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**Framing “South Asia”:  
Whose Imagined Region?**

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## ABSTRACT

The framing of regions, and in this case 'South Asia', has often been done in ostensibly objective terms. This article argues that far from being an objective exercise, framing regions in general and 'South Asia' in particular, is actually a normative and inherently normative political exercise designed to serve the interests of the 'framers'. The proposition, more specifically, is that the act of framing, in this particular context of 'South Asia', is the imposition of a particular kind of knowledge-as-power in which various peoples and complex ways of life are reduced to essentialist categories and meanings in order that they can be more easily managed and controlled by major regional and global actors. To demonstrate this, the bases of region framing used in the literature are discussed briefly and the manner in which these bases have been utilised in the framing of an 'objective' South Asian region is illustrated. The historical record is examined and a continuity is shown between the way the British colonial 'mapping' of South Asia was carried out to demonstrate the 'naturalness' of British imperial domination and the manner in which the independent Indian state has sought to frame 'South Asia' to 'prove' its 'natural hegemony' within South Asia. The conclusion suggests that there may be greater need to fuse theory and the analysis of the 'region' in order to come to a more profound understanding of the salience of the regional level of inquiry in international relations today.

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## FRAMING “SOUTH ASIA” : WHOSE IMAGINED REGION?

### Introduction

The aim of this essay will be to provide a critical reading of the basis of the region which has come to be known as ‘South Asia’ in the general literature. Regions, like other human communities such as the nation-state, are both ‘imagined’ and contested notions. This is no longer a novel argument. However, although there has been much recent work done on the social construction of regions and the politics of region-construction vis-à-vis ‘regions’ like Southeast Asia,<sup>1</sup> the South Pacific<sup>2</sup> and the Balkans<sup>3</sup>, no published work has appeared on South Asia. This is especially surprising given the sizeable literature on the politics of nation-state ‘mapping’ in the case of independent India.<sup>4</sup> This essay thus situates itself within the ‘critical-regionalism’ theoretical project, with the aim of using this theoretical prism to problematize certain authoritative ‘givens’ in the discourse of South Asian regionalism with a view to demonstrate the politics of region-mapping and the benefits and marginality to different groups such a political activity necessarily involves.

The first section of the essay will briefly discuss the conventional basis used to demarcate regions in the literature. Having understood how each of the four bases for framing region is utilised in the literature writ large, the second section will go on to show the manner in which each of these bases of region have been used to demonstrate the ‘objective’ basis of a South Asian region. The third section will show the points of contestation of each of the different bases for the ‘naturalness’ of the South Asian region. The last section of the of the essay will endeavour to examine the politics of region-mapping in the case of South Asia. It will attempt to re-examine the theoretical basis of ‘region’ generally and consider ways in which understandings gained from such a general critical analysis can be applied to the particular case of South Asia. In all, this last section will attempt to demonstrate how the politics of region

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<sup>1</sup> Ananda Rajah, "Southeast Asia: Comparatist Errors and the Construction of a Region" in *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 27, No.1,1999. (Special Issue on Reconceptualizing Southeast Asia). pp. 41-53.

<sup>2</sup> Greg Fry, “The South Pacific ‘Experiment’: Reflections on the Origins of Regional Identity”, in *The Journal of Pacific History*, Vol. 32, No.2, 1997, pp. 180-202.

<sup>3</sup> Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (London: Penguin Books, 1998). See also Partha Chatterjee’s, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

demarcation has been intimately influenced by the colonial encounter and how the shadow of the ‘colonial’ still hangs over the post-colonial as far as framing the region of South Asia is concerned. An important, though largely neglected, process that this essay will strive to highlight is the link between knowledge-as-power, regional hegemony and region demarcation.

### **Bases of Region**

In this section I will endeavour to briefly outline the four main bases for identifying ‘region’ in the contemporary literature; geography<sup>5</sup>, culture<sup>6</sup>, economics<sup>7</sup> and geopolitics<sup>8</sup>. The purpose of the exercise below will be to elucidate how these four factors have been used as foundations of region generally before proceeding later in the essay to demonstrate their use in the specific case of ‘mapping’ South Asia.

In terms of defining region, geography seems the most intuitive basis for a region. The presence of natural geographical barriers like vast oceans and high mountain ranges serve to separate certain lands from others, thus giving rise to the conception of a ‘region’ as a separate, discrete piece of territory. It is important to note, especially for the discussion on the South Asia case later, that geography alone has seldom been used as a basis for region but that geography has been one of the most important starting points or criteria in defining and delineating a ‘region’.

The second criterion or basis for a ‘region’, that of culture, has also been used widely in the literature. It is imperative to note that such cultural bases for region are often denoted as “civilisational areas”. One of the most prominent and influential illustrations of this is Huntington’s “Clash of Civilisations” argument,<sup>9</sup> which sees the world divided up into several

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<sup>5</sup> See Jaynti Prasad Garg’s, *Regionalism In International Politics* (New Delhi: Research Publications in Social Sciences, 1969). Especially relevant is the section, “The Geographical Aspects of Regionalism”, pp. 7-8.

<sup>6</sup> For a classic study, see O. W. Wolters’s, *History, Culture and Region* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982).

<sup>7</sup> For an example of the economic basis of ‘region’, see M. Bernard’s, “Regions in the Global Political Economy: Beyond the Local-Global Divide in the Formation of the Eastern Asian Region”, in *New Political Economy*, Vol.1, No.3, 1996, pp. 335-353. See also Richard Stubbs and G. R. D. Underhill (ed.), *Political Economy and the Changing Global Order* (London, Macmillan, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> An authoritative work is Barry Buzan’s, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilisations?”, in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.72, No.3, 1993, pp.22-49.

civilisational blocs. However, Huntington's use of "civilisation" is hardly typical of the use of the "civilisational" criteria in the 'regionalism' literature. This is because Huntington's conception of 'civilisational' categories does not necessarily require a geographical dimension to it while for much of the 'civilisational' claims of 'region' identification, geography is an important factor co-existing with 'culture'.<sup>10</sup> It will be instructive at this juncture to appreciate this nuance as we will see its salience in the South Asian case later.

The third basis for 'region', which has grown in importance in the contemporary discourse on region, is that of economics. The claim that the future will be increasingly characterised by a world divided up into different trade blocs represented as "economic regions" is an excellent characterisation of the economic rationale for region. It is sufficient at this point to note that economics is increasingly seen as an important basis of region.

The last basis for regional demarcation has been that of geopolitics. This line of argument owes much to Buzan's concept of "regional security complexes", whereby he argues that certain parts of the globe deserve to be 'seen' as regions because the strategic calculations of states in these particular areas were highly dependent on the dynamic of conflict/co-operation with other states in these 'areas'.<sup>11</sup> In fact, as we will note later, South Asia is most pertinent to the geopolitical basis of region-formation as it was the original model for Buzan's "regional security complex" theory.<sup>12</sup> As with the other bases of region, it will suffice here to appreciate the use of geopolitics as a basis for region-formation in the prevalent literature before going on to discuss the specific case of South Asia.

### **Bases of 'South Asia'**

Having discussed the four bases for region in the literature, this section will endeavour to investigate how each of these four bases have been used in the 'identification' and 'delineation' of the region that has come to be known as "South Asia'. The contemporary literature on South Asia understands it as a region consisting of seven countries: Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Nepal,

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<sup>10</sup> For example, the Islamic civilisation bloc, according to Huntington, is not geographically contiguous but spread out.

<sup>11</sup> Buzan, *People, States and Fear*, p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> See B. Buzan and Gowher Rizhi, *South Asian Insecurity and the Great Powers* (London: Macmillan, 1986), pp.31-32.

Bhutan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Each of the four bases of region discussed above has been used to show the viability and naturalness of such a particular framing of 'South Asia'. The remainder of this section will thus endeavour to illustrate how geography, culture, economics and geopolitics have been employed in the pursuit of 'identifying' South Asia as a regional entity.

Let us first look at how South Asia as a region has been conceived geographically. The contemporary literature has typically alluded to South Asia as a "geographically discrete region"<sup>13</sup>, one whose existence is geographically self-evident. In line with the general discussion of the earlier section on the geographical demarcation of regions, natural 'barriers' like oceans and mountain ranges have been employed in the demonstration of the 'naturalness' of the South Asian region. The geographical term of 'subcontinent' has been employed to exhibit the physical unity thus of South Asia.<sup>14</sup> In terms of mountain ranges, to borrow the words from an American college guide to the physical geography of South Asia, the "northern boundary consisting of the Himalayan Mountains, the Karakoram Range and the Hindu Kush Mountains, the eastern boundary mountains and thick forests along Myanmar (Burma) border and the western boundary (consisting of) deserts and mountains"<sup>15</sup>, have been cited as 'natural' boundaries of the South Asian region. The ocean periphery cited in this guide is the "Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea"<sup>16</sup> with the Maldivian Islands representing southern most edge of the 'natural' region of South Asia. It is imperative at this juncture to understand the implications of such a geographical demarcation of South Asia – the characteristic claim here is that the delimitation and labelling of South Asia is not a subjective framing of a certain part of the globe but that the south Asian region and its boundaries are instead an empirical geographic 'fact', a 'reality' that can be discerned by any 'objective' study of this area. This point will bear importance when the next section considers the different points of contestations against the idea of South Asia as a "geographically discrete region".

