Adam's Mirror: The Frontier in the Imperial Imagination

MANAN AHMED

To the centre of any empire, the frontier is a site of anxiety, of potential harm, of barbarians who could be marching towards the gate. The imperial imaginations of the medieval Arab dynasties, the colonial British, and now the United States have been dominated by this anxiety. We have to plant our historiographical feet in the frontier space of present-day Afghanistan, Pakistan and north India to see the concerns which emerge from within a regional imagination, in a regionally specific conversation and in regional stories. Situating ourselves in the frontier reveals varied perspectives that are invisible to the imperial eye. To pay attention to the localised production of history and memory is to decontextualise the only context that appears relevant – the imperial one. This shift in perspective reveals that the oft-designated "frontier" has a centrality all of its own.

Manan Ahmed (*mananahmed@gmail.com*) is at the Freie Universität-Berlin, Germany.

Prologue

In az-Zubayr's *Kitāb al-Hadāyā wa al-Tuhaf* (Book of Gifts and Precious Items), a catalogue, created in the 11th century, of tributes collected by Muslim kings over the centuries, is a report about a fragment of a mirror, which was received as tribute by the Umayyad caliph Muʿāwiya b Abi Sufiyān (d 680) from the king of al-Qiqān near al-Sind.[1] Since 660 CE (Common Era), the Arab armies were engaged in extending tributaries in the *Thughr al-Hind w'al Sind* (frontier of al-Hind and al-Sind), slowly making their way east of Khurusān, Kirmān, Sāstān, and Makrān (present cities such as Kandahar in Afghanistan, Lahore, the regions of Waziristan, Baluchistan, and the port city of Sindh in Pakistan). It was Adam, az-Zubayr reports, who received this mirror from god, upon his descent from heaven, so that "he could see whatever he wished on earth", no matter in conditions good or bad. Muʿāwiya used the mirror to examine for himself the conditions at the frontier of his dominion, to know and check on his appointed governors and commanders in the distant battlegrounds of *al-Hind w'al Sind*. This mirror, now a fragment of governance, remained in Muʿāwiya's personal possession until the ʿAbbasid times (mid-8th century onwards), after which it was reportedly lost.

A metaphorical reading of the 11th century re-imagination of the Umayyad frontier policy needs to retain both the mystery and the danger of that frontier. It ought to capture the anxiety that the frontier continuously produces in the seat of putative power – what is going on so far away?[2] It is an anxiety that paradoxically internalises a peculiar fascination with the frontier even as it pushes away more robust understandings – it simultaneously keeps the frontier a known object and an unknowable terrain. The fragment of the mirror acts as an apt metaphor for this tension – a mirror that reflects not the viewer but the distant other, and not just any other but a specific other that denotes potential danger. The frontier itself is a site of anxiety, of potential harm, of barbarians who could be marching towards the gate.[3] It is this anxiety, this particular reading of the frontier that tends to dominate the imperial imagination – it clouds over the historical contingencies, the particularities or the specificities, and those instated there; in its place is a caricature of the exotic, the unknown. This anxiety of the empire embeds itself in the frontier itself, waiting to be recalled, remembered and reproduced.

On 29 January 2009, at the Senate confirmation hearing for US Secretary of State nominee Hillary R Clinton, Senator John Kerry, the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, made the following remarks:

> We are struggling to fight with and for people with a different culture, a different language, different custom, different history, different religion,

> if any. And all of those similarities exist. We don't live there. We don't live in the community, in a hamlet, in a small town, pocket, whatever you want to call it. And so we're not there often at night. They are. And the night often rules with insurgencies. The complications are profound in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. And I went to both – and to India – immediately after Mumbai and was really struck by the extraordinary distance we have to travel in both places, Senator. … It left – it kept leaping out at me in ways that, over a number of years here, I really, frankly had not given enough consideration to. But recently read a wonderful book when I commend to you by Rory Stewart, you know, *The Places in Between* and another book, *The Forever War* and a whole host of them that really give you the flavour of this if you really want it – I mean, *Gertrude Bell, the Desert Queen* is a fascinating study of sort of the region and of tribalism. And that's really what I want to point to.[4]

