

Pull-out supplement

theFocus

Militarized Borderlands in Asia

Philosopher Georg Simmel uses 'the door' as a powerful metaphor of conscious borders.¹ The door is an active boundary, for it can be closed and opened at will. While the closure of the door reinforces the feeling of separation, the fact that it can be opened symbolizes the freedom to transcend boundaries.² The closed door quality of borders is most apparent in disputed territories and frontier conflict zones, where military structures and technologies of surveillance, such as border fences and security cameras, materially reorder space as well as reify the border in people's minds and lives through psycho-sociological processes.

Swargajyoti Gohain

Himalaya

New Delhi

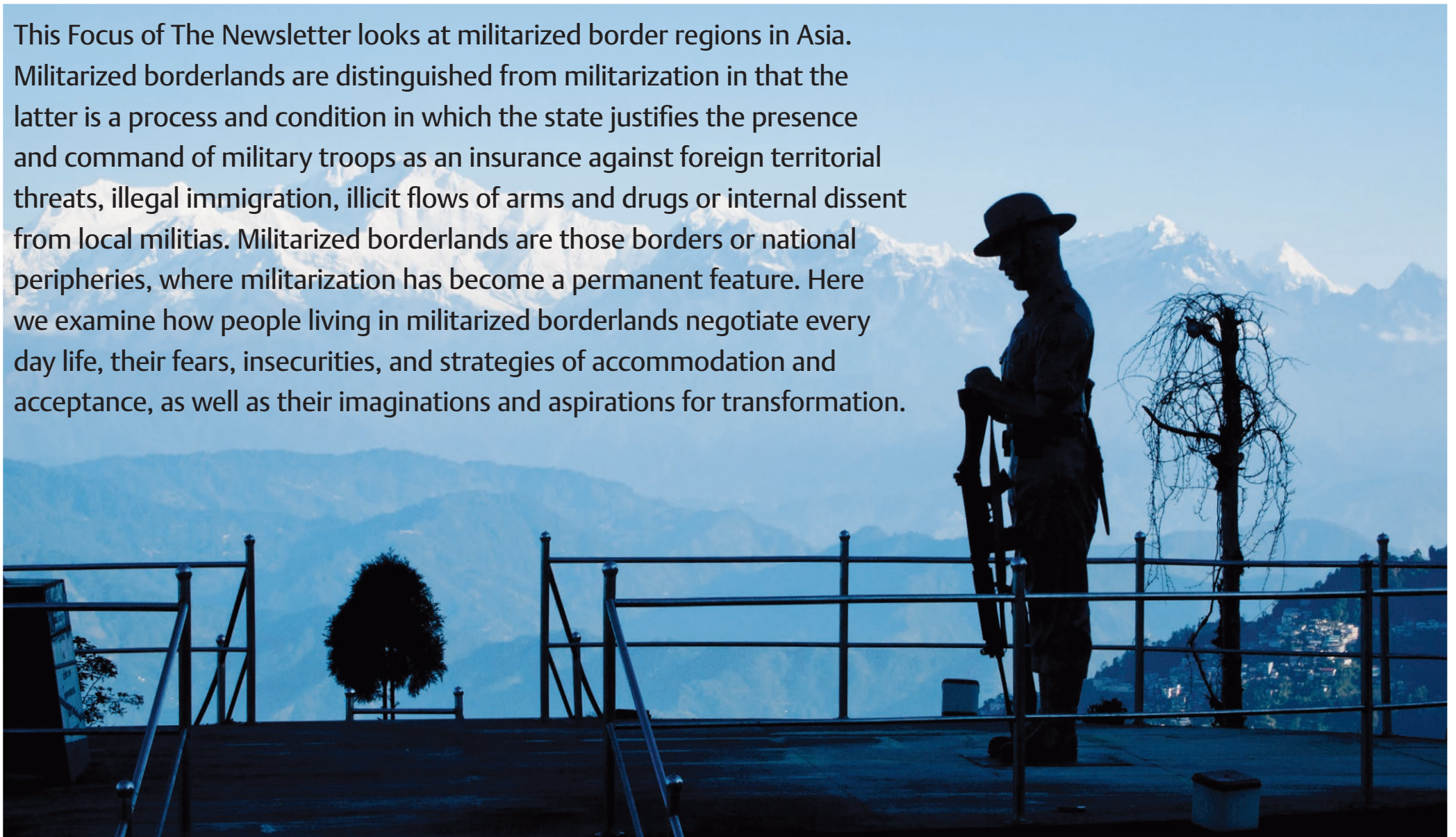
Islamabad

Lahore

The line of lights, with a distinctly orange hue, snakes from north to south. It appears to be more continuous and brighter than most highways in the view. This is the fenced and floodlit border zone between India (to the left of the line) and Pakistan (to the right). The fence is designed to discourage smuggling and arms trafficking. A similar fenced zone separates India's eastern border from Bangladesh.

Militarized Borderlands in Asia *continued*

This Focus of The Newsletter looks at militarized border regions in Asia. Militarized borderlands are distinguished from militarization in that the latter is a process and condition in which the state justifies the presence and command of military troops as an insurance against foreign territorial threats, illegal immigration, illicit flows of arms and drugs or internal dissent from local militias. Militarized borderlands are those borders or national peripheries, where militarization has become a permanent feature. Here we examine how people living in militarized borderlands negotiate every day life, their fears, insecurities, and strategies of accommodation and acceptance, as well as their imaginations and aspirations for transformation.



Above:
Indian Border guard, Darjeeling. Image reproduced under a creative commons license, courtesy of Frederik Rowing on Flickr.

Militarization without immediate threat

Often, when we speak of militarization, we assume that it is a natural process of securitization, and is somehow independent of political interest. That is, militarization is perceived to be a natural consequence for societies at war, internal or external. However, to recapitulate Michel Foucault's argument: sovereignty, discipline and security are different economies of power that are exercised over different types of spaces with the intent of maximising efficient state control.³ That is why militarization can exist even when there are no external or internal security threats.