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted from Mohammed Ayoob's, *From Regional System to Regional Society: Exploring Key Variables in the Construction of Regional Order*, unpublished paper, p. 24.

<sup>14</sup> This issue of whether the use of the term 'subcontinent' is geographically accurate in describing the contemporary demarcation of South Asia is an issue that will be addressed in the next section. At this point, it must be noted that 'Indian subcontinent' and 'South Asia' have been widely used interchangeably in the literature.

<sup>15</sup> This quote is taken from a guide to South Asia's geography provided by Harper College's web site guide. See *South Asia: Defining the Realm* (<http://www.harper.cc.il.us/~mhealy/g101ilec/sasia/ssd/ssrealm/ssrealfr.htm>). Last accessed on 29<sup>th</sup> January 2000.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

The next basis of a South Asian region is that of culture. Again, with reference to the earlier general discussion on the use of culture to demarcate ‘regions’, the term ‘civilizational area’ has been used interchangeably with ‘culture’ to demonstrate the underlying ‘essence’ of South Asia.<sup>17</sup> An excellent example of the authoritative idea that South Asia can be demarcated clearly on the basis of being a ‘civilizational area’ is the comment by the present Indian foreign minister in his recent book, *Defending India*, where he states that “the Indian subcontinent is *recognised* as one of the self-contained *civilizational areas* of the world” (italics added).<sup>18</sup> This idea that South Asia is defined in terms of a shared culture is not new. The autobiography of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of independent India, is illuminating when he says that there has been a “continuity of a cultural tradition through *5000 years of history*” in the Indian subcontinent (italics added).<sup>19</sup> Lest one should doubt the dominance of this discourse of South Asia as a ‘civilizational area’, it should be noted that such views have been as authoritative in western academia as they have been within Indian elite circles. For an anthropologist writing from within the institution of Western academia, not only is South Asia ‘recognisable’ as a region due to ‘cultural traits’ but also

A person from South Asia, when walking down on the sidewalks of New York or London, is *almost always recognisable as a South Asian*, for the partial geographical isolation of the subcontinent has bred a physiological type as well as a distinctive pattern of culture (italics added).<sup>20</sup>

The implication of this statement is that similar to how “people of South Asia” could be ‘recognised’ through mere observance, the territorial space termed ‘South Asia’ was recognisable due to an observed similarity of ‘culture’. Like in the above mentioned geographical basis of South Asia, ‘detached observance’ allowed a learned ‘discovery’ of a cultural ‘reality’ known as South Asia. These self-confident positivist claims will be useful to recall in the context of the next two sections of this paper.

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<sup>17</sup> For one of the earlier works that discusses the cultural ‘essence’ of South Asia, see Cora Du Bois’s chapter, “Cultural Facets of South Asian Regionalism”, in Henry Brodie et al. (ed.), *South Asia In the World Today* (Chicago: university of Chicago Press, 1950), pp.27-44.

<sup>18</sup> See Jaswant’s Singh’s, *Defending India* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), p. xiv. Again, with reference to the point made earlier in footnote 14, it must be appreciated that the term ‘South Asia’ and the ‘Indian subcontinent’ have been used interchangeably here.

<sup>19</sup> See Nehru’s autobiography, *The Discovery of India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 52.

<sup>20</sup> Clarence Maloney, *Peoples of South Asia* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1974), p. 43.



The fashioning of South Asia on an economic basis is probably the most recent of the four foundations used to demarcate a South Asian region. The formation of the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) in 1985 signalled the beginning of the attempt to define South Asia on economic foundations. The 1995 SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement is often hailed as an important milestone in the building of economic linkages among the countries in the region.<sup>21</sup> Like the use of geography and culture, there have been attempts to conceive of South Asia as a 'natural' economic region, with obvious inspiration from other regions like North East Asia which have economics linkages as an important basis of conceiving 'region'.<sup>22</sup> The fact that the states within 'South Asia' have for a long period followed a more inward looking development strategy, as compared to the South East Asian and East Asian countries, is often cited as an important commonality for forming the basis of an economic 'region'.<sup>23</sup> The general similarity of the different national economies, in terms of production and trade patterns is, especially when contrasted with the economies of countries in surrounding 'regions', therefore seen as an important argument for the economic basis for 'region'.<sup>24</sup> As would be quite apparent by now, economics has been used as demarcating tool in the case of South Asia through 'negative' regionalization. Essentially, this argument posits that the South Asian 'region' is made up of the given seven states because they are 'different' from and 'rejected' by the adjacent region of Southeast Asia and East Asia on the basis of unimpressive economic growth rates since independence.<sup>25</sup> However, as will be discussed in the next section, claims of South Asia as a 'natural' economic region can hardly be termed "typical" especially when compared in relation to the other three bases of region in South Asia. It is

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<sup>21</sup> For a more comprehensive analysis of the origins of SAARC and the various agreements signed, see Davinder Kumar Madaan's (ed.), *SAARC: Origin, Development and Programmes : From First to the Ninth SAARC Summit* (New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publications, 1997). See p. xiii for the complete terms of the 1995 Preferential Trading agreement itself.

<sup>22</sup> See Bernard and Ravenhill's, "Beyond product cycles and flying geese: regionalization, hierarchy and the industrialization of East Asia" in *World Politics*, Vol. 47, January 1995. Especially relevant here is the section entitled, 'Regionalized Networks of Production', pp. 183-188.

<sup>23</sup> Comment made by Narul Islam in his chapter, "South Asia: Regional Perspectives On the New World Interdependence", in Ashok Kumar and Mukta Mittal (ed.), *Economic Development and Planning in Third World* (New Delhi: Anmol Publications, 1995), p. 22.

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of the similarity and complementarity of the different national economies within 'South Asia', see Ayubur Rahman Bhuyan's paper, "Regional Cooperation and Trade Expansion in South Asia", in *Towards Regional Cooperation in South Asia, an ADB/EWC Symposium on Regional Cooperation in South Asia* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 1988), pp. 43-44.

<sup>25</sup> See Kanti Bajpai's *The Security of South Asia after the Cold War* (Paper presented at the workshop on "Sub-regional Dynamics of Asian Security" held at the Malaysian Strategic Research Centre, Kuala Lumpur, December 2-3, 1997, p. 4)

instructive nonetheless at this bend to appreciate that there is a view that conceives of South Asia as an economic region and is part of the project of demonstrating the 'objective' existence of a South Asian region.

The fourth and last basis for an 'objective' South Asian region is that of geopolitics. As was indicated in the earlier section, an important contribution to the idea of seeing regions as defined by conflict/geopolitics is Buzan's concept of "regional security complexes".<sup>26</sup> More importantly for our purposes here, South Asia was the original model for Buzan's 'regional security complex' theory.<sup>27</sup> To carry this logic further, one scholar for example, remarks in almost resigned tone that "South Asians remain South Asians because they remain part of a security complex. They continue to perceive each other as the key threats to their security".<sup>28</sup> The historical events and data often used to show the persistent nature of the interconnected nature of security relations among the states in this area are: the antagonistic nature of the birth of India and Pakistan; the status of Bhutan's formal foreign policy dependence on India; the Indian "intervention" in Sri Lanka between 1987-1990; the Indian role in the 1971 war with Pakistan and the subsequent formation of Bangladesh, and finally the Indian intervention in the Maldives in 1989.<sup>29</sup> The main theme emanating throughout all the arguments for conceiving South Asia as a region defined by geopolitics is the centrality of the role of India in the security perceptions of all the other states in South Asia.<sup>30</sup> As with the other three bases of South Asia as a region, the geopolitical foundation also seeks to draw regional boundaries. Therefore, South Asia was a regional 'reality' because "the South Asian complex was quite well insulated from those around it (as) Burma/Myanmar provided insulation from Southeast Asia and Afghanistan provided it from the Gulf".<sup>31</sup> Thus geopolitics has been used to firstly identify who is in the region (the seven states mentioned earlier) and who is excluded (Burma and Afghanistan).

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<sup>26</sup> See Footnote No. 15.

<sup>27</sup> See Footnote No.16.

<sup>28</sup> Quote taken from Bajpai's, *The Security of South Asia after the Cold War*, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> Buzan uses these sets of historical data to argue the case for a South Asian 'security complex'. See his *South Asia: Inching Towards Transformation* (unpublished paper), p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Bajpai, *The Security of South Asia after the Cold War*, p. 5. Also, K. Subrahmanyam, one of India's leading strategic thinkers, argues that "for India...its neighbours see it (India) as a 'natural' threat". This is from his book, *Indian Security Perspectives* (New Delhi: ABC Pub. House, 1982), p. 213.