Clinton's answering remarks echoed Kerry's reading as well as his particular teleology,

> Sitting here today, when I think about my trips to Afghanistan, my flying over that terrain, my awareness of the history going back to Alexander the Great and, certainly, the imperial British military and Rudyard Kipling's memorable poems about Afghanistan, the Soviet Union, which put in more troops than we're thinking about putting in – I mean, it calls for a large doze of humility about what it is we are trying to accomplish.[5]

Starkly present in Senator Kerry's language is the frontier, though he will never use that word. The space he describes is at the edge, chaotic, destructive, dark, unknowable. Here, the role of Adam's mirror is played by the literary reporter, dispatched from the empire out to the frontier, the Rudyard Kipling, the Rory Stewart, the T E Lawrence, the Gertrude Bell; those who can walk, mingle, pass through that frontier to either reproduce *it* in a image of the capital or reproduce an *image of it* for the capital. Here again is the mystery and danger of the frontier, invoked either in romantic tones or in catastrophic ones.

In the teleology of empires that Clinton presents – from Alexander, to the British, to the Soviet and finally, to the US – is another manifestation of the anxiety produced by the frontier, the forgetting of known pasts, the eliding of known geographies, the deliberately maintained distance from the frontier. The genealogy reflects not only the specific links between empires and that particular frontier but also the pasts that the empire chooses to acknowledge, reflect on and know. Afghanistan, Pakistan – especially the regions of Waziristan, Baluchistan and lower Sindh – act as the internal frontiers of the US empire. In the language of empire, this frontier space is posited as both empty (figuratively speaking) and chaotic (analytically speaking). It becomes a site of continuous contestation and battle and always remains, by definition, far removed from the ordered capital. It is in a state of permanent displacement, filled only by transitive populations. It is liminal, in the sense that it is at the margins, between zones, at the edge, unable to produce subjectivities of its own. Its inhabitants cannot be visualised historically, politically, or socially. It is this liminal nature, this existence outside law's writ that, on the one hand, allows the drones to fly over the region, dispensing "frontier justice" (to evoke the American West), without the explicit need of trial, juries or judges, and on the other hand, allows the empire only a peculiarly circumscribed knowledge of it. The Adam's mirror of the Umayyad is now recreated as the 5,500 metre high camera on an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) and the ambulatory viewpoint of British academic, author and politician Rory Stewart.

Viewed through the drone's camera, the frontier is both utterly knowable and maddeningly unknown. This capacity to crowd out all other narratives about the space it demarcates as "frontier" belongs only to the empire, and so it is to imperial history that we must first turn. Not to explain imperial histories but to showcase, in the archives of an empire far removed from our present, the very same gestures of framing the frontier as can be seen in the British or the US cases. In what follows, I want to interrupt time as it flows in Clinton's formulation. I want to bring into the conversation the Umayyad empire and its relationship to the frontier. I do so to highlight that particular ways of knowing and unknowing the frontier are constitutive of imperial experience, and tracing these pathways of knowledge illustrates the unknown terrain to which frontiers are routinely confined. Next, I want to plant our historiographical feet in the frontier space itself to see the concerns which emerge from within a regional imagination, in a regionally specific conversation and in regional stories. Situating ourselves in the frontier reveals new topographies, varied perspectives, networks and routes that are invisible to the imperial eye.

