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Security Nexus Perspective

# WHEN MAPS BEGIN TO MOVE

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*Three incidents in one week: a detained traveler in Shanghai, a revived claim on Sindh, and a currency note from Kathmandu, reveal a South Asia where small symbols now carry the weight of territorial claims. The danger lies not in armies but in imaginations sharpened into weapons.*

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It began without spectacle, as many troubles in the subcontinent often do: quietly, almost indifferently, as though history were clearing its throat. A week steeped in a kind of comic solemnity, its events unfolding with the grave absurdity of men arguing over shadows cast on an old, uneven map. One could almost hear the creaking of history's machinery, answering its own summons, as if reluctant to surrender its favorite mischiefs.

The first murmur, faint but unmistakable, came from Shanghai, where a young woman from Arunachal Pradesh found herself [detained](#) beneath the cold fluorescence of an airport hall. Chinese officials, stern in their devotion to an alternate cartography, examined her Indian passport as though it were a relic from a vanished civilization. She was questioned not-so-gently, and made to sign papers she did not understand; an initiation into that peculiar fraternity of those whose identities are disputed not because of who they are, but because of where the lines on someone else's map would prefer them to be. A small incident, almost comically so, yet heavy in the way only trivial humiliations inflicted by great powers can be.

And barely had that echo settled when another whisper rose from Delhi. [India's Defence Minister](#), with the ease of a man accustomed to speaking into the certainties of a friendly crowd, remarked that "Sindh may return to India one day." He said it with the offhand confidence of a politician who

knows mythic geography plays well at home. But the remark, dropped into the region's already crowded pool of dreams, loyalties, and inherited grievances, spread outward in ripples - provoking [denunciations](#), apprehensions, and that familiar tightening of breath that accompanies any suggestion that the past might yet attempt a resurrection. In Pakistan, the words landed not as rhetoric but as portent, dredging up every anxiety sharpened by partition, war, and the belief that memory in South Asia, once stirred, is never quite satiated.

Then Nepal, with its quiet talent for announcing its displeasures through objects rather than declarations, unveiled its [new currency notes](#): each one bearing the imprint of its 2020 political map. [Lipulekh, Kalapani, Limpiyadhura](#) - names that have become ritual incantations in the theatre of Himalayan disputes, contested frontiers now printed in neat, official ink. The release was explained as routine. Nothing in this region is ever routine. The moment a boundary is drawn on money, it becomes more than a border; it becomes an assertion, a reminder, a pre-emptive negotiation.

Three events, scattered like windblown leaves across the subcontinent's restless topography. None catastrophic, none decisive, yet each carrying the faint odour of things unresolved, things forgotten until the moment they are not. The humor is thin; the unease is thick. They were small gestures; a passport, a proclamation, a banknote, but in South Asia small gestures have a way of expanding, like shadows at dusk, into quarrels no one quite intended and no one quite knows how to end.

For beneath these small episodes lies the harder truth: the subcontinent has slipped into an era where symbols, not armies, do the fighting. Maps, murals, visas, banknotes, toponyms, remarks: each now carries the weight that artillery once did. The provocations are miniature; the meanings are immense. And the region reacts to each with a suspicion that borders on reflex.

China understands this vulnerability better than anyone and does not need to invent South Asia's sensitivities. It merely needs to press on the ones that already exist. China's refusal to accept an Arunachal Pradesh passport is not clerical fussiness; it is a demonstration of a worldview. By turning a lone traveler into a pawn of territorial narrative, [Beijing enforces its claim to "South Tibet"](#) without firing a shot, and normalizes its cartographic imagination through mundane encounters, where the humiliation is individual but the message is national.

It is sovereignty-by-bureaucracy, a slow, grinding assertion that does not need tanks to leave a bruise. The frontier now lives in the immigration cubicle, not just the mountain pass.

India's "[Sindh may return](#)" remark sits at the opposite pole. It neither denies the sovereignty of others nor confines itself within current boundaries. Instead, it breathes life into an older geography, one that extends far beyond the Republic's present outline. For Delhi, this is heritage. For Pakistan, heresy. For the region, it is another sign of a political climate in which myth, memory, and maps are all too easily woven into public rhetoric. And rhetoric, once spoken, becomes the shadow of intent.

Nepal's cartographic gesture is its own form of resistance. It asserts that [small states](#), too, possess symbolic weapons. A currency note bearing a disputed frontier is not merely a piece of paper; it is a refusal. And refusal, in South Asia, quickly acquires the density of principle.

To understand why these gestures resonate so forcefully, one must return to the deeper architecture on which they fall. The subcontinent carries not one historical geography but three. There is the

civilizational past: epics, empires, pilgrimage routes, whose outlines stretch far beyond the borders of modern sovereignty. There is the colonial cartography layered atop it, drawn hurriedly and indifferently by men who never intended to inhabit the lands they demarcated. And there is the postcolonial state, fragile in identity and jealous of territory, inheriting maps it never drew and histories it cannot fully escape.

