


*Caravan Trade to Neoliberal Spaces: Fifty years of Pakistan-China connectivity across the Karakoram Mountains**

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Abstract

Located along Pakistan's central Asian margins, the high mountain region of Gilgit-Baltistan borders Afghanistan and India, and since 1969 has connected Pakistan to China. In this article, I argue that over the last 50 years, expanding forms of connectivity between Pakistan and China were localized in Gilgit-Baltistan through three processes: (1) from 1969, overland connectivity between Gilgit-Baltistan and western China has enabled Pakistan to imagine and project expansive ties—and geopolitical aspirations—that transcend the border areas where the cross-border trade was initially localized; (2) unfolding ties between the two countries were accompanied by new material exchanges: initially barter trade and regulated caravans, followed by private commerce in the mid-1980s and, finally, economic corridor development under the Belt and Road Initiative; and (3) Chinese investments in Pakistan were part of a new cycle of global accumulation. Concurrently, in the wake of transnational investments, local governance in Gilgit-Baltistan adopted neoliberal administrative measures: the prioritizing of investment capitalism, the privatization of public goods and services, and securitization.

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Everyone knows that there are no true forests in England
—Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1 (1867)

It could be anywhere
Most likely could be any frontier any hemisphere
—The Clash, ‘Straight to Hell’ (1982)

Introduction

In June 2016, the village bazaar in Aliabad—the commercial hub of Pakistan’s northern Hunza valley—was covered in election posters. I was captivated by one that featured a bearded man with slick hair, staring defiantly into the camera. His left arm was clenched in a fist salute, shackles dangled from his wrist. In the backdrop, a faint Karakoram ridgeline was barely visible. ‘From Prison to Parliament’, the poster announced, in English. Underneath—where the script had switched to Urdu—was his name, Baba Jan, and a lightbulb, an election symbol. Baba Jan had been a steadfast defender of human and democratic rights, the poster extolled, who stood with the affectees of Attabad. If elected, Baba Jan promised to protect the Sost dry port, which handled overland imports from China, and reinstate wheat subsidies.

Baba Jan was attempting to stand for the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly while serving a life sentence in a nearby prison. *Attempting*, because when we arrived in Hunza, it was unclear if his nomination papers would be accepted; the matter was before the supreme appellate court in Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan’s northernmost administrative region, with a population of approximately two million. Located along Pakistan’s central Asian margins, this high mountain region borders Afghanistan and India, and connects Pakistan to its steadfast neighbour, China.

Baba Jan’s election poster illustrated how neoliberalism was being sensed in Gilgit-Baltistan, as evidenced by his campaign promises to protect the dispossessed, defend democratic and human rights, reinstate wheat subsidies, and renew public institutions. Although Pakistan had witnessed neoliberal restructuring since the 1980s through recurring cuts to public spending and subsidies, as well as privatization drives, these changes were now being felt in Gilgit-Baltistan. By summer’s end, the high-altitude sun would have bleached the election posters or they would have had disappeared beneath bills for cellular data, tea, or

soap. Momentarily, the election had engendered the articulation of anxieties that had been simmering across the region.

In this article, I put forward three arguments. First, I argue that since 1969 connectivity between Gilgit-Baltistan and western China has enabled Pakistan to imagine and project expansive ties—and geopolitical aspirations—that transcend the border regions of the two countries. In 1969, cross-border ties culminated in the reopening of a dormant caravan route over Mintaka Pass (4,798m) on the Karakoram-Pamir watershed. By 1972, Mintaka had fallen into disuse again when trucks and jeeps began navigating a perilous, still under construction Karakoram Highway, crossing the border at Khunjerab (4,697m), also on the Karakoram-Pamir watershed. Then, following the Cold War, the Karakoram Highway was reimagined as heralding connectivity between Central, East, and South Asia. Finally, since 2015, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—the ‘flagship project’ of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—was mapped onto the Karakoram Highway as well as Gilgit-Baltistan, now purportedly a Eurasian gateway with a critical role in enabling CPEC. Thus since 1969, each scale-up in connectivity has encouraged more ambitious geopolitical aspirations on Pakistan’s part.

