World Map: To Each Their Own?

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This article is an edited version of the paper written for the Valdai Discussion Club, https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/political-map-of-the-world-to-each-their-own/

DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2026-24-3-224-228

For fifteen years until its collapse, the Soviet Union regularly published a popular science series titled *Looking at the Political Map of the World*. Issued monthly, these brochures examined current events in specific countries or regions and offered historical context. They served as an excellent companion to the world map itself, which, amid ongoing decolonization, was updated almost annually. Attention was also paid to long-established countries, both near and far. Soviet citizens had many opportunities to deepen their knowledge of political geography.

This legacy of basic geographic knowledge—shared with other European countries[1]—may be why stories of cartographic blunders in U.S. media[2] remain so popular in post-Soviet Russia.

[1] Francès, D., 2017. Mais c'est quoi le problème des Américains avec la géographie? [But What Is the American Problem with Geography?]. *Slate*, 6 September. https://www.slate.fr/story/150837/fromage-probleme-geographie-americains

[2] RIA Novosti, 2026. Телеканал Fox News перепутал на карте Иран и Ирак [Fox News Confused Iran with Iraq on the Map]. *RIA Novosti*, 3 March. https://ria.ru/20260312/telekanal-2080273269.html

But there is one thing that even a strong geographical culture does not resolve. The political map of the world has never been universally accepted: a map depicts the globe, but also the official viewpoint—even the political philosophy—of its country of origin. Perhaps the most basic manifestation of this is map-centering. Western and Russian maps are typically centered along the prime meridian, though in post-war Soviet and contemporary Russian cartography, the Moscow meridian has been used. Maps published in the United States sometimes center the axis on America, splitting Eurasia in two, while Chinese maps are generally centered on the Pacific Ocean.

But the depiction of national borders carries even greater political resonance. While map-centering offers different perspectives on geographic reality, drawn borders often bear no relation to it. The first post-war generation of West German schoolchildren grew up with maps showing Germany within its 1937 borders, with the GDR labeled a "Soviet occupation zone" and East Prussia as being "currently under Soviet/Polish administration." During the Cold War, American maps noted that the United States did not recognize the incorporation of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania into the USSR, yet still depicted the Baltic republics as part of the Soviet Union. For eighty years, Indian maps have shown the entire former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir as part of India, while Pakistani maps claim it as their own. Incidentally, Soviet maps were much closer to reality on the Kashmir issue, as they showed the 1949 demarcation line. Yet Korea remained formally unified on Soviet maps until the establishment of diplomatic relations between Moscow and Seoul in 1990. Countries that do not recognize Israel depict it as Palestine. The list goes on.

The first decade of the 21st century saw a qualitative leap in cartography, as it was revolutionized by the Internet. In 2005, Google Maps set a new standard for mass geographic media. It combined three key components: vector maps (borders, names, roads, points of interest), satellite imagery, and interactive features (route planning and, later, the ability to correct and add data). In showing national borders, Google initially took a technological approach, prioritizing functionality and navigational accuracy. But by the end of the decade,

its product had gained such widespread popularity and authority that it began to influence military and political realities.

In October 2010, a Nicaraguan detachment landed on Costa Rica's Calero Island and began dredging the San Juan River—acting, according to the Nicaraguan commander, based on Google Maps. The ensuing diplomatic conflict was later dubbed by the media "The First Google Maps War,"[3] but, fortunately did not escalate into real war, and was resolved in court in Costa Rica's favor. After this and several other incidents, Google, a U.S.-based company, changed its approach to depicting borders. Recognizing their explosive nature and facing the demands of national laws, Google abandoned the idea of a 'single map for everyone' and adopted a localization strategy. In disputed cases, Google Maps now shows different borders (depending on the user's location) or uses dotted lines. The same applies to place names: in 2025, Google quickly reacted to President Trump's executive order, renaming the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of America—for U.S. users.[4]

This localization policy has proven an elegant solution, allowing the company to largely avoid conflicts with the authorities of countries where it operates, although this does not always prevent scandals. Russia's Yandex took a similar approach, displaying international borders in accordance with national legislation—until the summer of 2022. At that point, regulatory and sanctions risks drove Yandex to remove state and administrative borders, officially presented as a "shift in focus to natural features."[5] Other Russian online map services—2GIS and VK Maps—have followed Yandex's example, though the latter still shows administrative borders.

While American companies have adopted a localized approach to borders, and Russian ones hedge by displaying none at all, Asian companies strictly adhere to their own governments' policies. South

[3] Jacobs, F., 2012. The First Google Maps War. *The New York Times*, 28 February. https://archive.nytimes.com/opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/02/28/the-first-google-maps-war/?_r=3

[4] Bespalov, A., 2025. The War of Narratives: Geography as Another Battleground. *Valdai Club*, 22 April. https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/the-war-of-narratives-geography-as-another-battle/

[5] RBC Radio, 2022. "Яндекс" объяснил исчезновение границ государств на своих картах [Yandex Explained the Disappearance of State Borders on Its Maps]. *RBC Radio*, 9 June. https://www.rbc.ru/technology_and_media/09/06/2022/62a1eac49a79478250299d07

Korea's Naver Maps, for instance, not only indicates the Liancourt Rocks (claimed by Japan) as South Korean territory but, driven by patriotic considerations,[6] provides unique content, such as underwater photos. However, Naver, like its competitor Kakao Maps, lacks global coverage.

The same cannot be said for the Chinese map service Baidu, which presents all users worldwide with a ten-dash line in the South China Sea and with China's claimed border with India. Moreover, Baidu's map not only fails to reflect the results of the 2005 demarcation of the Russian-Chinese border, but also draws the Russian-Japanese maritime border north of Iturup Island, labeling the Southern Kuril Islands as "Russian-occupied" (俄占). Apparently, the borders are depicted as they were defined by the cartographical agency in 1989, and an update is dependent upon demarcation with other states.[7] This argument appears to satisfy Russia: China has repeatedly stated that all border disputes with Russia have been resolved, and that discrepancies between maps and reality are a technical, not political issue.

But at least Chinese users can see some version (even an outdated one) of their country's border. Demand for the same is clearly present in Russia, and online maps' importance casts doubt on Russian companies' attempt to 'stay out of politics.' Users have already developed their own solutions, adding custom map layers on top of Yandex, whether for military analysis[8] or genealogy.[9] It would be a step in the right direction to provide Russian online maps with a standard toggleable 'borders' layer, with a choice of historical period.

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6 The Korea Herald, 2017. Naver's Online Map Service Adds New Dokdo Photos. *The Korea Herald,* 14 August. https://www.koreaherald.com/article/141744

7 RBC Radio, 2023. Захарова прокомментировала карту Китая с российскими территориями [Zakharova Commented on the Map of China with Russian Border Territories]. *RBC Radio*, 31 August. https://www.rbc.ru/politics/31/08/2023/64f0b5659a79472ca25564d3

8 https://lostarmour.info/map

9 https://metrics.tilda.ws/russia-map