

# 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.

Ping-hsiu Alice Lin is a postdoctoral fellow at the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies, Harvard University. E-mail: [pinghsiu\\_lin@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:pinghsiu_lin@fas.harvard.edu)



## Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai

The Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai serves as the hub within the NYU Global Network University system to promote the study of Asian interactions and comparisons, both historical and contemporary. The overall objective of the Center is to provide global societies with information about the contexts of the reemerging connections between the various parts of Asia through research and teaching. Collaborating with institutions across the world, the Center seeks to play a bridging role between existing Asian studies knowledge silos. It will take the lead in drawing connections and comparisons between the existing fields of Asian studies, and stimulating new ways of understanding Asia in a globalized world.

## Asia Research Center at Fudan University

Founded in March 2002, the Asia Research Center at Fudan University (ARC-FDU) is one of the achievements of the cooperation of Fudan and the Korean Foundation for Advanced Studies (KFAS). Since its formation, the center has made extensive efforts to promote Asian studies, including hosting conferences and supporting research projects. ARC-FDU keeps close connections with Asia Research Centers in mainland China and a multitude of institutes abroad.

## 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).

traders expanded their operations – I have heard such success stories in Kyrgyzstan and Pakistan – mostly, traders contended with small margins. Profits financed the next trip. One summer, during a visit to Afyatabad, I stood in front of a small stall piled with items shuttled across the border: electric pliers, flipflops, thermos flasks, batteries, small toys. Border trade laid out on a table.

This cross-border trade was enabled by public infrastructure: borders, open to the public; regular public transport; cargo forwarding services for those times when the merchandise could not be self-imported by traders on buses and trains.

### New geopolitics

In 1991, five new states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – appeared along (or just beyond) Xinjiang's borders. New geopolitics, which included settling the disputed borders and acquiring energy security, initially framed

Chinese policy towards Central Asia. While cross-border trade by independent traders in fact increased in the 1990s, it was eclipsed by wider strategic concerns, as China and newly-independent Central Asia built regional diplomacy.

In the unipolar world of the 1990s, China led the way in assembling a confidence-building multilateral mechanism between itself, Russia, and Central Asia. In 2001, this mechanism was institutionalized as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) that was described as a model for broad multilateral cooperation, which allowed China to extend assistance to the Central Asian states, including in the commercial realm.

The new century was also when China started “going out,” that is, Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) and private businesses were encouraged to invest abroad. Xinjiang became a bridgehead for investment in Central Asia and Pakistan. Some were large-scale investments requiring extensive injections of capital, such as the

2006 partnership between China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and Kazakh KazMunayGas to import Caspian oil. Other investments were comparatively modest, such as the partnership between logistics provider Sinotrans Xinjiang and hereditary elites in north Pakistan to build and operate a dry port. This dry port also became operational in 2006.

Such engagements came to be seen as the realization of a “new Silk Road,” a term that was popularized following Premier Li Peng's visit to Central Asia in 1994. In the quarter-century since, the Silk Road narrative has become curated. Today, historic figures such as Han dynasty envoy Zhang Qian (d. 114 BCE) and Ming admiral Zheng He (1371-1433/1435), along with images of camel caravans, reference a past prior to European imperialism in Asia, and they signal a present, Chinese ascendancy.

Silk Road tropes are becoming commonplace in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Pakistan, suggesting how neighboring countries are adopting this particular geopolitical aesthetic from China [Fig. 2].

But the new Silk Road is markedly different from past connectivity in one crucial respect: earlier, the so-called Silk Road brought communities together. But now, under BRI, it is primarily finance and heavy cargo moving between distant nodes. Traders and shopkeepers I have spoken to in Afyatabad – have visited five times in a decade – describe how, under BRI, independent cross-border mobilities have declined, both due to stringent tariff regimes and, more recently, to increased securitization in Xinjiang.

### Securitized borderlands

The large-scale internment of Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang has mostly remained out of public conversation in Pakistan, a result of how Pakistan's civilian and military leadership has deliberately steered clear of the topic. But for small traders who cross into China overland, heightened vigilance, security checkpoints, and heavily armed security personnel in Xinjiang are impossible to overlook.<sup>4</sup> I have also heard traders grimly describe the internment of Uyghur women married to Pakistani traders, complaining that Pakistani authorities should have done more to secure their release.

The pall of security hanging over Xinjiang discourages independent trade. Small traders

I spoke with complained of long waits and humiliating body searches at the border. They also face increased restrictions on mobility within Xinjiang, and in terms of where they can stay once they are there.

Similarly, cross-border mobilities between China and Central Asia have changed. Although Chinese authorities had long been cautious about independent cross-border ties fomented by Uyghurs and Kazakhs, until a few years back, Uyghur and Kazakh small traders were shuttling goods between Xinjiang and Central Asia. In my fieldwork in bazaars in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2013 and 2014, I met Uyghur traders who were importing garments and shoes from Xinjiang; this was a cross-border commercial network rooted in ideas of community and social well-being.<sup>5</sup>

But in 2017, I began hearing how it was becoming difficult for Uyghurs and Kazakhs from Xinjiang to leave China. Thus, while container trucks, railways, and ports are one face of the BRI, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that another defining feature of the current Silk Road – taking shape in the fifth decade since the reform era began in China – is securitization. In this long, complex story, Covid-19 may end up being little more than a wrinkle.