My second argument is that unfolding ties between the two countries were accompanied by new material exchanges. When the first Chinese caravan crossed into Pakistan on 22 August 1969, cross-border trade was intended to address local needs. This remained the pattern for the next 15 years. For example, in 1980, hardware, electrical appliances, and tea from China were bartered for cigarettes, razor blades, and leather goods from Pakistan. In 1986, the Karakoram Highway opened to private commerce, which quickly eclipsed barter. Small-scale trade in consumer goods from China would characterize cross-border trade for two decades, before new administrative restructuring in Gilgit-Baltistan began slowing these flows. These new measures coincided with investments by Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in Gilgit-Baltistan, including the establishment of a dry port outside the village of Sost, about 75-kilometres from the Pakistan-China border. Through the privatization of a public service—port management—Pakistan’s national and Gilgit-Baltistan’s regional elite sought to exploit what they envisioned as untapped market forces between China and India, Central Asia, and the Arabian Sea.

Third, I argue that in the new century Gilgit-Baltistan emerged as a neoliberal space, as evidenced by the primacy of investment capitalism, integration into transnational financial networks, privatization of public

goods and services, and, finally, securitization. In Gilgit-Baltistan, the meaning of community began to change as investment and finance, privatization, and securitization converged under a neoliberal administrative framework.

Neoliberalism's market logic alters citizens' relationship with the polity; it also creates new, market-driven, spatial configurations that extended beyond the 'political singularity' of the state (Ong 2006, 6–7). That these changes occurred in Gilgit-Baltistan, a region that borders China, was suggestive of a wider historical shift not disassociated, I would argue, from recent developments in the geographical peripheries of China, namely Hong Kong and Xinjiang. At the time of writing in 2019, Hong Kong had seen six months of increasingly violent street protests, at the core of which are mounting concerns over autonomy and representation.¹ Meanwhile in Xinjiang, an estimated one million Turkic and Tajik Muslims remained interred in purpose-built camps, arguably a 'structural consequence' of a 'particular nexus between modernization and securitization', which have been in place for about a decade (Steenberg and Rippa 2019, 275–276). Similar to the Canadian Residential School System, which from 1879 to 1986 wrested Aboriginal children from their communities in order to bring them into the ambit of 'civilization' (Milloy 1999), the systematic internment of Xinjiang's Turkic and Tajik Muslims cannot be considered as anything other than forced assimilation into what state authorities perceive as "modern" social norms and expectations' (Brophy 2019). In both Hong Kong and Xinjiang, questions of who belongs—and what belonging means—are pivotal. That these questions are emerging in regions that are gateways for capital and investment is, I think, not accidental. Indeed, a lesson from Gilgit-Baltistan is how neoliberalism builds on inter-regional connectivity. As I describe, neoliberal administrative measures in Gilgit-Baltistan were coterminous with the arrival of Chinese finance which aimed to enhance connectivity.

Neoliberal governance structures also attempt to minimize public spending and maximize profit; the privatization of public assets and services is a result of neoliberalism's ethos of governance structures that are based on free-market competition and profit maximization (Hilgers

¹ The protests, which initially began in opposition to a proposed law that would have allowed Hong Kong residents to be extradited and tried in mainland Chinese courts, were followed by four additional demands: an independent inquiry into the use of force by the police; a halt to describing protestors as rioters; amnesty for arrested protestors; and universal suffrage (*South China Morning Post*, 4 September 2019).

2011; Kotsko 2018; Tironi and Barandiarán 2014). In Gilgit-Baltistan, a feature of the new administrative measures was an increase in security personnel (to manage checkpoints, verify identity, and ascertain movement) and corrective institutions (such as CPEC-related security, courts, and anti-terrorism legislature) which offered legal authority for transnational capital (Karrar and Mostowlansky, 2018). In such securitized social milieus under neoliberalism, protest or community mobilization could not be a given. There is always a possibility that these will be criminalized in the scramble to provide security for investment capital. Neoliberalism's market logic destabilizes community and public participation (Ferguson 2006, 205–207; Galemba 2018, 20–21; Ong 2006, 6).

I build these arguments over five historically chronological parts. The first part introduces Gilgit-Baltistan's historical geography since the late nineteenth century, illustrating how colonial power in the Karakoram was a form of indirect control; after 1947, indirect control transformed into liminal citizenship for the people of the region, a consequence of flaring conflict with India over Kashmir. The second part describes cross-border exchange after 1969. Pakistan's overland trade with China is the story of connectivity across two passes: Mintaka, its role erased from popular memory, and Khunjerab, symbolizing bilateral cooperation and fraternity. In the third part, I describe small-scale, cross-border trade by Gilgit-Baltistanis which began in 1986 as regulated caravans were being phased out.