<sup>31</sup> Buzan, *South Asia: Inching Towards Transformation*, p. 2.

Having discussed each of the four bases of defining region in the case of South Asia, it should be noted that all four bases of demarcating a South Asian 'region' do not differ significantly as to the territorial boundaries of this 'natural' region; China and Burma are not part of this 'region' on geographical, cultural, economic and even geopolitical grounds<sup>32</sup> and Afghanistan, while sharing a much weaker consensus in the literature, is still typically thought to be marginal to the 'natural' region of South Asia on all four bases of regional definition. On all four basis of region therefore, 'South Asia' as a regional entity has been unproblematically delineated, demarcated and framed as consisting of the seven states and the territorial space they inhabit. The 'natural' region of South Asia, as it is presently framed, is thus proclaimed as an objectively existing reality. The challenge of problematizing this self-confident assertion will form the burden of the next section.

### **Contesting 'South Asia'**

The task of contesting and problematizing the dominant framing of 'South Asia' begins first with a brief critical enquiry into the origins of the term 'South Asia'. The rest of this section will attempt to use each of the four bases of region to demonstrate the points of contestation in the demarcation of 'South Asia' that have very often been ignored in the dominant representation of the 'region' of South Asia.

The term 'South Asia' has gone through a two-stage process. The first stage began in the late 1940s when United States (US) Department of State coined the term in the aftermath of the emergence of an independent India.<sup>33</sup> However, by the early 1950s, this nomenclature became less popular and was replaced by the label 'Southern Asia' within academic and policy discourse.<sup>34</sup> This formulation of 'Southern Asia' differed in terms of its demarcation from the present day 'South Asia'; it stretched from the Persian Gulf to South East Asia and included

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<sup>32</sup> Buzan ponders this point about whether China is part of the South Asian regional security complex but finally he sees China as not part of the South Asian region. This point will be given a more nuanced interrogation in the next section. See *ibid.* p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> See Bajpai's, *The Security of South Asia After the Cold War*, p. 3. The term 'South Asia' as a regional signifier also began to be used within academic circles around this period. For example see, J. S. Furnivall's chapter "South Asia In The World Today" in Henry Brodie et al. (ed.), *South Asia In the World Today*, pp.3-24. Furnivall includes Burma as part of a South Asian 'region'. See especially pp. 4-13.

<sup>34</sup> As an example of the use of this label, see Michael Brecher's, "The Subordinate State System in Southern Asia", in Richard Falk and Saul B. Mendlowitz (ed.), *Regional Politics and World Order* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1973), pp. 369-383.

China.<sup>35</sup> The second stage or ‘rebirth’ of the term ‘South Asia’ happened in the 1960s, with the term increasingly being used in US official and academic discourse.<sup>36</sup> However, the use of the term ‘Southern Asia’ as a regional signifier still persisted till the late 1960s and was probably replaced nearly completely in the 1970s.<sup>37</sup> The territorial boundaries of this ‘South Asia’ region still differed in crucial ways from the demarcation of present day ‘South Asia’. Firstly, the earlier conception of ‘South Asia’ included both Afghanistan and Myanmar and secondly, the Maldives was thought of to be marginal to the ‘South Asia’ during this earlier period and thus not part of the ‘region’. It was only in 1985, with the formal delineation of the region, that the seven member states of SAARC (earlier denoted as SARC – The South Asian Regional Co-operation) came to represent and encompass the region of ‘South Asia’ as it is ‘framed’ today.<sup>38</sup> Having outlined in a brief fashion the history of the ‘region’, the paper will proceed to show the extent to which the present ‘reality of ‘South Asia’ is contested.

The first basis of the present representation of ‘South Asia’ to be interrogated will be geography. In attempting to contest this dominant geographical basis of the ‘natural’ South Asia, it is imperative to problematize and question those areas that have been excluded from such a demarcation of ‘region’.

The first example of exclusion based on geographical grounds is that of China. The geographical case for the exclusion of China from a ‘South Asian’ region has been that the Himalayan Mountains served ‘natural’ boundaries between the South Asian region and China. A critical analysis of this geographical basis of demarcation will however reveal that this argument is rather simplistic. As a renowned scholar of Indian history remarks, “the emphasis on the impregnable mountain barriers as natural frontiers become a cliché in most texts on India...it conceals the basic geographical fact that the mountains provide a *very vague and ambiguous frontier* (emphasis added) in almost all areas...the Himalayas...look like unmistakable frontiers, but in

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. See the section entitled ‘Definition of the Southern Asian System’, pp. 373-374.

<sup>36</sup> The changing terms and boundaries of the region are well discussed by Bajpai, *The Security of South Asia After the Cold War*, p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> For example, in 1968, Harvard University Library published a bibliography of ‘Southern Asia’, which included Afghanistan, Bhutan, Burma, Cambodia, Ceylon, India, Laos, Malaya, Nepal, Pakistan, Sikkim, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. See *Southern Asia: Afghanistan, Bhutan, Burma, Cambodia, Ceylon, India, Laos, Malaya, Nepal, Pakistan, Sikkim, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam* (Cambridge: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 1968).

<sup>38</sup> The composition of SAARC as it is today was mooted by the President of Bangladesh, Ziaur Rahman in 1980, in his proposal for the formation of the above regional organisation.

fact they *did not anywhere provide clear-cut lines of territorial demarcation* (emphasis added)...they do not rise abruptly as the metaphor of ‘the mountain wall’ suggests” (parenthesis in original).<sup>39</sup> Thus the ‘cliché’ of the natural geographical barrier between China and South Asia is put to question. By basing an important part of excluding China from ‘South Asia’ on the basis of geography, dominant representations of ‘South Asia’ are vulnerable to being contested by alternative geographical studies of the kind done by Embree above. The events of the 1962 border war between India and China further discredit the idea of China being separated from South Asia by means of impregnable geographical frontiers.<sup>40</sup> The very fact that the Chinese and Indian armies engaged in open warfare over the issue of contested borders alerts us again to the highly contested nature of the territorial demarcation of the ‘region’ of ‘South Asia’.

A second example of exclusion based on geographical grounds in the framing of South Asia is Myanmar (Burma). Burma’s geographical exclusion from South Asia has been based on the presence of “thick forests”<sup>41</sup>, as well as it “being a difficult journey from central India”.<sup>42</sup> However, the very fact that there are Burmese tribes that inhabit both sides of the Burmese-Indian border weakens the idea of Burma being excluded from South Asia due to natural impregnable geographical barriers. It is for this reason that Burma is recognised as the only “Southeast Asian state to have a land border with India”,<sup>43</sup> thus suggesting that the exclusion of Burma from a South Asian region cannot be convincingly based on geography. Like the case of China, although geography has been cited as an important basis for the exclusion of Burma from South Asia, a closer analysis reveals borders that are far from impregnable and highly contested.

Besides interrogating the basis of exclusion based on geographical grounds, the basis of inclusion based on geography must also be problematized. As mentioned earlier South Asia has

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<sup>39</sup> Quoted from Mark Juergensmeyer (ed.), *Imagining India: Essays on Indian History by Ainslie T. Embree* (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 1989), pp. 77-78.

<sup>40</sup> It was Chinese incursion into North West India, known as the Aksai Chin area, and North East India, in Anurachal, that showed the illusory nature of China and India being separated by ‘impregnable frontiers’. See W. H. Morris Jones’s chapter, “South Asia”, in Robert Jackson and Alan James (ed.), *States In a Changing World: A Contemporary Analysis*, p. 164.

<sup>41</sup> See Footnote No. 21.

<sup>42</sup> Taken from George K. Tanham’s widely cited work, *Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretive Essay* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1992), p. 44.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

been often referred to as a 'subcontinent', namely the 'Indian subcontinent'. A basic geographical examination of this claim will show that the Maldives in no way links with the rest of the South Asian countries as part of a subcontinent. The 'geographically discrete' region that South Asia is often proclaimed as thus becomes problematic.

Having critically analysed and shown the margins of contestation of the geographical delimiting of south Asia, the cultural foundation will be next examined.

In stressing the role of culture or civilisation, the idea of South Asia as sharing a certain cultural 'essence' is highly contested. To accept uncritically the clichéd unity-in-diversity idea of an 'essential' South Asian culture, defined in terms of Brahmanical Hinduism is to be ignorant of what Embree terms "the debate over whether or not there is an all-encompassing Indian (read Hindu) civilisation" (parenthesis added).<sup>44</sup> For example, within the contemporary territorial demarcation of South Asia, there are five major linguistic groups, a quality that has led many to look upon the 'region' as an excellent study of 'difference'.<sup>45</sup> In addition to the diversity in language is added the presence of different religious groups, caste and race. Having an appreciation of the remarkable cultural diversity of the region connoted as 'South Asia' allows a healthy antidote to the kind of dominant cliché, a famous example of which was Nehru's belief that "some kind of a dream of unity has occupied the mind of India since the dawn of civilisation".<sup>46</sup> The idea of South Asia as a civilizational discrete region is thus hardly a resolved issue; it is a highly contested one.