The First Frontier

The Arab expansion towards the frontier of *al-Hind w'al-Sind* – roughly peninsular southern Asia, using the Indus River as a natural boundary between *al-Sind* (the regions to the north and west) and al-Hind (the regions to the east) – began largely as a result of the re-entrenchment of the last of the Sasanid nobility in the eastern hinterlands of Khurusān and Kirmān in the mid-seventh century. By 700 CE, the regions of Sīstan and Makrān – with important garrison sites such as Kandahar – were constantly switching alliances, revolting, and both attracting and exporting rebellious elements, ideologies and assassins against the Umayyad court in Damascus and the major cities of Basra and Kufa. Efforts to "control" this region eventually led to the successful campaign of 712 CE that established Umayyad garrisons in the ports on the Indus River and opened a secure naval route from Aden to Sindh. The victory, like all previous victories in the region, was short-lived and throughout the eighth century, numerous expeditions were dispatched to the frontier, as the Gurjara-Partiharas in the north-west and the Rashtrakutas in the Deccan maintained a tumultuous coexistence with the Arab-Muslim principality.

The anxiety of harm that exists on the military frontier is aptly captured in Arabic historical and exegetical tradition. In the section on the frontier of *al-Hind wa'l Sind* in the *Kitāb Futāh al-Buldān* (The Book of Conquest of Lands) by al-Balādhurī (d 892), there are repeated invocations of the many failures and setbacks suffered by the Arab armies in the region of Zabulistān, Sistān and Makrān. At the outset, al-Balādhurā reproduces a caution given to the third caliph 'Uthman (d 655), who hoped to restrict the movement of rebellious forces to and from the region, and received this report from a scout to the region: "'O Commander of the Believers, I examined it and know it well.' The caliph said, 'Describe it'. He said, 'The water supply is sparse; the dates are

inferior; and the robbers are bold. A small army would be lost there, and a large army would starve.'"[6] That caution shadows the narration of the various Muslim campaigns to the region – al-Balādhurī repeatedly refers to the breaking of frontier treaties, the decimation of established garrison cities, the assassination of governors or their removal due to corruption. In his narrative, this eastern frontier of the Umayyad empire remains volatile and unsettled, continuously draining the coffers. The list of armies and commanders given by al-Balādhurī' illustrates the continual pressure the frontier exerted on the Umayyad. In 663-64, 'Abdallāh b Sawwār al-'Abdi leads two expeditions to Kikān, perishing in the second. In 665, Sinān ibn Salamah reaches Makrān and establishes a fort. Sinān's conquest, however, is short-lived, as the fort goes in and out of Arab control until 672 when al-Mundhir ibn al-Jarūd al-'Abdiis is able to recapture it. The local political and social powers, such as the Zunbīls of Zamīn-dawar and Zābulistān, and the Kābulshāhs of Kabul, were sometimes persuaded to pay tribute but, according to al-Balādhurī, due to the lack of a standing Arab army, they often changed their minds and remained ferocious opponents.

The Zābulistān campaigns left a deeper historical mark – the Umayyad sent the governor 'Ubaidallah b Abi Bakra to Zābulistān at the head of the *Jaish al-Tawawis* (Army of Destruction) to subdue the region in 698. They were caught, captured and largely decimated, putting an end to Umayyad expeditions to the region for the next decade.[7] It provoked a number of poetical and mythical accounts of the doomed army. One of these is preserved in the early 10th century geographical treatise Kitāb al-Masālik wa'l-Mamālik (Book of Roads and Kingdoms) by Ibn Khurdādhbih (d 913), where he reproduces a popular lament about the many graves of fallen Arab soldiers in Kandahar.[8]

This engagement – military and political – also stimulated a production of knowledge about this frontier in all the genres that usually constitute imperial knowledge, the historical, the administrative, the geographical, and the wondrous. As mentioned earlier, the first reported embassy from Baghdad to the al-Hind and al-Sind departed in 800, and became the basis of numerous geographical and historical accounts. A number of key Arab geographers visited Arab Sind in the 9th, 10th and 11th centuries. However, there is a general deficiency in "official" Muslim accounts when it comes to this frontier. The universal histories, such as of those al-Tabarīī (d 923) and al-Ya'qūbī (d 897), provide little coverage of *al-Hind w'al-Sind*. This scarcity in the historical and geographical texts is read, in secondary literature, as indicating the lack of political and religious significance of Sindh to the Arab polity. Khalid Blankinship, for example, notes that there is an "overwhelming geographical bias" towards the metropolitan cities of Iraq, with the consequence that "the importance of events is only measured by their nearness to and impact on the capital city".[9] But that seems to be a limited understanding of both the frontier and the centre – or at least a decidedly atomic one, with concretised stable notions of "centre" and "frontier".