Hasan H. Karrar, Lahore University of Management Sciences,  
Email: hkarrar@lums.edu.pk

#### Notes

- 1 Lattimore, O., 1950. *Pivot of Asia: Sinkiang and the inner Asian frontiers of China and Russia*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- 2 Karrar, H.H., 2021. Caravan Trade to Neoliberal Spaces: Fifty years of Pakistan-China connectivity across the Karakoram Mountains. *Modern Asian Studies*, 55(3), pp. 867-901.
- 3 Karrar, H.H., 2016. The resumption of Sino-Central Asian trade, c. 1983-94: confidence building and reform along a Cold War fault line. *Central Asian Survey*, 35(3), pp.334-350.
- 4 Rippa, A., 2020. *Borderland Infrastructures: Trade, Development, and Control in Western China* (p. 307). Amsterdam University Press.
- 5 Steenberg, R., 2016. Embedded rubber sandals: trade and gifts across the Sino-Kyrgyz border. *Central Asian Survey*, 35(3), pp.405-420.



Fig. 2: Silk Road imageries – here depicted on the outskirts of Zharkent, Kazakhstan – are commonplace in Central Asia (Photo courtesy of the author, 2017).

## Friction and Collaboration in Borderlands: Framing the Sino-Indian Borderlands along the Eastern Himalayas

Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman

The Sino-Indian borderlands straddles multiple strategic and securitized territories, and they span across diverse community worldviews and perceptions. As one travels from the northernmost borders of Ladakh through Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Arunachal Pradesh in the easternmost fringes of the Himalayas, there are multiple layers of understanding of the borderlands, across spaces and temporalities. What we call the borderlands between the modern nation-states of China and India – framed in conflict and contestations over territoriality and sovereignty claims – intersect multiple scales of community and ecological worldviews and understandings. The forests, mountains, rivers, and sacred landscapes of communities who inhabit them, who have shifted along and moved across as the Himalayan landscape formed and crumbled over centuries, characterize transboundary spaces between China and India.

### Sino-Indian borderlands and borderlines

Willem van Schendel depicts the India-China border as a “sensitive border” marked by uncertain sovereignty and apprehensive

territoriality, with remarkably frayed edges. He goes on to argue that such a border cannot be called a border at all, as in official parlance it is referred to as the “Line of Actual Control” (LAC) or, more famously, as the “McMahon Line.” It is based on the ground presence of the respective militaries along the border, or what is the perception of the borderline by them, usually negotiated on a regular basis by “long range patrols” which perform “area domination exercises” and monitor and inspect border pillars, some perhaps once in a year or two, given the remoteness of the borderline. The way ahead, according to van Schendel, is to approach such borders across transboundary spaces from the lens of “anthropology of frayed edges” rather than with the definite “geography of lines.”<sup>1</sup>

Along the Sino-Indian border, there are several interesting tri-junctions, which underline the presence of a third country at the borderlines. Such tri-junctions involve Nepal and Bhutan in many different sectors, and these are nodes of traditional migration and trading routes across the difficult terrain of these mountainous regions. These tri-junctions have also been sites of territorial claims, contestations, and conflict, as we have recently witnessed in the Doklam plateau, involving the three countries of Bhutan, China and India.<sup>2</sup> The community imaginations,

understandings, perceptions, and worldviews along these borderlands are based on memories of migration, trade, and pilgrimage routes; regular activities such as hunting in the forests, sources of daily livelihood such as transboundary rivers, wetlands and transborder community linkages. They are broader than that of the nation-state's perception of borderlines marked by mere border pillars.

The practice of marking borders on the ground, along which border contestations and claims are made, has followed natural geographical features such as mountains, hills, valleys, forests, plateaus, plains, and watersheds in the Himalayas. The “water-parting principle,” wherein the edge of a watershed was used to establish the border, was a key marker of international boundary-making around the world in the 20th century, especially in mountainous areas where the dominant cartographical understanding was in terms of border points rather than borderlines.<sup>3</sup> The historical perception of border points in a mountainous area – such as border points across the length and breadth of the Himalayas – was bypassed with the “water-parting principle” as an imposed colonial marker to draw regional borderlines. We can therefore see that the Sino-Indian borderlands have several divergent markers.

### Shepherds, hunters, and shamans

The Mishmi community along the Sino-Indian border in Walong and Kibithoo speak about their meetings and exchanges with Mishmi people across the LAC in the grasslands, where they regularly take their sheep to graze. They say that their brethren living in Chinese territory across Kibithoo are prosperous. They note that the Mishmi villages on the Chinese side enjoy better living conditions, housing, and sanitation facilities mostly made up of pre-fabricated structures. They can see the Chinese villages across the border and wonder why they cannot be opened up and allowed to travel to the other side. Some Mishmi community elders with whom I had conversations say that they do not feel intimidated by being close to the border and will want to visit their relatives across the border as and when such an opportunity comes. While the Mishmi recognize nationalist framings, the perception of the border at the community level is based primarily on shared tribal affinities.

Hunting is common amongst the Mishmi, as it is connected to their animist religion and traditions, which require wild meat to appease the spirits and protect deities in their festivals and family offerings. Mishmi hunters often spend weeks in the forests along the Sino-Indian border, and they come into contact with Chinese hunters who often cross into the Indian side. Apart from consumption and religious needs, hunting in the Mishmi hills is also done for commercial purposes, where musk deer and black bears are hunted for their pods and gall bladders, respectively; these are sold to businessmen from mainland