In contesting the dominant framing of South Asia on the basis of culture, not only is it important to interrogate the supposed 'unity' of those within the region, it becomes imperative to question the basis of exclusion from this region. The case of Afghanistan here is an excellent example. Excluded from the present framing of South Asia on the basis of culture, besides other factors we will come to later, Afghanistan is represented as part of Southwest Asia due to its

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<sup>44</sup> See Ainslie T. Embree's chapter, "Indian civilisation and regional cultures: The Two Realities", in Paul Wallace (ed.), *Region and Nation In India* (New Delhi: Oxford & IBH Publishing Company, 1985), p. 19.

<sup>45</sup> The reference to five major linguistic groups must not be mistaken for five major languages; the number of different languages spoken in India alone number into the hundreds. See Maloney, *Peoples of South Asia*, pp. 22 and 114.

<sup>46</sup> Nehru, *The Discovery Of India*, p. 62. The 'India' that Nehru was referring to may not approximate the South Asia of today but it spanned a large part of it and includes present-day India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Islamic character.<sup>47</sup> A critical reading of this ‘location’ of Afghanistan would have to appreciate that Afghanistan’s position vis-à-vis South Asia has always been highly contested. In terms of history, the period of the Mughal Empire linked Afghanistan and large parts of the present South Asia together in terms of culture, religion and societal practices.<sup>48</sup> As many scholars of Indian history have commented, the ‘culture’ of the Indian subcontinent, used interchangeably to refer to South Asia, has been most significantly informed by the period of the Mughal Empire before the onset of British colonialism.<sup>49</sup> Besides scholars of Indian history and culture, even Indian statesmen like Nehru saw Afghanistan as part of “historic” India.<sup>50</sup> To argue, as the dominant framing of South Asia does today, that Afghanistan is marginal to the ‘region’ on the basis of culture or civilisation is therefore problematic. In exhibiting the tensions inherent in such self-confident ‘objective’ claims of region demarcation, the subjective nature of such an exercise becomes clearer.

The use of economics as a basis for defining ‘region’ in South Asia is, as has been alluded to before, a relatively recent phenomenon. The setting up of SAARC has been seen as an attempt at introducing an economic basis for ‘region’ in South Asia similar to that of Europe, East Asia and North America. However, as was mentioned earlier, this basis of ‘region’ is probably the weakest of the four due to the specific economic complexion of the countries within ‘South Asia’. While the other regional trade blocs are premised increasingly on liberalisation of trade and financial flows, at least within the trade bloc, the individual economies within ‘South Asia’ have been comparatively “more inward-looking” and resistant to trade and financial liberalisation.<sup>51</sup> This feature thus makes the economic basis of ‘region’ in South Asia seem unconvincing especially since such an economic basis for ‘region’ is largely informed by the example of the other regional trade blocs mentioned earlier. It is thus quite telling when an analyst writing on possibilities for an economic ‘region’ in ‘South Asia’ remarks that “as these trends towards regional blocs gain momentum, South Asia is the region which is likely to be left

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<sup>47</sup> For this typical representation of Afghanistan as outside the ‘region’ of South Asia, see Morris Jones’s chapter, “South Asia”, p. 157.

<sup>48</sup> For a comprehensive historical account of the Mughal empire, see Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal (ed.), *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, and Political Economy* (New York: Routledge, 1998). See the chapter “The Mughal Empire: State, Economy and Society”, pp. 35-47.

<sup>49</sup> The enduring influence of the Mughal period in present day South Asia is especially evident in the fields of language and architecture; the present use of Urdu in many parts of South Asia today owes its existence to the dominant position of Persian during the Mughal period. See *Ibid.*, pp. 45-47.

<sup>50</sup> Nehru, *Discovery of India*, p. 61

out. The SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation) has so far been a non-starter in the economic field.”<sup>52</sup>

A good example of the lack of economic interaction among the countries of ‘South Asia’ are some commonly used trade figures; the percentage of intra-regional exports as a percentage of total exports was 5.1 percent in 1979 and fell to 3.6 per cent by 1985 while on the imports side, the figure was 3.0 percent in 1979 and 1.9 percent in 1985.<sup>53</sup> The figures are thus testimony to the abysmal state of economic interaction within the member states of the SAARC. Therefore the economic basis for ‘South Asia’ as a ‘region’, as was mentioned earlier, is thus probably the weakest of the four bases for region. As far as the present is concerned, almost all scholars in the field look upon the economic basis for region in ‘South Asia’ with scepticism.

The last and probably one of the most compelling basis for the existing South Asian ‘region’ is that of geopolitics. Buzan’s concept of ‘regional security complexes’ and South Asia being the original model for this theory have already been discussed. Once again, the main points of contestation of this manner of demarcating ‘South Asia’ arise from the basis of exclusion from the ‘region’.

The case of China is an important example of exclusion on the basis of geopolitics. Buzan justifies the exclusion of China from the ‘region’ on the basis that

This China problem was dealt with by seeing China not as part of the South Asian region, but as part of the global system level intervening into the region...the argument being that while India might see China as its main threat, China did not reciprocate, seeing India as a relatively peripheral problem in its overall security constellation.<sup>54</sup>

However, if Buzan uses this criterion of “peripheral problem” to define membership of a region, then by the same logic, there is a strong view in the strategic community that India is/was never concerned with Pakistan per se but rather with the role of Pakistan as a conduit for major power intervention; a view which will render India and Pakistan as not part of the same security

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<sup>51</sup> Narul Islam, “South Asia: Regional Perspectives on the New World Interdependence”. p. 24.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>53</sup> Figures taken from Ayubur Rahman Bhuyan’s chapter, “Regional Cooperation and Trade Expansion in South Asia”, p. 37, Table 7.

<sup>54</sup> Buzan, *South Asia: Inching Towards Transformation*, p. 2.



complex.<sup>55</sup> In fact there is an increasingly clearly expressed view within both Indian academic and policy circles that Pakistan is only a ‘irritant’ for Indian security purposes while China is the single main long-term threat to Indian security.<sup>56</sup> The citing by the Indian government of the “China factor” as the main impetus for India to carry out its nuclear tests of May 1998 are illustrative of the continuing centrality of China in Indian strategic thought.<sup>57</sup> To insist therefore that the present exclusion of China from the ‘region’ is based on firm geopolitical grounds is to be mistaken. The marginalisation of China and the resulting demarcation of the present ‘South Asia’ on geopolitical grounds can instead be strongly challenged. The point to be made here is that the exclusion of China from South Asia on the basis of strategic/conflict interactions does not seem a very convincing line of reasoning especially when seen in the light of the above counter-arguments.

The second case of exclusion from ‘South Asia’ on the basis of geopolitics is that of Afghanistan. In addressing the reasons for excluding Afghanistan from the South Asian ‘security complex’, Buzan sees Afghanistan as “always an insulator... (and it) remains the key to this *boundary*” (italics added) – a boundary that separates South Asia from the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East.<sup>58</sup> Projecting into the future, Buzan sees “the ‘zone of chaos’ represented by Afghanistan as likely to endure and will continue to fulfil its function as an insulator between the Gulf and South Asia”.<sup>59</sup> The issue that that this representation of ‘regional interaction’ is silent on is the very important ‘security’ implications of ethno-nationalism and cross-border insurgency and the role of Islam in these events in ‘South Asia’.<sup>60</sup> The link between the porous border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, the flow of arms and militant Islam across this border and the increased military conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir is thus absent from the

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<sup>55</sup> See Subrahmanyam, *Indian Security Perspectives*, p. 16.

<sup>56</sup> See Jasjit Singh’s chapter, “Why Nuclear Weapons”, in Jasjit Singh (ed.), *Nuclear India* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 1998), pp. 9-25. See also Tanham’s, comment that “Indians consider China the major external military threat” under the sub-heading of “China: The Major Rival”. In his *Indian Strategic Thought*, pp. 35-39.