As is apparent from the various geographical and historical accounts, Arab Sind, especially during the time of Arab political and military presence, played a powerful role in the genre of literature known as *'ajāib wa ghar'āib* (wonders and miracles). The *'ajāib al-Hind* (marvels of India) texts, which emerge in the late ninth century, act as a well-noted locus of historical, geographical and exotic information on this frontier. In this genre, which also contains a large number of mercantile and naval accounts, lies an exotic landscape that is filled with gold-carrying ants, giant eagles and other terrible creatures – some in Kashmir, some in Kabul, some in Multan. An examination of the wondrous tales in the *'ajāib al-Hind* genre reveals that it borrowed heavily from Greek accounts, often reproducing tales from the second or third centuries BCE (Before the Common Era), with slight modifications, in Arabo-Islamic guises.[10] That these fantastic elements mingled, within the same text, with dynamically produced nautical reports on distances, wind currents, and port conditions reflect the carefully calibrated knowing/unknowing that situated itself in the empire's frontier.

It is to the persistence of this literary and political imagination of the *thughr* (frontier) that we can credit the appearance of Adam's mirror in the 11th century text. And it is a similar literary and political imagination, which rests uncomfortably in the imperial heart that shapes our present-day understandings of that same frontier. For more than 250 years, the frontier of *al-Hind w'al-Sind* remained static in the imperial vision, onto which could be projected the fantastic, the bizarre, and the incomprehensible. During that same period, the Indian Ocean trade re-emerged as a dominant link; and a vast intellectual and ideological transfer of communities occurred, generating site-specific knowledge. That this frontier, though within the confines of the empire, retained the allure of the exotic and the fear, reflected the balance of knowing and unknowing that constituted the empire's others. Any recuperative act against the empire, any historiographical corrective to the imperial narratives, must begin by examining this imagination, but it cannot stop there. It has to situate itself on the frontier, locating itself outside Adam's mirror.

The View from the Frontier

In 1868, in an essay titled "Democratic Vistas", poet-philosopher Walt Whitman made a prediction about the American frontier.

> In a few years the dominion-heart of America will be far inland, toward the West. Our future national capital may not be where the present one is. It is possible, nay likely, that in less than 50 years, it will migrate a thousand or two miles, will be re-founded, and every thing belonging to it made on a different plan, original, far more superb.[11]

This magnetic pull of the frontier on the centre, which is powered by the demand for new talent, for new energy, for new "stock", is rarely remarked upon in the literature on centre-periphery models. In Whitman is a subtext worth explicitly noting – the frontier is not empty. The inhabitants of this frontier, the space towards which the empire must advance, are the necessary fodder to propel the movement. It is quite possible to read, in this sense, the movement of Islamicate capitals towards the frontier of *al-Hind wa'l Sind* – from Damascus to Baghdad to Samarra to Ghazna and Ghur and the influx of Persian, of Turkic, of Indian populations, found at the "frontier", who settle the characteristics of the empire "with all the old retain'd, but more expanded, grafted on newer, hardier, purely native stock."[12] The logical extension of such a reading would be to place ourselves on the

frontier and examine the ways in which the empire is reflected and refracted in histories and policies. To pay attention to the localised production of history and memory is not just a passive scholarly act of locating "agency" in archives. It is to arrest the narratives that the empire generates about itself. It is to decontextualise the only context that appears relevant – the imperial one. This shift in perspective is not merely a corrective, but a critical one, as it reveals that the oft-designated "frontier" has a centrality all of its own.