For example, US militarization was justified in the post-Cold War period by moving the military into areas once considered civilian functions.⁴ By expanding the frontiers of military intervention and deploying military troops in evacuation operations, disaster relief, famine relief and such activities, the military and its industries were saved from decimation. Tisaranee Gunasekara shows how similar militarization in Sri Lanka today is aided through the 'humanitarian' discourse.⁵ Following the military ouster of the rebel outfit, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), from their stronghold in Northeast Sri Lanka in 2009, the then president Mahinda Rajapaksa increased military presence in these areas. While during the period of internecine war, the image of the Sri Lankan military as a good, efficient and law-abiding entity was necessary to sustain the myth of a 'humanitarian' operation with 'zero civilian casualties', after the war this image was maintained to justify the continued militarization of society. Sri Lanka was turned into a garrison state in order to serve the interests of a national government, despite the absence of an external or internal enemy. However, with the election of the new president, Maithripala Sirisena in January 2015, militarization might be reversed. In India, militarization has been associated with both external and internal security matters. In the latter context, it is pertinent to mention the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act or AFSPA, a controversial act which prohibits the assembly of five or more persons and empowers members of the armed forces with the right to open fire at anybody thought to be violating the law in areas deemed as 'disturbed areas'.⁶ In many instances, this has enabled routine violence by military and paramilitary forces in everyday 'encounters' – a euphemistic term used in South Asia to define extra-judicial killings – with people suspected to harbour anti-national intentions. Quite recently, on 19 April 2015, a Kashmiri teenager was killed when police forces fired at a civilian protest.⁷

The nation-state project

It is clear that the military has to be seen as an appendage of the state and an apparatus of rule, and not an extension of a disinterested executive. Our focus on militarized borders brings to light the many ways in which militarization aids the

nation-state project in the national peripheries. The project of the nation-state is to shape territorial subjectivities in conformity with the national geography,⁸ and its territorial anxieties are played out most forcefully at its borders. In this sense, border regions, far from being peripheral to the nation-state, are sites where the nation is experienced most intimately,⁹ and the military, as an agent of the state, is directly involved in the process of constituting national subjects.