<sup>57</sup> Jasjit Singh, “Why Nuclear Weapons”, pp. 9-25.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted from Buzan, *South Asia: Inching Towards Transformation*, p. 13.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15

<sup>60</sup> See Maya Chadda’s, *Ethnicity, Security and Separatism in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). Her work demonstrates the very important link between ‘strategic security’ and increased separatism in border states in the case of India. For a comparative ‘South Asian’ perspective see Stanley Tambiah’s, *Levelling*

above understanding of ‘security’ and geopolitical bases of region demarcation.<sup>61</sup> The allegations by both Indian and US official circles of the involvement of Islamic militants from Afghanistan in the recent Kargil war is an excellent example of the integral place of Afghanistan in the dynamics of conflict and security of both India and Pakistan. The inclusion of Afghanistan in the same ‘region’ as India and Pakistan on the basis of geopolitics, though marginalised vis-à-vis the dominant South Asian ‘security complex’ discourse, has been argued and proposed before.<sup>62</sup> The increasingly apparent link between developments in Afghanistan, ethno-nationalism and the conflictual relationship between India and Pakistan (as well as sub-national conflict within both countries) have led several scholars to suggest alternative framings of ‘conflict’ regions which include Afghanistan. The mainstream strategic community has however, largely ignored such attempts.<sup>63</sup>

The above has endeavoured to exhibit the important link between developments in Afghanistan and the conflict-dynamic between India and Pakistan. In addition, it has also cited existing literature with alternative framings of region, which have included rather than excluded Afghanistan in the construction of region. It is thus hoped that with a reading of the above account the points of contestation against the dominant framing of region have been made clear.

### **“A Region Is Always For Someone or Something” - The Politics of Framing ‘South Asia’<sup>64</sup>**

Having critically analysed the various points of contestation of each of the four bases of region, this section will attempt to examine the politics behind the current framing of the South

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*Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>61</sup> The recent Kargil ‘war’ that took place roughly after June 1999, though the nature of the combatants themselves is disputed by India and Pakistan, is a good example of the link between flow of arms and ‘Islamic’ militants from Afghanistan and the conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir.

<sup>62</sup> For an example of this ‘alternative’ reading of geopolitical region, see Zalmay Khalilzad’s, *The Security of Southwest Asia* (United Kingdom: Gower Publishing, 1984). This analyst, writing this book as part of a research project for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, includes India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and even Iran in his demarcation of Southwest Asia.

<sup>63</sup> Another example, besides Buzan, is Leo E. Rose’s and Satish Kumar’s chapter, “South Asia”, in Werner J. Feld and Gavin Boyd (ed.), *Comparative Regional Systems* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1980), pp. 237-273. For an example of the dominant geopolitical framing of ‘South Asia’ without Afghanistan, see especially pp. 260-267.

Asian region. As was pointed out in the introduction of this paper, regions, like all other forms of human communities are not independently existing ‘realities’ that are discovered through detached observation. This, again as was indicated earlier, is hardly a novel or interesting argument by itself. It is important, I believe, to move beyond the idea that regions are social constructs to examine who benefits from the dominant framing of region and who is marginalised and what interests are served by the particular delineation of region. Therefore, for our purposes here, I will attempt to probe the politics of whose interest(s) are served and whose are overlooked in the dominant framing of South Asia today.

The first part will examine, from a historical point of view, the politics behind the colonial framing of India as part of the British Empire. This part will basically deal with the ideas and interests that informed the exclusion of both Afghanistan and Burma from the colonial framing of India and later South Asia. The second part will then go on to deal with the post-colonial phase and examine whose interests the current framing of South Asia serves. The two parts are intricately linked by continuity in the use of particular framings of geographical space as categories in knowledge systems. The power to label and demarcate a specific geographical space and to give it a particular meaning has served and continues to serve certain interests and marginalise others. Thus Edward Said’s link between knowledge and power can be linked to regional images both during and after the colonial era.<sup>65</sup> It will be this link between knowledge, power and framing of region which will form the core of the discussion in the rest of this section.

The link between the colonial mapping of the ‘Indian sub-continent’ and the colonial governance of empire is an important illustration of the link between knowledge, power and mapping a regional space. As one study of the link between knowledge, power and mapping of British India points out, “the creation of British India required the prior acceptance by the British of ‘India’ as signifying a specific region of the earth’s surface”(parenthesis in original).<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> This phrase is a modification of the phrase used by Robert Cox, “theory is always for somebody or something”. See Robert Cox’s article, ‘Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory’, in *Millennium*, Vol. X, Summer 1981, pp. 126-155.

<sup>65</sup> The link between power, knowledge and regional images made by Greg Fry in his chapter, “A ‘Coming Age of Regionalism’?”, in Greg Fry and Jacinta O’Hagan (ed.), *Contending Images of World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 2000 forthcoming), p. 8.

<sup>66</sup> This is taken from a most interesting and original work. See Matthew H. Edney’s, *Mapping An Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765-1843* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 3.

The need to label, delineate and frame British India derived from the need to “know” the area that had been colonised; being able to give certain ‘essences’ to people within this region thus served as Said’s knowledge-as-power. Therefore the geographical demarcation of India by the British through the modern ‘scientific’ tool of the map allowed for an imagined India that was “a rational and ordered space, that could be managed and governed in a rational and ordered manner”.<sup>67</sup> It is important thus to appreciate that having colonised a certain part of the earth’s surface, the British sought to show, through the modern disciplines of geography, cartography and archaeology, of the existence of a ‘natural’ unity of the area they governed which set it off from areas that were not colonised. There were thus attempts among British intellectuals to ‘search’ for the shared origins of an Indian civilisation.<sup>68</sup> ‘Knowing’ India and giving common singular essences to this piece of territorial space allowed the British to ‘know’ India in ways that would sustain colonial authority and through simplistic categories that were fundamentally different from Europe.

Having briefly outlined above the process through which knowledge-as-power played an integral part in the colonial framing of India, it becomes interesting to investigate how this process of framing and ‘knowing’ India came to exclude Afghanistan.

As has been discussed above, the civilisational claim has often been used as the empirically relevant basis for excluding Afghanistan from the framing of ‘South Asia’. However, as has also been discussed in the earlier sections, such civilisational claims are contested and problematic keeping in mind the Mughal impact on the cultural and civilisational landscape of what later was termed the geographic category of “India”. The need to understand the exclusion of Afghanistan from colonial framings of ‘India’ is important, I think, as the exclusion of Afghanistan from the category of ‘South Asia’ in the post-colonial era is best seen, to some extent, as a continuation of the practice of exclusion through the mode of knowledge-as-power.

The exclusion of Afghanistan from the colonial framing of India was due, to a large extent, on the British inability or lack of interest in colonising this area. The British colonialists’

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>68</sup> See the point made by Thomas R. Metcalf in his book, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge, New York & Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 14. An important critique of the Orientalist production of knowledge on India that came to be known as ‘Indology’ is Ronald Inden’s book, *Imagining India* (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

inability to effectively conquer and rule Afghanistan as part of the British Raj has been well documented.<sup>69</sup> However, what has been missing is a study of the link between this colonial attitude towards Afghanistan and the British framing of 'India'. The link between colonial governance and what the term 'India' was to denote is captured very aptly in the Interpretation Act passed by the British Parliament in 1889 which stated that

The expression "India" shall mean British India, together with any territories of any native prince or chief *under the suzerainty of Her Majesty* (emphasis added).<sup>70</sup>

Therefore, beginning from the British colonial period, and continuing into the post colonial era as we shall see later, the term "India" excluded Afghanistan not on the basis of certain essential civilizational or geographic factors but more importantly on the basis of governance and control – that which the British conquered and sought to govern as a single administrative unit was 'India' and Afghanistan was excluded on this basis.

The link between colonialism, map-making and Orientalism in the exclusion of Afghanistan from India thus slowly becomes more apparent. 'India' was not only an ordered and rational administrative category but also an ordered and rational academic category. Conversely, because Afghanistan was not colonised and not 'known' in ways that the British Raj was, it was seen as a zone of chaos and danger and thus outside the intellectual category of 'India'. A symbol of this dichotomy between the 'known' India and the 'chaotic' Afghanistan was the enduring imperial myth of the 'Frontier'.<sup>71</sup> The colonial production of knowledge on 'India' not only tried to 'discover' the shared unity of the colonial space but also, in this case, tried to show how the spatially contiguous Afghanistan was 'essentially' different with a stress on the Frontier's unique character which supposedly set it apart from 'India', both demonstrated through the empirical disciplines of geography and anthropology.<sup>72</sup> This quest to 'empirically' demonstrate the significance of the Frontier was done despite the repeated assertions by the Pathan people within British India of their similarities with their brethren in Afghanistan and their differences vis-à-vis other Muslim peoples within British India (a situation which in fact

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<sup>69</sup> See Maloney, *Peoples of South Asia*, pp. 150-151.

<sup>70</sup> This is taken from Juergensmeyer (ed.), *Imagining India*, p. 80.

<sup>71</sup> See Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, p. 140.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

carries on in present day Pakistan today).<sup>73</sup> The use of ‘superior’ knowledge to give a particular, singular essence to a colonised space thus resulted in the exclusion of Afghanistan from the administrative and intellectual category of ‘India’.

This process of excluding Afghanistan from ‘India’ continued into the post-colonial era with the framing of South Asia. As many scholars have commented, independent India has often been considered the successor state to British India.<sup>74</sup> More importantly for our purposes here has been the continuity in the use of knowledge-as-power by the Indian state to exclude Afghanistan from the framing of ‘South Asia’. In similar fashion to the British colonialists, the Indian state has attempted, in the post-colonial era, to give the category of ‘South Asia’ a certain essentialist, singular meaning thereby ‘objectively’ showing Afghanistan’s exclusion from South Asia as ‘natural’.