By the time of al-Mu'taṣim (813-33), the 'Abbāsids had sent a long list of governors to the region of *al-Hind w'al Sind*. The period between the death of al-Mu'taṣim and the assassination of al-Mutawakil (833-61) is one of a fairly stable court in Baghdad. A large influx of *hadīth* scholars, grammarians, and theologians made their way to the port cities in Gujarat and Sindh, and up towards Lahore. Similarly, the traffic from *al-Hind* across the Arabian Gulf to the cities of Baghdad and Cairo flourished. Pottery and coins gathered from Sāmarrā, Fustāt, Daybul and Mansūra show that a cross-regional trade flourished during this period. One sign of the stability of this trade was the numerous regional power centres that flourished in the 9th and 10th centuries – the Mahāniya in Gujarat, the Habāri in Sindh, and the Saffārids and the Sāmānids from Ghazna to Multan. The Ghaznawids (962-1186) are perhaps most well known for extending their empire across most of *al-Hind wa'l Sind*, threading together all the cities from Ghazna to Lahore to the lower Indus valley. The establishment of the Delhi Sultanate, out of the fragments of the Ghurid empire, once again created a new political space in the broader region encompassing the frontier. The 14th, 15th, 16th and 17th centuries saw the establishment of polities with political and social bases in Sindh, Baluchistan and southern Afghanistan – the Sumrā and the Sammā (based in Makrān), the Arghān (based in Kandahār), and the Tarkhān. Surrounding them were the gunpowder empires – the Uzbek (1500-1785), the Mughal (1526-1858) and the Safavid (1501-1722), who often insisted that this was a frontier – a meeting of borderlines, conflict zones, and uncontrollable chaos. Hence the adventures of Babar in 1520, Akbar in 1592, Nadir Shah in 1739, Ahmad Shah Durrani in 1753, and, perhaps most relevantly, the East India Company in 1843.

The above string of political dynasties and concerns each left their traces in history – built environments, circulated objects, cultural memories. All of which provide a radically different conception of space, boundaries and belonging than the view from the capitals of Baghdad, Delhi, Agra or London. Consider the early 13th century Persian text, written in Thatta, Sindh, and popularly known as *Chachnama*. Describing for its courtly audience, a portrait of seventh century al-Sind, it presents a strictly bounded vision of the polity that existed before Islam's arrival.

> Narrators of reports and historians write that the city of Aror, which was the capital of al-Hind and al-Sind, was a great city by the river Sehwan (which we call Mehran), filled with varied palaces, colourful pastures, canals, fountains, gardens, and flower gardens. And in this lively city was a Hindu Raja by the name of Rai Sehras b Sehasi who had immeasurable treasures and riches. His justice was known around the world and his philanthropy was legendary. To the East, his kingdom extended to Kashmir; in the west to Makran, in the south to Daybul and the sea shore, and to the north to the Qiqans. To each frontier, he had appointed four governors – one in Brahmanabad, one in Sistan, one in Iskandari, and one in the great city of Multan. He himself remained in the capital and kept a close relationship with his frontier governors, supplying them with troops and arms. He gave them strict orders to guard the borders of their domains so that no outsider could break through.[13]

The text goes on to describe the rule of a brahmin king Chach, who conquers this kingdom and proceeds to visit the borders of his new polity.

> At Kashmir, he planted two trees – one oak and one beech and he waited for them to grow and their branches to entangle with each other. This, he declared, was the border between the Raja of Kashmir and us. No one will go across without permission. At Makran he planted a bushel of date trees and inscribed on the trunk an insignia of his court – marking the limit of his rule. By Sistan, he had erected a bell tower with five trumpets which would sound at dawn and at dusk.[14]

This already-realised picture of kingship is markedly different, of course, from the claims of a *Chakravartin*, a *Sultan-e Kamil* or a *Badhshah-e Alam* or other designations reserved for kings, conquerors and rulers, whose domain was always the world in its entirety. Its careful delineation of terrain is also largely invisible to scholarship because it does not fit the centre-periphery or the frontier model.