Militarization is more than the aggregation of military forces in a territory. It is simultaneously a discursive process, involving a shift in general societal beliefs and values in ways necessary to legitimate the use of force and the organization of large standing armies.¹⁰ It has powerful spatial and ideological effects, changing the visual landscape, the language and social norms, and the local and global economy.¹¹ Militarization imparts a physicality to the border as a line of division; I have characterized this particular spatial practice of normalizing the border, the 'border-normative vision', which becomes particularly forceful in situations of conflict. The military enforces the border-normative vision through various spatial strategies, which include both physical and symbolic transformations of landscape.

Historical and arbitrary constructs

This Focus on militarized borderlands also allows us to revisit the scholarship on borders through a particular optic. Growing critical perspectives on borders since the 1990s have encouraged a view of borders as historical and arbitrary constructs, which divide up formerly conjoined areas or forcibly amalgamate previously separate and hostile territories.¹² The huge labour migrations and inter-mixtures of people accelerated through colonialism, mass movements of refugees in the postcolonial context, the migrations of professionals and transnational businessmen through economic globalization, and the rise of transnational networks and supra-national organizations, have all contributed to the erosion of homogenous national identities.¹³ Such denationalised existences and experiences made it possible to question territoriality as a basis of identity and to deconstruct borders.

When borders are no longer seen as inflexible boundary lines, it seemed fruitful to highlight crossing, more than containment, and to see borders as zones of blending, fluidity and creativity.¹⁴ Literary and cultural studies added to the idea of the border the metaphor of hybridity and in-betweenness, where the border may be embodied in particular border crossing figures, such as, for instance, a Mexican-American from Texas who rises to the rank of general in the U.S army.¹⁵

Bordering practices

However, the articles in this Focus remind us that while travel, crossing, and movement between borders is

important in order to denaturalise borders, it is equally true that 'bordering' ideologies and border-making practices persist.¹⁶ The constructed border may be an imaginative, mental border but no less potent in its effects and consequences.¹⁷ How is the consciousness of difference produced through systematic incursions of state machinery, such as the military, or through semiotic codes disseminated by selected images, memories, and metaphors?¹⁸

Baud and van Schendel argue that border spaces acquire their character from the triangular interactions of state, regional elite and local people.¹⁹ Border dynamics are affected by networks that lie on the other side too, so that the border becomes the intersecting zone between a 'double triangle'. What, then, are the kind of dynamics produced in militarized border zones, where state control is much stronger, and where the role of local people and regional elite – the other two points of the triad – diminishes considerably? How does the state take a pro-active stance in dissuading relations with the national Other through surveillance and cultural politics?

The six papers in this Focus show that in militarized borderlands, the split between the two sides of the border occasions certain spatial and social practices that constitute different kinds of adaptation strategies. Borderland strategies rest on "defiance and accommodation" where border people both accept the conditions of bordered, restricted existence, and creatively seek to defy/cross the border for economic and commercial gain, often through the complicity of border guards.²⁰ According to Van Schendel, clandestine border-crossing activities (smuggling, illegal immigration) constitute a border effect that counters the state effect (of surveillance, patrol, territorial control).

Several scholars have attempted to understand border lives in militarized zones. Smadar Lavie's work among the Mzeinis of South Sinai is a classic study of a border region under occupation that had to shed previous elements of social life in order to adapt to life under two hostile nations.²¹ In the Arab-Israeli conflict in the twentieth century, the South Sinai was a "political football tossed at least five times between Egypt and Israel".²² The Mzeini Bedouins of South Sinai could not maintain an independent Bedouin identity, because they were disenfranchised on their own land by continual military occupations, and could only perform their nomadic Bedouin identity allegorically; "for Mzeinis to openly confront any armed or unarmed occupier could mean beatings, jail, even death".²³ In today's Palestine, protest poetry is often the expressive release from oppressive conditions of military occupation.

