

# Friction and Collaboration in Asian Borderlands

Borders, borderlands, and frontiers are not new concepts. They each carry different meanings in different disciplinary contexts. While borders are most closely tied to conceptions of state sovereignty, they are also exceptionally salient devices across and within which resources, commodities, and people move, and in so moving, define, reinforce, or contest claims to national sovereignty and territory. Scholars have moved from a study of the hard territorial line separating states within the global system to the processes of bordering through which people, commodities, and territories are managed differently, and the processes of change within what are labelled “borderlands.” For anthropologists, the primary interest lies in studying the daily practices of ordinary people in the borderlands. Instead of a clearly demarcated concrete physical space (near a border), borderlands also symbolize a cultural and geographical periphery.

How should we approach borderlands in Asia? A continent that is both vast and amorphous, with nation-state systems formalizing after decolonization, borders in Asia became increasingly hardened and securitized in efforts to mark oftentimes contested territorial sovereignty. While borders may have a beguiling logic for many, a consequence of the Westphalian system, these arbitrary divisions have meant different things for the people dwelling along Asian borderlands; in the case of the flowing rivers, lofty mountain ranges, sacred landscapes, and wandering wildlife, state demarcations of territory could be potent barriers to mobility or hardly noticeable at all.

In a world of presumably clear and established borders, a dive into the everyday experiences of ethnic communities living on both sides of borders, partitioned and divided along lines of nationality, offer a useful reminder of the cultural complexity of people beyond borders and the reinvented entities of nation-states. Beginning from the viewpoint of the communities residing in borderlands along the southwest of China – neighboring Pakistan, India, and Myanmar – Hasan Karrar, Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman, and Sun Rui contribute to our understanding of borderlands by capturing different aspects of life in these spaces across time. For them, borderlands are not conceived

as predetermined geographic spaces, but rather as places where the control of the state has had material and immaterial consequences on lives, livelihoods, and ecology. Together, they show how communities on both sides of borders have been shaped by colonial histories or postcolonial states, as well as their infrastructural or proselytizing projects, broadening our range of understanding of borderland lives in Asia.

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## China's Western Borders since the Reform Era

Hasan H. Karrar

Owen Lattimore famously coined “pivot of Asia”<sup>1</sup> to describe Xinjiang's position amidst new geopolitical configurations resulting from the onset of the Cold War, decolonization in South Asia, and consolidation of power by the Chinese Communist Party. Seven decades later, Xinjiang remains critical both for how Beijing projects its economic and political influence abroad – China has eight land borders in Xinjiang – as well as for the country's self-projection as a harmonious multiethnic state. Situating myself variously in north Pakistan and Central Asia, regions adjacent to Xinjiang, I describe how, since the reform era got underway in the 1980s, bordering China has been contoured by frontier capitalism, geopolitics, and recently, securitization.

October 2020. Afiyatabad commercial centre, north Pakistan. “Our livelihoods are tied to the border,” was the matter-of-fact reply when I commented that the bazaar was quiet [Fig. 1]. I had been glancing out from a roadside restaurant. Seventy-five kilometers up the road was Pakistan's land border with the China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region; throughout 2020, the border had remained closed because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The last time I was in Afiyatabad, in 2017, container trucks with Xinjiang licence plates had been rolling past on their way to the nearby dry port. Although independent cross-border trade between Pakistan and China had been declining, heavy cargo had increased. Visiting Zharkent on the China-

Kazakhstan border later that same year, I had driven past a line of container trucks – my partial count exceeded fifty – coming from China. I had seen these cargo vehicles as evidence, admittedly superficial, of enhanced circulation, undergirded by new or upgraded infrastructure. Since 2013, China had been unrolling the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a broad mechanism for global investment and infrastructure, capital and information flows via economic corridors that transit countries that neighbor China, such as Kazakhstan and Pakistan.

But Afiyatabad in 2020 seemed to suggest a different story. Looking through the frosted window, I saw shuttered shops. A few ambling locals, predictably men. The occasional vehicle, barreling through the market, horn blaring. Then silence again.

That damp afternoon I witnessed how the Covid-19 pandemic had altered – for the time being, at least – cross-border mobilities. But

what to make of this? Had Covid-19 changed bordering? Within a wider vista – going back to the reform era in China, when cross-border mobility between Xinjiang and Central Asia, and Xinjiang and Pakistan began to flourish – would the recent pandemic still be significant?

Although it is tempting to think that Covid-19 has transformed the latest Silk Road, at least three successive border regimes have variously facilitated and restricted cross-border exchanges since the 1980s: frontier capitalism, new geopolitics after the Cold War, and recently, securitization.

### Frontier capitalism

The reform era in China saw deepening exchanges between Xinjiang and Pakistan. In 1986, the Karakoram Highway, which connected Xinjiang to Pakistan, opened to commercial traffic. Previously, since 1969, there had only been official cross-border

trade.<sup>2</sup> After 1986, anyone domiciled in Pakistan's border areas and in possession of a locally issued border permit could travel to Xinjiang for trade.

Similarly, reform in China, accompanied by Sino-Soviet rapprochement, also led to the resumption of exchanges across the China-Central Asia border after a hiatus of about two decades. Besides regulated exchanges, in the mid-1980s, traders and transporters engaged in a parallel trade where consumer goods purchased in the open market were shipped across the border by being declared as “gifts.”<sup>3</sup> By the end of the 1980s, the façade had dropped, and the large number of shoppers arriving from Kazakhstan were reportedly creating bottlenecks at the Kazakhstan-China border.

This frontier capitalism was undergirded by a market economy stripped to the basics: self-financed small traders leveraging arbitrage with minimal regulatory oversight. While some



Fig. 1: The Afiyatabad Commercial Centre – a border market on the Pakistan-China border – wore a deserted look during the Covid-19 pandemic (Photo courtesy of the author, 2020).