Keeping in mind that this Persian text was produced on the frontier, we can add a string of such localised texts, which are not concerned with the imperial capitals but with their own region. The *Tarikh-i Tabakāt-i Mubarākshahī*, written in early 16th century, which is our only primary source for the Sammā, and the *Tarikh-i Tahirī*, written in the mid-16th century, were both produced in the town of Thatta. In both, the Mughal empire, the doings of Humayun and Akbar, are mere backgrounds against which regional concerns are paramount – the tales of ascensions and victories, the descriptions of forts, cities and ports (especially of Thatta, Multan, Lahore, and Kandahar), the recounting of folk romances and biographical notes on notable poets and Sufis. Unlike the materials completed in the capital, these texts are not focused on exotica or anxiety, but on the lived lives of the communities that surround them. In the 17th century, *Tarikh-i Ma'sumi* and *Beglarnama*; in the 18th century, *Tuhfāt ul-Kirām;* and in the 19th century, *Lubb-e Tarikh-i Sind* were some of the key texts produced in the frontier of al-Sind.

The most critical intervention these frontier texts provide is information on local customs, local culture and biographies of notables. It seems a banal point to make that the imperial gaze to the frontier always aimed to generalise from the particular, to deduce patterns, to predict behaviour. The power of these particular texts lies in shifting the descriptive focus away from the diagnostic or the programmatic to the lived and the social. It is a perception of space utterly lacking in Adam's mirror.

Take *Tūhfat ul-Kirām* (Gifts of the Generous) by Mir 'Ali Sher Qāni (1727-1788), a history attuned to the spiritual and mystical leaders of Sindh – narrating folk epics and oral histories of various towns, centres and graveyards. Qāni authored more than 42 works, including numerous compendiums of poetry (he excelled in the *mathnāvi* and *qasidā*); a dictionary of Persian poets in Sindh, *Muq'allāt-e Shur'ā* (1760); a history from the 'Abbasids to the Kalhōra, *Tar'īkh-i 'Abbasi* (1761); and a truly unique cultural

history of Sindh, incorporating everything from fashion to culinary skills and means of relaxation, *Nisāb ul-Bulghā* (1783). *Tuhfāt ul-Kirām* (1761) comprises three volumes. The first deals with the history of the prophets down to the early Caliphs. The second is divided into seven sections – each containing histories of cities and towns in Sindh, Baluchistan, and Afghanistan, along with their spiritual and ruling elite. The third volume is dedicated to the history of the region, ending with the Kalhorā dynasty. *Tuhfāt ul-Kirām* concerns itself primarily with cultural and spiritual aspects, intertwining romances, culinary practices, Sufi hagiographies and discussions of the magical properties of everyday objects. In all, Qāni uses the history of the region, of institutions, of households, to illustrate the "pre-eminence" of certain practices and to promote a regional viewpoint, which he laments is absent in the works on history composed at the courts.

These histories, these tombs, these political philosophies, political theologies, manuals of governance, and genealogies of rule are the missing links in Clinton's historical narrative ("my flying over that terrain, my awareness of the history going back to Alexander the Great and, certainly, the imperial British military"). My attempt to fill in the gap is not an attempt at bibliographic or encyclopedic completeness. It is an attempt to reduce the teleological distance (the more than 2,100 years that separate Alexander from imperial Britain in that "terrain"), to give valence to contexts more valid to this particular imperial adventure.

At the Edges of the US Empire

The debate about the "empire-ness" of the post-1989 US acquired momentum during the 2001-03 period, when its military and political retaliation to the 11 September 2001 attacks created a starkly new geopolitical world. Taking the late 19th century British Empire as the yardstick for all imperial measurements, historian Niall Ferguson declared in October 2001 that the US had to become a colonial imperial power or risk losing the world to chaos.[15] This judgment did not catch on per se, as despite administrators such as Zalmay Khalilzad, Jay Garner and L Paul Bremer, the US decided to restrict the colonial angle of its imperial processes. Hence, the petulant declaration by then Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld in April 2003, "We don't seek empires … We're not imperialistic. We never have been."[16] Taken at face value, such protestations are taken as evidence that the US is an "anti-colonial" empire, one that has never been interested in possessing colonies (hence, never developed an administrative or service core of colonial bureaucracies).[17] But, it does not take away the imperial vision on a global scale that has bound successive US