That singular, essential meaning that the Indian state has served to give the category of ‘South Asia’ is that of a “Hindu civilizational area”.<sup>75</sup> Before the Taliban seemed headed for control of Afghanistan and when leftist parties were in power in New Delhi, India was enthusiastic about including Afghanistan as part of ‘South Asia’. However, ever since the Taliban seemed headed on the way to representing the country, India has been adamant against including it in South Asia while Pakistan has been a keen supporter of such an inclusion.<sup>76</sup> The important continuity in the attitude of the Indian state in the period since 1947 however has been to ensure that Afghanistan’s membership did not challenge the singular ‘Hindu’ meaning that it attempted to give to the regional category of ‘South Asia’; the Taliban’s explicit and strident Islamic identity represented a contestation to the singular way the Indian state wanted ‘South Asia’ to be ‘known’. The use of the term ‘Hindu’ here needs to be qualified – ‘Hindu’ in this context has been used by the Indian state not in the strictly conventional religious manner but as a wider cultural tradition that predated the advent of ‘Hinduism’, which in turn is seen as a more conventionally religious signifier.<sup>77</sup> The need to ‘know’ South Asia in a wider ‘Hindu’

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>74</sup> Point made by Milton W. Meyer in his book, *South Asia: A Short History of the Subcontinent* (New Jersey: Totowa; Adams: Littlefield, 1976), p. 19.

<sup>75</sup> Jaswant Singh, *Defending India*, p. vi.

<sup>76</sup> See Bajpai’s, *The Security of South Asia After the Cold War*, p. 1.

cultural manner instead of the narrower 'Hinduism' religious fashion has significant similarities to the way Indian elites in the post colonial period sought to construct what meanings 'India' should have. The 'idea' of South Asia was framed in a synonymous and compatible manner with the 'idea' of post-colonial India by Indian elites. This 'idea' was that of a "secular" India but one underpinned by a wider 'Hindu' culture that pervaded the social milieu of all the different religious groups that were found in India.<sup>78</sup> The single most useful way to 'know' both India and South Asia according to this framing was to see them both as having the capacity to be home to different religious faiths but yet be underpinned by a single culture; that being a tolerant and all encompassing 'Hindu' culture.

It is through the exclusion of Afghanistan by the mode of knowledge-as-power that we can come to appreciate Pakistan's attempts to define itself as part of a wider Islamic fraternity, in some instances arguing that it is part of the Middle East.<sup>79</sup> The Indian state's attempts to assign an essentialist 'Hindu' representation to the geographic space of South Asia has important resonance thus with the British colonial attempts to represent 'India' and endow it with certain 'civilizational' essences. The Indian independence leaders accepted uncritically this "imaginary institution" of 'India' and thus saw the Partition of the country into India and Pakistan as a challenge to the cultural 'unity' representation that the British had made of 'India'.<sup>80</sup> The desire to challenge this essentialist framing of South Asia thus drives the Pakistani state's attempts to define itself as part of an alternative region. The Indian state's attempts to exercise 'power' through representing and framing 'South Asia' in a particularistic, singular manner is thus clear – the Pakistani state's resistance to this power-as-knowledge is an important facet of the politics of framing South Asia.

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<sup>77</sup> I owe my understanding of this point to Professor Williard G. Oxtoby, who discussed the nuances of the terms "Hindu" and "Hinduism" within a historical context in a seminar entitled "The Emergence of Religious Group Identities In the Indian Subcontinent" at the National University of Singapore, 6<sup>th</sup> March 2000.

<sup>78</sup> For an exposition of the meaning of the term 'secularism' within the Indian context, see Khilnani's, *The Idea of India*, pp. 179-181. For a discussion of how the BJP in recent years has highlighted the crisis of 'secularism' in India, see pp. 189-191.

<sup>79</sup> Pakistan's insistence on sharing more in common with the Islamic countries of the Middle East though has not been always well received by other these other Islamic states. See the discussion by B.H. Farmer, in *An Introduction To South Asia* (London & New York: Methuen, 1983), p. 147.

<sup>80</sup> For an incisive treatment of this issues, see Sudipta Kaviraj's chapter, "The Imaginary Institution of India", in Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey (ed.), *Subaltern Studies VII – Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 1-39.

The use of power-as-knowledge in the politics of framing South Asia has been discussed. The next question would be to determine how developments in international society since 1947 have facilitated the ability of the Indian state to impose certain 'framing' of South Asia.

It is at this juncture that I believe a minor diversion is necessary. This diversion delves into the need to re-appraise the manner in which the category of 'region' has been studied in IR literature. While W. W. Rostow has suggested 'the coming age of regionalism' as 'a metaphor of our time',<sup>81</sup> and many others have spoken of a 'new regionalism',<sup>82</sup> there is still no rigorous 'theory of the region'. Therefore, although the 'region' is increasingly seen as an important "site where contests occur over what values, practices and concepts should prevail within the societies of that region",<sup>83</sup> the process and norms which regulate such 'contests' have not been given due attention. On a general level and to simplify crudely, the mainstream IR literature has seen the condition within states as 'ordered' and the situation within international society as 'anarchic'.<sup>84</sup> The presence of a central authority in the former and the lack of it in the latter thus explain the respective contexts of 'order' and 'anarchy' which influence the character of 'contests' which take place in both within the state and within international society. However, the human community of the 'region', which lies between the two human communities of the state and international society, has not been similarly analysed.<sup>85</sup> A tentative attempt in this direction will thus be attempted.

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<sup>81</sup> This now famous comment by Rostow was made in the journal *Encounter*, LXXIV, No. 5, June 1990.

<sup>82</sup> Examples of such work are Norman Palmer's, *The New Regionalism in Asia and the Pacific* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1991) and Bjorn Hettne and Indras Inotai, *The New Regionalism: Implications for Global Development and International Security* (Helsinki: United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research, 1994).

<sup>83</sup> Quoted from Greg Fry's chapter, "A 'Coming Age of Regionalism'?", p. 8.

<sup>84</sup> Hobbes work, *Leviathan* is used as an important intellectual influence for this inside/outside dichotomy within mainstream IR literature for a long time. See Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (London: Penguin Books, 1985).

<sup>85</sup> An example of less known work which attempts to study 'regions' as a community of social interaction is Daniel Druckman's chapter, "Social-Psychological Factors in Regional Politics", in Werner J. Feld and Gavin Boyd (ed.) *Comparative Regional Systems*, pp. 18-55. His approach however disappoints as he seems more concerned with understanding regional solidarity or conflict vis-à-vis other regions rather than attempt to situate where the 'region' stands in comparison to the 'state' and international society in terms of the dynamic of social interaction. Another earlier attempt at analysing region which falls short of addressing the above issue is Louis J. Cantori and Steven L. Spiegel's chapter, *The International Relations of Regions*, in Falk and Menlovtz (ed.), *Regional Politics and World Order*, pp. 335-354.



The 'region', I believe, lies between the state and international society more than just in terms of size. It situates itself between the two in terms of the nature of 'contests' that take place within it. With a crude typology of 'order-central authority' of the state on the one hand and the 'anarchy-lack of central authority' on the other, the 'region' can be seen as being situated in the middle. Therefore the argument here is that although the 'region' does not have a sovereign authority comparable to that found in the quintessential state, it cannot be put in the same theoretical category of international society. This idea becomes even clearer by delving into the origins of the term 'region'; it is derived from the Latin word "regere", which means "to rule". The 'region', therefore, as one writer puts it, "is therefore an area that is 'ruled', as it were, by an administrative-political 'centre'" (emphasis in original)<sup>86</sup>. The 'region' thus has a greater sense of 'order' and predictability than the international society beyond it while it still cannot usually have the same amount of 'order' as those states that comprise it. This, I believe, is due to a large extent to the increasing salience of norms that have given the category of 'region' some widely shared and accepted 'meanings'.

The one important discourse that is relevant to the discussion of the framing of South Asia is the norm of "regional hegemony". As K.M. Panikkar, in a much earlier work, pointed out, one way of viewing the social dynamic within a region, commonly referred to as 'regionalism', was by seeing it as the "establishment of the paramountcy of a Great Power in a defined geographical region".<sup>87</sup> Writing much more recently, David Myers sees that in the post-Cold War era, "decline in superpower capability to project effective power uniformly around the planet has permitted influential regional states to pursue long suppressed hegemonic aspirations within local geopolitical arenas".<sup>88</sup> Although the issue of 'regional hegemony' has been widely discussed in the literature, it has not been discussed sufficiently in tandem with the discourse of regional 'doctrines' which legitimise the status of the 'hegemon' both within and outside the region. The "Monroe Doctrine" of the US in the American continent,<sup>89</sup> the China 'Middle

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<sup>86</sup> For a discussion of the origins of the term 'region' and its implications, see Bajpai's, *The Security of South Asia After the Cold War*, p. 4.