The fourth part begins with the opening of the Sost dry port, when both the local elite and Pakistan's national leadership sought to capitalize on Karakoram's location between Asian markets. This section continues to include the Attabad landslide which took place on 4 January 2010 in north Hunza and destroyed the namesake village, led to the death of 19 villagers, and submerged 20 kilometres of the Karakoram Highway. Following the disaster, local activists, including Baba Jan, then an unknown public figure, championed the cause of the displaced. In the fifth part, I suggest that, notwithstanding new investments from China, CPEC followed in the wake of neoliberal governance, which was already underway in the region. The Chinese were not the only ones with vested financial interests: local elite and paramilitary bodies also sought financial leverage in the new neoliberal space. While difficult to verify, local vested interests help to explain state anxiety vis-à-vis intolerance of public criticism and community activism. Both CEPC and BRI are still in their initial stages; while my analysis is exploratory, I find utility in placing these developments within a longer continuum

of connectivity. I conclude with a discussion on what 50 years of connectivity in the Karakoram mountains can offer in terms of insights into an emergent China, the politics of accumulation, and how new neoliberal spaces transform the local.²

Colonial to post-colonial frontiers

Gilgit-Baltistan is Pakistan's northernmost administrative region, taking its name from the Gilgit division, which includes Hunza, and from the adjacent Baltistan division. The western Himalaya and the Karakoram sprawl across Gilgit-Baltistan, making it the most heavily glaciated region outside high latitudes. Where inhabitants traditionally subsisted through pastoralism and irrigated mountain agriculture, the population increasingly benefits from connectivity through roads linking to down-country Pakistan. Outside the two cities, namesake Gilgit and Skardu, both with approximately 200,000 residents, the majority of the population lives at sub-3,000m in proximity to the two transport arteries, the Karakoram Highway and the Gilgit-Skardu road (Butz and Cook 2016; Hewitt 2006).

² In constructing this sequential account, I rely on media from Pakistan and China, as well as India, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Media accounts stand in for the dearth of accessible archival documentation from Pakistan and the People's Republic of China. Historical documents pertaining to cross-border connectivity are sensitive for three reasons: first, Gilgit-Baltistan remains at the centre of the Kashmir conflict and remains disputed. Second, oral accounts about the territory that was exchanged during the 1962–1963 border settlement continue to circulate; more than half-a-century on, memory of territorial adjustment has not faded. Accessible records *could* give credence to local grievances. Third, both Pakistan and China today project their current fraternal ties back in time, where today's 'Iron Brothers' purportedly *always* enjoyed equally close relations. The official documents I consult, such those of the British Foreign Office, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), or the US Department of State, complicate this view. They suggest, for example, that in the 1950s Pakistan did not enjoy exceptional relations with China, or that when bilateral relations deepened in the 1960s, they were motivated by a zero-sum approach to geopolitics; bilateral relations then were cordial, but caution was also exercised.

I continue to benefit from regular visits to Gilgit-Baltistan, such as to the border market of Afiyatabad where I explored how overland connectivity between Pakistan and China transformed bazaar trade. My work on Chinese-Central Asian diplomatic relations, and my scholarly focus from 2000 to 2010, required an understanding of the role of Xinjiang in not only connecting China to the former Soviet Union, but also to Pakistan.

To the west and north of the Karakoram are the Hindu Kush and the Pamir, mountain ranges that connect Gilgit-Baltistan to Afghanistan and China. Gilgit-Baltistan also shares a militarized border with India in the south and southeast. As I explain below, during the partition of India, this high mountain region, for which the broad nomenclature ‘Kashmir’ was used, was divided between Pakistan and India. In this section, I offer an overview of this region as a colonial frontier and its transition to a post-colonial frontier. Where the high mountains of Asia had traditionally connected adjacent communities, following colonial power, connectivity also took the form of formal institutions: postal services, for example, or diplomatic consuls. Connectivity was also accompanied by enclosure, such as the regulation of trade or attempts to seal borders.

In the late nineteenth century, Afghanistan and Central Asia became zones of geopolitical competition between the British and Russian empires and, to a lesser extent, the Qing. As a result, Gilgit (and Chitral to the west) acquired strategic importance. Although colonial authorities had awarded the region of Gilgit-Baltistan to Gulab Singh (1792–1857), the second maharaja of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir during the 1846 Treaty of Amritsar, by 1877 Britain was consolidating its position in Gilgit by stationing an ‘officer on special duty’ who was pointedly tasked with ‘obtaining early and authentic information’ about the ‘frontier districts’ of Kashmir and the regions beyond (Dani 1989, 284; also Haines 2004, 545).