The Focus papers continue the engagement with militarized borders by looking both at state efforts to govern borderlands through military settlement as well as the strategies of accommodation or expressions of defiance devised by border people to deal with militarization.

This Focus

The paper by Horstmann and Cole describes the tangible and very poignant effects of the militarized Thai-Burmese border on the Karen civilians trapped in between. The most telling, and chilling, evidence of hyper-militarization is the proliferation of prosthetic limbs; everyday villagers are confronted with the dangers of the 'killing minefields' where state military and rebel militias wage battle. Escape remains a dream as even those who manage to cross over to the Thai side remain caught between the two warring armies.

Ankur Datta, discussing the Kashmir border, shows how militarization has far-reaching effects. He describes the border almost as if it has a radiating aura, expanding its sphere of influence and casting its shadow over a people who have been displaced far away from the zone of army occupation. The border is embodied in these people, and even as they move away and into non-militarized zones, they carry with them the traces, fears and insecurities of militarized existences for "the border came alive for them in terms of sightings and accounts of the movement of 'unknown men' with weapons".

A different kind of embodiment is highlighted by Malini Sur in her discussion of the India-Bangladesh border, described as a 'killer border' by Willem Van Schendel, because of the frequent killings, by security forces, of civilians trying to cross this border. Retrieving the story of Felani – a young woman shot by border guards as she was crossing into Bangladesh from India – from amidst the faceless statistics of undocumented migrants, Sur shows how studies of the border must take into account the lives of those who straddle divided worlds, and who, in negotiating and crossing these boundary divisions on an everyday basis "for trade, to shop or to maintain kinship ties", physically encounter the violence that is the border. In embodying the border divisions, enforced by state security apparatuses, they are 'divided bodies'.

Duncan McDui Ra's article shows how geographical mobility is often the chosen strategy for the beleaguered inhabitants of Manipur on India's Northeast frontier. For these people, acquiring a mainstream education becomes an unlikely ally – unlikely, because the military also represents the mainstream state. On the surface, one may not perceive the boom in private schools in Manipur, excellently detailed by McDui Ra, as a border effect. But gaining a mainstream education, supplied by private schools at a time when public schools have failed to deliver, is often the straw that people will clutch at, in order to escape conditions of entrapment.

Below:
Virgin Mary above a Karenni refugee camp along the border with Myanmar. The Karennis were converted to Christianity in Myanmar and have fled to escape the current regime. Mae Hong Song province, Thailand. Image reproduced under a creative commons license, courtesy of Alex Wright on Flickr.

Gohain and Grothmann's paper focuses on culturally Tibetan Buddhist regions in Arunachal Pradesh in India, bordering China, the subject of a protracted Sino-Indian border dispute for more than half a century now. They show how military settlements, as well as practices of renaming local place names, map these areas as Indian territory, while marking them as discontinuous with cross-border circuits. But the state effect here, as elsewhere, is not a totalizing project, as defiance emerges in surprising ways.

Shishikura's article has a different cast. He shows how on the military island base of Ogasawara, people creatively defy the statist appropriation of the border and injunctions on cross-border settlement by fusing musical practices divided by history and territory. Hybridity is not metaphorical but a lived experience here.

The papers show how strategies of adaptation can range from the poetic to the practical. In trying to find ways to attenuate existences circumscribed by military occupation, borderlanders may opt for physical flight, or propose counter-narratives through poetry and music; yet they do not always find the refuge they seek.

Swargajyoti Gohain teaches Sociology and Anthropology in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur, India. Her research interests include border studies, cultural politics, development, roads, and the anthropology of mobility. Her book manuscript *Himalaya Bound: Culture, Politics, and Imagined Geographies in India's Northeast Frontier* (University of Washington Press), currently under revision, concerns cultural politics among a Tibetan Buddhist minority in Arunachal Pradesh on the India-China border (swargajyoti@gmail.com).

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