regimes and the public since the very beginning. Here, as a crude example, is an ode, written by Francis Hopkinson, printed on pamphlets and distributed at the Independence Day parade on 4 July 1788, in Philadelphia: "O for a muse of fire! to mount the skies/And to a listening world proclaim/Behold! behold! an empire rise!"[18] The ode was titled "Columbia's Triumph", using the now almost forgotten title for a US that extended its triumph beyond the seas.

> 'Tis done! 'tis done! my sons, she cries,
> In war are valiant and in council wise.
> *Wisdom* and *valour* shall my rights defend,
> And o'er my vast domain those rights extend.
> Science shall flourish, genius stretch her wing,
> In native strains Columbian muses sing:
> *Wealth* crown the arts, and *Justice* cleanse her scales,
> Commerce her pon'drous anchor weigh
> … Wide spread her sails.
> And in far distant seas her flag display.[19]

This vision of a global imperial reach was clearly articulated early. The world beyond was always visible, always attainable – Jedidiah Morse's *The American Universal Geography* (1797) had by its fifth edition a long chapter on "Sindetic Hindoostan", covering the cities of "Lahore, Cashmere, Cabul, Ghisni, or Gasna, Candahar, Moultan, and Tatta". This awareness of a global geography and the availability of global capital are most clearly visible in the 1856 Guano Islands Act. Goaded by that same spirit, the 1821 treaty between the East India Company and the Talpurs of Sindh expressely forbid "other Europeans and Americans the right to settle in Sind".[20] This 1821 treaty was subsumed by the 1830 treaty and finally abrogated when the Company annexed Sindh in 1843, in the aftermath of the disastrous first Anglo-Afghan War of 1841. The annexation, as has been convincingly argued by John Y Yong, was driven in large parts by the Company's desire to further control the production and transportation of opium from Bengal's plantations to China. As Yong describes the global network of opium, the US military and mercantile interests were intimately linked as procurers and transporters in the Indian Ocean.[21]

What is striking is that neither the regional histories nor the US' own imperial past are visible in present narratives, and neither is brought to bear in the postcolonial scholarly engagement with *Pax Americana*. The overwhelmingly prevalent comparative project to the US empire remains the British example in west Asia and south Asia. The critiques levelled against US strategies in Afghanistan or Pakistan are rarely themselves cognisant of historical pasts of the region, and rarely entangle themselves in locally produced narratives. The effort to generalise from particularities gives us reams of scholarship on "tribes" or "Islamism", which recycle, at best, British colonial strategies of control and domination. Adam's mirror, as a metaphor, reflects one trope of an epistemological engagement with the frontier – that of direct, unfiltered reportage, the ultimate informant who holds no bias, and where there is no need to sift the personality from the knowledge. In starker terms, the frontier remains a fixed, stagnant space from the point of view of the empire – whether the Umayyad Adam's mirror or the US drone's view-finder. Adam's mirror shows its limitation not in itself – in the object – but in its raison d'être – the gazer's intent.

NOTES

1 Ghāda al Hijjāwī al-Qaddūmī (1998): *Book of Gifts and Rarities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press): 175.

2 Distance here, however, cannot be read literally. Arab Sind was not at some great distance from the governors in Bahrain or Oman, or from Damascus or Baghdad, for that matter. However, Arab Sind remained at a great remove in the imperial imagination. The first noted expedition, primarily for the sake of knowledge gathering occurred as late as 800 CE, when the Barmakid minister Yahyā bin Khalid went on a scientific tour. That report remains the sole imperial documentation of its dominion in the peninsula until al-Beruni's in the 11th century (by which time military and political power had shifted from Baghdad to Ghazna).