<sup>87</sup> K.M. Panikkar cited in Lynn Miller's chapter, "The Prospects for Order Through Regional Security", in Falk and Menlovtz (ed.), *Regional Politics and World Order*, p. 61.

<sup>88</sup> David J. Myers, "Threat Perception and Strategic Response of the Regional Hegemons: A Conceptual Overview" in David J. Myers (ed.), *Regional Hegemons: Threat Perception and Strategic Response* (Boulder & Oxford: Westview Press, 1991), p. 2.

<sup>89</sup> For an exposition of this 'doctrine', see Jaynti Prasad Garg's, *Regionalism In International Politics*. Especially relevant is chapter 6 on "Organization of American States", pp. 60-72.

Kingdom' or 'China backyard' analogy<sup>90</sup> in East Asia and, most importantly for us, India's "Indira doctrine" in South Asia<sup>91</sup> are all well known examples of the legitimating discourse for regional hegemons to be accorded *parēs inter parēs* status within their 'natural' regions both by insiders and outsiders. A very good example of the latent acknowledgement of this common shared 'meaning' that has come to be bestowed on regional 'hegemons' is that echoed by Ayoob when he says that "there must be an implicit acknowledgement of the *differing roles* played within the region by members of the regional system" (emphasis added)<sup>92</sup>.

It is this "implicit acknowledgement" of the regional hegemon's 'rightful' or 'natural' role that fits the 'region' between the state and international society on a theoretical level. The 'regional' hegemon thus assumes the position of the de-facto authority within the social context of the 'region' and maintains the status quo 'order' through the legitimising doctrines of regional hegemony (like the 'Monroe doctrine'). However, regional hegemony and the discourse which underpins it is different from the nature of authority found in the arch-typical state; the hegemon's position and the legitimacy of its 'hegemonic' actions are contested to differing degrees within the region quite unlike the dynamic of order within the 'state'. However, there is still some amount of 'order' and predictability within the region which results from the shared meanings that have been widely attached to the mantle of 'regional hegemon' and thus the nature of the 'contests' which occur within the 'region' has important differences with those that occur in the wider international society. The most important site of contest within the region thus becomes the mantle of 'regional hegemon' and not the shared meanings that are endowed upon 'regional hegemons'. The need to display and gain acceptance of one's regional hegemony, both within and outside the 'region' is thus the crucial location in beginning to theorise the 'region'.

Having shown that the important issue here is the contest over the mantle of regional hegemon, the issue of framing or defining the 'region' thus assumes a most crucial place. It is also here that the above discussion on the theory of the 'region' feeds back into our discussion on the framing of South Asia. In other words, it becomes quite obvious that the 'contest' for regional hegemony would be intricately linked with contest of framing and demarcating the boundaries of a 'region'. The contest over who is included / excluded in a 'region' will have

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<sup>90</sup> See Gerald Segal's chapter, "North East Asia", in Robert Jackson and Alan James (ed.), *States In a Changing World: A Contemporary Analysis*, pp. 197-218.

<sup>91</sup> This point will be more elaborately developed in the following paragraphs.

<sup>92</sup> Taken from Ayoob's, *From Regional System to Regional Society*, p. 6.

important implications thus for who the regional hegemon is. Framing region, in this case South Asia, is thus critically informed by the shared meanings that have come to be associated with 'regional hegemony'.

To turn thus to the case of South Asia, we can see the Indian state's attempts to exclude Afghanistan yet include Pakistan in the framing of 'South Asia' as a good example of the above. The explicit claim of the Indian state to a 'natural' hegemony in the region of 'South Asia' was first spelled out under the rubric of the 'Indira doctrine' during the period of Indira Gandhi's leadership. Alike in many ways to the American Monroe Doctrine, the 'Indira doctrine' was meant to assert the 'natural' Indian hegemony of the surrounding region.<sup>93</sup> The 1971 Indian military defeat of Pakistan and the eventual division of East and West Pakistan into two separate countries was a stark symbol of the Indian state's claim to 'natural' hegemony.<sup>94</sup> As many observers have pointed out, although the US was a close ally of Pakistan in 1971 and tried to use coercive means to prevent the Indian state from splitting up Pakistan, in the end, the implicit acknowledgement of the Indian state 'rights' as a 'natural' hegemon in the territorial space that covered both East and West Pakistan was accepted.<sup>95</sup> Even the feared Chinese intervention on behalf of its ally, Pakistan, did not materialise. Not only did the US accept Pakistan as within the 'regional' ambit' of Indian strategic interests, but more importantly, the Chinese leadership, by deciding not to intervene, accepted East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) and West Pakistan as beyond its 'legitimate' sphere of interest especially when compared against India's interests in the 'region'. In fact, this essentially meant that the Chinese defined themselves out of the 'region' of South Asia. The subsequent Indian state's annexation of Sikkim in 1976, the Indian army's 'peacekeeping' intervention in Sri Lanka from 1987-1990 and the 1988 'Operation Cactus' in the Maldives by the Indian military thus slowly but surely delineated and framed the 'region' of South Asia; the 'region' within which India will claim to exercise a 'natural' hegemony. By reserving the right to intervene in the partition of Pakistan in 1971, both Pakistan and later

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<sup>93</sup> This is an example of this common comparison between these two doctrines is quite common within the literature of Indian foreign policy. For example, see William Richter's chapter, "Mrs. Gandhi's Neighbourhood", in Yogendra K. Malik and Dharendra K. Vajpeyi (ed.), *India: The Years of Indira Gandhi* (Leiden & New York: E.J. Brill, 1988), p. 123.

<sup>94</sup> Mrs Gandhi's period also witnessed the annexation of Sikkim into the Indian Union and clearly more stronger Indian foreign policy line towards Nepal. For the detailed and personal memoirs of a retired Indian diplomat, see V. Longor's, *The Defence and Foreign Policies of India* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1988), pp. 246-247.

Bangladesh were framed as part of the South Asian ‘region’. The annexation of Sikkim as part of the Indian Union thus put an end to earlier Chinese challenges to India’s ‘authority’ in this geographical space.<sup>96</sup> The Indian state’s ability to caution off earlier attempts by the Sri Lanka government to obtain political and military assistance from Pakistan, Israel, Britain and the US while reserving the ‘right’ to be the only legitimate state to politically and militarily intervene in the Sri Lanka civil war was again an exercise in demarcating and framing the boundaries of South Asia in accordance with India’s role as regional hegemon.<sup>97</sup> Accordingly thus, the Indian military operation in the Maldives thus effectively demarcated the furthestmost boundary of South Asia – the South Asia within which India was the regional hegemon. Claiming ‘regional hegemony’ and demarcating that ‘region’ itself were thus inextricably linked. The Indian state’s place as ‘first-among-equals’ in the region of South Asia was thus implicitly accepted – as was the former’s framing of the region of ‘South Asia’.

Having discussed the process through which the Indian state’s attempts to covet the mantle of regional hegemony and to demarcate the region are dialectically informed by each other, let us reconsider the similarities of this exercise to earlier colonial framings of India.

The similarity between the earlier colonial framing of region and the ‘regional hegemony’ mapping of region in South Asia is that both serve as tools of control and subordination. The use of the normative discursive structures of ‘colonialism’ and ‘regional hegemony’ to ascribe certain essentialist meanings to spatially delimited human communities are a feature of both of these normative discourses. As was discussed earlier in this section, the colonialist discourse was used to spatially delimit and culturally essentialise British India for the purposes of making colonial control seem ‘natural’ or inevitable’. In the same vein, the ‘regional hegemony’ discourse has been used by the Indian state to spatially frame and culturally essentialise South Asia so as to show the India domination of South Asia as a ‘natural hegemony’, as a inevitable state of affairs. A comment by Mohammed Ayoob, a renowned academic who has written widely on ‘regional security’, is testimony to the success of the Indian state’s attempts to

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<sup>95</sup> Point made by Shrikant Paranjpe and Raju G. C. Thomas in their chapter, “India and South Asia: Resolving the Problems of Regional Dominance and Diversity” in David Myers (ed.), *Regional Hegemons: Threat Perception and Strategic Response*, p. 172

<sup>96</sup> There were Sino-Indian skirmishes at Nathu La, Sikkim, in 1967. See Jaswant Singh’s, *Defending India*. p.143.

<sup>97</sup> See Shrikant Paranjpe and Raju G. C., “India and South Asia: Resolving the Problems of Regional Dominance and Diversity” in David Myers (ed.), *Regional Hegemons: Threat Perception and Strategic Response*, p. 181.

