the 'Tit for Tat' effort of some South Asian states to make an opportunistic response to the unilateral actions of their counterparts. However, China's release of newer maps claiming territory of other neighbours cannot be taken as a 'Tit for tat' exercise because publishing fantasy maps to claim disputed territory without any cartographic provocation is not an act of response. However, the release of newer map by Myanmar and Chinese cartographic claiming of the territory of other neighbours cannot be taken as a 'Tit for tat' effort because publishing fantasy maps to claim disputed territory without any cartographic provocation is not an act of response, but a move for initiating cartographic jab.

Domestic political mobilization

For many years, Cartography and propaganda maps have been used as an instrument of instilling nationalism among the citizens. By claiming disputed territory as their own, the ruling elites attempt to domesticate the growth of a nationalistic sense among the people, which in turn stimulates consolidation of their own positions in domestic politics (Noorani, 2020). Some scholars argued that the abrogation of Article 370 to scrap the special status of Kashmir and the unveiling of a new political map by India were leveraged by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to whip up a sense of nationalism to get an edge over the political opponents in domestic politics. There exists a similar opinion regarding the recent cartographic adventurism by Prime Ministers, namely KP Sharma Oli of Nepal and Imran Khan of Pakistan. There were allegations that both were also motivated by the opportunity of reviving their own positions in domestic politics, which were endangered due to domestic political and economic woes. Through the authorisation of cartographic exercises against neighbouring India to encourage the nationalistic psychology among their citizens for reviving their own positions (Bhadrakumar, 2020)

Consequences of the politics of cartography in South Asia

Though the unilateral use of propaganda maps does not pose an immediate security threat in the South Asian context, it has some adverse effects on the bilateral relations and regional stability. In this part of the paper, the consequences of the unilateral mapmaking politics by the South Asian states and their neighbours are first identified in the following table and then elaborated:

Table 2. Prepared by the authors illustrating the consequences of the politics of cartography in South Asia.

Parties engaging in the politics of Cartography	Consequences of the politics of cartography in South Asia
China-India India-Pakistan India-Nepal Bangladesh-Myanmar	1. Psychological warfare inciting border tensions. 2. Further deterioration of Inter-state Relations. 3. Perils of the future escalation of large-scale military confrontations.

Psychological warfare turning into border tensions

As political adventurism by the resorting states using cartography is deployed to assume and understand the willingness and preparedness of their rivals for military confrontations, it develops belligerent psychology in the minds of both the resorting and victim states. Thus, a kind of psychological warfare develops between the party states, which in turn instigates border tensions between them that culminate in confrontations and skirmishes. For instance, after the publication of new maps by India, China, and Pakistan, tensions that heightened in the border also stimulated a psychological war that every now and then was converted into bloody skirmishes between these neighbouring states. Similar kinds of scenarios developed between India and Nepal, and Bangladesh and Myanmar, after the unilateral practice of mapmaking. To exemplify, Nepal came up with a unilateral production of its new map and deployed troops at its border with India. In the case of the claim of the Saint Martin's Island as its own territory by Myanmar maps in 2018, Bangladesh not only

condemned such irresponsible action by summoning the diplomatic envoy of Myanmar, but also deployed troops for the first time in 22 years in 2019.

Further deterioration of inter-state relations

The acrimonious inter-state relations among South Asian states and their neighbours have deteriorated further due to these aggressive cartographic exercises. Lack of respect for the territorial sovereignty of the neighbours that became mutual through the unilateral cartographic assertions not only shrank the scope for bilateral and multilateral ties but also exacerbated the current form of poor inter-state relations to make it poorer in this region. To give an idea, bilateral relations between China and India, India and Nepal, and India and Pakistan have deteriorated to a new low after they published unilateral new maps against each other in recent years. With successive claims of the Saint Martin's Island as its own territory, Myanmar has also exacerbated the instability and mistrust in its bilateral ties with Bangladesh amid the lingering issue of Rohingya repatriation.

Perils of the potential escalation of large-scale military confrontations

The South Asian states, such as India, China, Pakistan, and Nepal, and their neighbours, China and Myanmar, have been provoking their territorial rivals through fantasy maps for a long time. These kinds of provocations are deployed by these states to express their territorial aspirations. Though this kind of abusive use of cartography has not posed a serious threat in the South Asian context, at any time, it may lead towards destructive consequences. If misjudged and miscalculated, this kind of artifice by the relatively powerful countries such as China, India, and Pakistan with nuclear capabilities for understanding the mindset and preparedness of the rivals can degenerate into serious military and nuclear confrontations to risk lives, stability and security of this region. Correspondingly, Myanmar's cartographic exertion towards the Saint Martin's Island of Bangladesh that aims at assuming the mindset and preparedness of Bangladesh towards military confrontation, also bears the risk of military escalation between countries with almost similar military capabilities. Nevertheless, cartographic practice by the tiny state of Nepal against big brother India was more likely to be a bargaining chip and a 'tit for tat' attempt; it did not come with such a threat of large-scale military battle.

Conclusion

The 'politics of cartography' has been exercised by the regional and extra-regional states of South Asia in recent years, not only to make territorial assertions and influence the opinions regarding the disputed territories but also to wage a war by cheaper means without bloodshed and destruction, to estimate the willingness and preparedness of the counterpart for waging military confrontations, and to whip up the nationalistic feelings among the people to favor the ruling elites in domestic politics. Although such unilateral cartographic drills do not come with immediate risk for the regional and extra-regional party states, they can generate psychological battles turning into border tensions, further deteriorate inter-state relations, and instigate large-scale military confrontation between the parties. But should the countries of a region like South Asia, which are thriving economically in recent decades on the one hand, and suffering from a deficit in regional integration on the other hand, afford to lose their pace of growth, and threaten stability with such a meaningless exercise? The answer is no. Since the first and foremost responsibility of a sovereign and independent state is to invigorate the nation and state-building process for promoting the welfare of its citizens, countries of this region and their neighbours should not get trapped in unnecessary animosity and disputes. If disputes arise even after being watchful, states must sort them out through diplomatic mechanisms before they get aggravated. But the way South Asian states and their extra-regional neighbours are aggravating the territorial disputes between them through cartographic assertions like unilateral map-making against each other is desolating to watch. Though unilateral use of cartography can play an instrumental role in confronting both the domestic and foreign adversaries, such use of maps is nothing but a meaningless exercise, as the maps are not universally accepted as significant evidence, except for being published before the emergence of the dispute. Therefore, the South Asian states and their neighbours should act

prudently to restrain themselves from the imaginative redrawing of international borders through fantasy maps and instead, resort to diplomatic means for resolving territorial disputes for the preservation and maintenance of the peace and stability of this region.

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The authors declare the originality of the paper.
The journal authority is not accountable for any estimations of the authors presented in the article.