3 A more explicit reworking of this anxiety localised in the mirror comes to us from the 12th century French *Roman d'Enéas*, which contains a description of the tomb of Camille, where a mirror is mounted to the ceiling "in which they could see very well when someone was coming to attack them, whether by sea or by land. They would never be conquered in war; whoever was seated at the foot of the tower could see in the mirror their enemies coming toward them. Thus they could supply themselves well and prepare themselves for defence; they would not be easy to surprise." See Vincent A Lankewish (1998), "Assault from Behind: Sodomy, Foreign Invasion, and Masculine Identity in the Roman d'Enéas" in Sylvia Tomasch and Seally Giles (ed.), *Text and Territoriality: Geographical Imagination in the European Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press): 208.

4 "Senate Confirmation Hearing for Secretary of State Nominee Hillary Clinton", The American Presidency Project, accessed on 14 November 2010, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=85454.

5 Same as Note 4.

6 al-Balādhurī (1988): *Futūh al-Buldān* (Beirut: Maktaba al-Hilāl): 416-17.

7 C E Bosworth (1973), "Ubaidullah b Abī Bakra and the 'Army of Destruction' in Zabulistan", *Der Islam*, 50: 268-83.

8 The retelling of this episode was oft-cited by Orientalists who found echoes of it in the Anglo-Afghan wars of the mid-to-late 19th century: "In the time of al-Muqtadār (916), during the digging for the foundation of a tower in Kandahar, a subterranean cave was discovered, in which were a thousand Arab heads, all attached to the same chain, which had evidently remained in good preservation since the year 70/698, for a paper with this date upon it was found attached by a silken thread to the ears of the 29 most important skulls, with their proper names. This would indicate that the Arabs at first met with no great success in their enterprise against this town: nevertheless they became masters of it." Of course, that note of eventual triumph at the end seemed prophetic for their enterprise, and the anecdote functioned less as a historical echo and more as a showcase for the frisson caused by the invocation of savagery at the frontier. See H D Seymour and J P Ferrier (1856), *Caravan Journey and Wanderings in Persia, Afghanistan, Turkistan and Beloochistan*, (London: John Murray): 323.

9 Khalid Yahya Blankinship (1994): *The End of the Jihād State: The Reign of Hishām Ibn 'Abd Al-Malik and the Collapse of the Umayyads* (Albany: State University of New York Press): 259.

10 See S Maqbul Ahmad (1989), *Arabic Classical Accounts of India and China* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study).

11 Walt Whitman (1997), *Poetry and Prose,* Justin Kaplan (ed.) (London: Fitzroy Dearborn): 951.

12 Same as Note 11.

13 N A Baloch (1983), *Fathnamah-i Sind: Being the Original Record of the Arab Conquest of Sind*, (Islamabad: Institute of Islamic History, Culture and Civilisation): 18.

14 N A Baloch (1983): 39.

15 Niall Ferguson (2001), "Welcome the New Imperialism: The US Must Make the Transition from Informal to Formal Empire", *The Guardian*, 31 October, accessed on 26 November 2010.

16 Max Boot (2003), "American Imperialism? No Need to Run Away from Label," *USA Today*, 5 April, accessed on 26 November 2010.

17 This is the first analytical point in Engseng Ho's remarkable essay on the US empire. I owe much here to Ho's critical thinking. See Engseng Ho (2004), "Empire through Diasporic Eyes: A View from the Other Boat" in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 46 (2): 210-46.

18 *The Gentleman's Magazine, and Historical Chronicle* (1788): Vol 58 (London: John Nichols), 1018.

19 Same as Note 18.

20 It is unclear whether this is in response to traders and merchants in the region or missionary activities. Churches based in the US had heavily invested in sending missions to Punjab and Sindh during the period. See, for example, The First Annual Report of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church, in the United States (New York, 1838).

21 See J Y Wong (1998), *Deadly Dreams: Opium, Imperialism and the 'Arrow' War (1856-60) in China*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).