‘naturalise’ its dominance of South Asia through the discourse of ‘regional hegemony when he says that “the most clear-cut example of a power in a discrete Third World region that possesses inherent capabilities that create pre-eminence is that of India.”<sup>98</sup> Like the colonial discourse before it, the ‘regional hegemony’ discourse has enabled the demarcation and framing of a geographical space to which certain essences can be given to demonstrate the ‘naturalness’ of ‘regional hegemony’. A highly contested and political exercise is thus reduced to an inevitable, natural occurrence.

Having discussed the colonial and post-colonial exclusion of Afghanistan from the geographic category of India and South Asia respectively, let us turn to exclusion of Burma and the politics of such a region mapping exercise.

In similar ways to the exclusion of Afghanistan from South Asia, Burma’s exclusion from the dominant framings of South Asia shows an important link between power, knowledge and region mapping. An integral part of the dynamic of excluding Burma from the dominant framings of South Asia is that of war and strategic planning. The connection between war, strategic planning and ‘region’ mapping in general and in the case of other ‘regions’ has been discussed in the literature.<sup>99</sup> An important part of the discussion of Burma’s exclusion will focus on its inclusion as part of the strategic region of Southeast Asia. The framing of Southeast Asia and the strategic interests that informed Burma’s inclusion as part of this ‘region’ correspondingly allow us an understanding of Burma’s exclusion from the region of South Asia. The rest of this section will thus attempt to show thus how the discourses of strategic planning and war have been integral in the exclusion of Burma from the dominant framings of South Asia.

The first important influence on the exclusion of Burma from the ‘region’ of South Asia was the Japanese war of occupation during the Second World War. The Japanese occupation of British Burma and their inability or disinterest in occupying British India marked an important boundary between the two colonies of the British empire. It was the Japanese occupation of Burma that later placed the latter within the geographic ambit of the Western Alliance’s South East Asian Command (SEAC) formed in 1943. As has been widely agreed in the literature, the creation of SEAC “was major step in the military and political identification of the region” that

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<sup>98</sup> See Mohammed Ayoob’s, *The Third World Security Predicament: State Making, Regional Conflict and the International System* (Boulder: L. Rienner Publishers, 1995), p. 60.

<sup>99</sup> See Greg Fry, “The South Pacific ‘Experiment’: Reflections on the Origins of Regional Identity”, p. 184.

has come to be known as Southeast Asia.<sup>100</sup> For the purposes of strategic planning thus, Burma was slowly becoming part of the ‘Southeast Asian’ region and defined out of the regional category of South Asia. The politics of such an exercise must be appreciated in light of the discussion in the earlier section whereby Burma’s exclusion from South Asia has often been based on cultural or geographical factors. Therefore, instead of such ‘objective’ factors, the exclusion of Burma from South Asia can be seen as intimately connected to the imperatives of war and strategic planning.

Showing the link between the Japanese occupation, strategic planning and the exclusion of Burma from South Asia brings the analysis to a more integral question. As the heading of this section illustrates and as shown in the examination of Afghanistan’s exclusion from South Asia, the exclusion of Burma from South Asia and the resultant mapping of the ‘region’ reflected certain interests while marginalising others. The formation of the SEAC and the boundaries of the Southeast Asian ‘region’ which the former helped to frame was informed by the desire and goal of the Western powers to regain their colonial empires which had been occupied by the Japanese.<sup>101</sup> The imperative to regain empire thus informed the strategic ‘framing’ of the Southeast region under the SEAC, which in turn involved the exclusion of Burma from South Asia. To argue by way of counterfactual, if the Japanese had not occupied Burma, Burma would not have been included in the SEAC; its exclusion from SEAC would probably have meant that Burma would less likely be part of a future Southeast Asian region (since the very important influence of SEAC on the later Southeast Asian ‘region’ has already been discussed in the earlier paragraph). To push the argument further, it would seem a fair argument to posit thus that a Burma that was not part of a Southeast Asia ‘region’ would probably have been included in the dominant ‘framing’ of a South Asian region. The point to be made here is that it was colonial interests and goals, inherent within the methods and logic of ‘strategic planning’, that informed, to a significant extent, Burma’s exclusion from South Asia. The South Asian ‘region’ and its present demarcation, in this case the exclusion of Burma, has thus been significantly influenced and informed by colonial interests and goals. Once again, the politics of region mapping in South Asia come to the fore.

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<sup>100</sup> Quote from Russel H. Feifield’s article, “Southeast Asia as a Regional Concept”, in *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 1983, p. 3. See also Milton Osborne’s, *Southeast Asia: An Introductory History* (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1997), p. 4.

<sup>101</sup> The boundaries of SEAC included all of latter-day Southeast Asia except the Philippines, northern Indochina and the island of Timor. See Russel H. Feifield’s, “Southeast Asia as a Regional Concept”, p. 4.

Similar to the exclusion of Afghanistan from South Asia, the colonial interests that informed Burma's exclusion from South Asia found important echoes in the post-colonial era. The important link between strategic planning and region mapping in the inclusion of Burma as part of Southeast Asia and exclusion from South Asia showed important continuities in the post-colonial period.

An important facet in Burma's exclusion from the South Asian region was the role of the US in international affairs in the post second World War era. The US's self-perceived role as the guardian of democracy against international communism had important implications for the demarcation of the boundaries of South Asia. The American intervention in Vietnam and the resultant "domino theory" that accompanied it linked strategic planning to region mapping. As the conclusions of the US National Security Council in 1950 showed, Burma's place in 'Southeast Asia' was significant because

The neighbouring countries of Thailand and *Burma* can be expected to fall under Communist domination if a Communist-dominated government controlled Indo-China. The balance of *Southeast Asia* would then be in grave threat (emphasis added).<sup>102</sup>

The link between American strategic interests, Burma and the mapping of Southeast Asia is thus clear. Burma was not framed as part of South Asia but instead as part of Southeast Asia because it suited American strategic priorities. Thus again we see similarities in this link between American strategic interests in combating global communism and Burma's exclusion from South Asia to the earlier colonial mapping of Southeast Asia under SEAC. Burma's exclusion from South Asia thus continued to be significantly influenced not by natural, objective factors but on the particular strategic interests of the West.

Having shown the link between American strategic interests, Southeast Asian region mapping and thus Burma's exclusion from South Asia, we return to our earlier theme on regional hegemons and their ability to demarcate 'regions'. As has been illustrated above, the US used its preponderant military and political power to include Burma as part of Southeast Asia and correspondingly exclude it from South Asia. More importantly, this process of region mapping also involved giving certain meanings to 'Southeast Asia' so as to legitimate the position of Burma within this regional category rather than that of South Asia. As has been discussed

elsewhere, the “domino theory”, the Vietnam War and ‘Southeast Asia’ are discourses whose meanings are significantly inter-connected with each other. The US differentiated Burma from neighbouring India on the basis of the perceived ‘threat’ of domestic communist forces to the ruling elite within both countries.<sup>103</sup> ‘Southeast Asia’, with Burma within this dominant framing, became a household expression in the US especially after the Second Indochinese War (which roughly can be dated from about 1965-1975).<sup>104</sup> The meaning that the US came to give Southeast Asia, and thus through this practice of knowledge-as-power exclude Burma from South Asia, was that of an area under the immediate danger of a global Communist revolution. The American ‘legitimate’ sphere of influence, with the U.S. being a regional hegemon, needed to include Burma and including it as part of a Southeast Asian region, a region already given certain meanings amenable to American intervention. Therefore the link between regional hegemony (in this case U.S. hegemony), legitimating discourses of hegemony (in this case the domino theory arising out of the American intervention in Vietnam) and region-mapping (Southeast Asia in this instance) thus resulted in the exclusion of Burma from the regional category of ‘South Asia’. Regional hegemony and region demarcation, through the process of giving certain meanings to geographical space, thus highlight the politics of exclusion in the case of South Asia – a region is thus always for somebody or something.

## **Conclusion**

This essay situates itself, as stated in the introduction, within the ‘critical-regionalism’ theoretical project. It has endeavoured to critically re-examine the theoretical basis for region framing and demarcation in the contemporary literature and apply the insights this re-examination affords to the particular case of South Asia.

In summing up, I believe that this essay contributes to the existing academic literature in two ways. The first contribution is akin to that of any academic critical project, that of questioning the authoritative discourses within the general literature, in this case that of the basis of a South Asia region. The second contribution this essay hopes to have made is that of stressing the need for greater theorising at the level of the ‘region’. The role of regional hegemons as the starting point for such theorising is put forward and applied in the specific case

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<sup>102</sup> Taken from Russel H. Feifield’s, “Southeast Asia as a Regional Concept”, p. 7.

<sup>103</sup> See again the significant reference to Burma by the US National security Council on pp. 44, Footnote No. 110.



of South Asia. The aim of this essay is to have pointed out a significant oversight in the ‘regionalism’ literature that would prompt greater attention towards the neglected site where ‘theory’ meets the ‘region’. It is to this humble expectation that this essay hopes to have lived up to.

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<sup>104</sup> Feifield’s, “Southeast Asia as a Regional Concept”, p. 7.