Where these three geographies collide, symbols expand. A remark becomes a blueprint. A detention becomes a claim. A banknote becomes an argument. All this might have been manageable had the region built institutions strong enough to absorb the shocks. But South Asia built almost none. SAARC remains an empty frame. BIMSTEC has function but not influence. India–China hotlines, for instance, rest dormant until damaged pride forces them into use. Meanwhile, crucial bilateral ties, like those with Nepal and Bangladesh, oscillate wildly with the whims of domestic politics. No mechanism exists to catch the fallout of symbolic friction before it hardens into political posture.

This fragility might seem uniquely South Asian, but symbolic warfare is not the subcontinent's alone. [China's 2012 passport](#) carrying the “nine-dash line” forced Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines to devise creative visa protocols. Japan and South Korea wage bitter disputes over the [naming of the sea](#) between them. Serbia and Kosovo have turned [license plates](#) into political barricades. Turkey's “[Blue Homeland](#)” map redraws the eastern Mediterranean on its own terms. The world is full of disputes fought through symbols. What makes South Asia different is the absence of buffers. Elsewhere, institutions diffuse the impact. Here, symbols fall unmediated onto political bone.

And that bone is increasingly exposed. This vulnerability is most pronounced around India, which, as the region's largest power, sits at the centre of the [symbolic storm](#). New Delhi's own symbolic gestures, often framed as cultural heritage or historical homage presented with a wink, are increasingly read by its neighbours as strategic ambitions cloaked in the language of civilizational memory. The recent mural of [Akhand Bharat](#) in the new Parliament building is a case in point. The mural's outline, invoking a civilizational geography stretching across today's neighboring sovereign states, was never going to remain a cultural gesture alone. Imagined maps, however metaphorical, cast [real shadows](#).

And the ripples did not take long to appear.

Nepal hardened its cartography. As a smaller state with a long history of negotiating Indian influence, Kathmandu often has to turn to symbolic gestures to assert its autonomy. The idea of “Greater Nepal,” referring to [pre-Sugauli Treaty boundaries](#) that once stretched into what is now Indian territory, surfaces periodically, not necessarily because the government seeks territorial revision, but because symbols offer a way to resist the gravitational pull of an imperious neighbor.

In [Dhaka](#), where anxieties over the [National Register of Citizens \(NRC\)](#), and [recent rhetoric around migration](#) are never far from the surface, the mural was seen by many commentators not as a

cultural artifact, but as a visual echo of a political rhetoric that questions the very legitimacy of post-Partition borders.

China, perceptive and opportunistic, seized on the atmosphere to escalate its own symbolic maneuvers. Every Indian invocation of civilizational memory becomes another opening for Beijing to apply pressure. China, too, draws from its own civilizational memory in framing the border question. Its claim over Arunachal Pradesh rests not only on strategic logic but on a narrative that casts the region as historically tied to Tibet. The [renaming of towns](#), the issuing of [stapled visas](#), and the symbolic [refusal to stamp Indian passports](#) from the state are all actions that gesture toward a deeper historical claim. Each is designed less to provoke than to remind: a steady drumbeat that keeps the dispute perpetually alive. It is a strategy of perpetual, low-grade friction, one mirrored in different forms by nearly every state in the region. In such an ecosystem, symbols do not travel alone. They accumulate, accrete and attach themselves to [older injuries](#). They become the whisper that prefaces the quarrel.

The danger is not a conventional war. The danger is something more insidious: symbolic escalation without restraint, without vocabulary, without exit.

Trust erodes quietly. Diplomacy shrinks to damage control. Domestic politics grows drunk on manufactured outrage. External powers deepen their footholds. Negotiation becomes surrender. The symbolic becomes structural. What begins as irritant becomes orthodoxy. And orthodoxy, once declared, becomes unalterable.

South Asia has survived wars, partitions, insurgencies, and occupations. What it may not survive is the constant abrasion of its [own imagination](#). A map becomes an accusation. A mural becomes a warning. A passport becomes a verdict. A remark becomes prophecy. The politics of small hurts calcifies into the politics of large anxieties. And every actor, large or small, finds itself boxed in by its own symbols.

Somewhere, in the fluorescence of another airport hall, a young woman stands again before an officer who informs her that her identity belongs elsewhere, that her map is incorrect, that her belonging has been misfiled in the registry of another nation. She does not know that she is the site of a quarrel larger than herself. She does not need to. Her uncertainty is enough to sustain it. She is not the crisis. She is merely its silhouette.

The crisis is the map in his mind. And the larger maps behind him, painted, printed, circulated, applauded, contested, and consecrated across a region that cannot decide whether its borders are

## When Maps Begin to Move

memories or mandates. Until the subcontinent learns to treat symbols with discipline rather than indulgence, it will remain at war with itself, not through armies but through shadows.

And shadows, once they begin to move, rarely stop where one expects.



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