Limiting Dogra control over Gilgit, but not Baltistan, which had less strategic importance, the British established the Gilgit Agency in 1889; this was a system of dual British and Kashmiri control, although the British were the dominant authority (Hunter 1909, 242). Soon afterwards, in 1891, the *mir*s of Hunza and Nagar were brought under the colonial ambit after a short military campaign. This severed Hunza’s ties to the Qing court (the *mir* had declared Hunza a tributary of the Qing during the Qianlong era [1735–1796]) as well as to the maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir, to whom the mid-nineteenth century *mir* of Hunza had also pledged tributary status. In his memoirs, Nazim Khan—who became *mir* of Hunza (1892–1938) with British support after the reigning *mir* and Nazim Khan’s half-brother Safdar Ali (d. 1930) had fled to Xinjiang following the 1891 invasion—describes being ordered to refuse gifts that Qing envoys had presented to the new *mir* (2001, 43–44).

The absorption of Hunza and Nagar into the Gilgit Agency opened a second land route between India and northwards to the Qing (the first route linked Srinagar via Leh to Yarkand over the Karakoram Pass

[5,540m]). The new route followed the Hunza river north from Gilgit, passing through Attabad, Gulmit, and Khyber, before reaching Misgar; Gilgit to Misgar was then a 10–12 day march (FO 1935A). Misgar was the last year-round settlement, and as early as 1909, there was fortnightly mail between Gilgit and Kashgar, where the Government of India maintained a consulate. Mail carriers used the adjacent Kilik Pass (4,827m) in the summer and Mintaka during the winter months (Lawrence 1909, 212).³ Leaving Misgar behind, the route climbed to either Kilik or Mintaka on the Karakoram-Pamir watershed before descending to the Taghdumbash *pamir*, home to Kyrgyz and Wakhi pastoralists (and now in southwestern Tashkurgan county, Xinjiang).

There are three points to consider here. First, even following the arrival of colonial power, local trade continued and the physical routes across the Karakoram, by virtue of being conditioned by terrain, remained unchanged (FO 1934; FO 1935A; also Rizvi 1999, 206–208; Saxer 2016, 111).⁴ Second, local rulers such as the *mirs* of Hunza and Nagar continued to exercise their authority by leveraging transit fees on merchandise (FO 1935A; Kreutzmann 1998, 294–296). How local authorities were to be dealt with (on matters of transit fees, for example) was a facet of indirect colonial rule in the region.

The third point is that indirect colonial rule became the starting point for latter-day post-colonial governance in the region, in part a consequence of the Kashmir conflict into which Gilgit-Baltistan was immediately drawn. I will briefly describe the events of 1947–1948 here: two weeks prior to the independence of Pakistan, the British had

³ Still, the obstacles posed by terrain should not be underestimated. A latter-day geographic survey by the CIA—who were concerned with the movement of military personnel—described north Hunza as ‘barely passable’, with ‘deep valleys and towering ranges’, where ‘any movement across the ground [was] severely limited by drifted snow, high water, near vertical slopes, and precipitous rock walls’ (CIA 1964). In an earlier report, the political agent in Gilgit, George Kirkbride, had described the same terrain more succinctly: ‘uninviting’ (FO 1934).

⁴ Colonial power resulted in the transformation of some practices; the days of Qing envoys being received at Attabad or of Hunza’s royalty visiting Kashgar to buy gold, horses, or wedding finery were largely over (Khān 2001, 27–32). But Kashgar continued to supply daily use items and goods continued to flow until the rebellion in Xinjiang in the mid-1930s, slowing to a trickle afterwards. British efforts to project commercial interest in Xinjiang by way of the Gilgit-Kashgar route—in part to counterbalance the Soviet Union’s increasing commercial reach in Xinjiang—shared similarities with how, on entry in Asia, European capital had followed existing commercial networks (FO 1935B; also Bayly 1988; Ray 1995).

returned Gilgit Agency to Jammu and Kashmir, which meant that the region was momentarily under the control of an independent India. A rebellion by Gilgit Scouts resulted in the formation of the Republic of Gilgit which lasted for all of 16 days before the short-lived state requested to join Pakistan in November 1947; adjacent Baltistan acceded from India to Pakistan in spring 1948 (Sökefeld 2005). Governor-general Mohammed Ali Jinnah accepted the region's accession to Pakistan, albeit under a colonial framework: his first act was to dispatch a political agent, Sardar Alam Khan, and to impose the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) in the Gilgit Agency, as it continued to be known.⁵

Thus, Gilgit and Baltistan became Pakistan. But the region was not given provincial status and still has not up to the present day because historic Jammu and Kashmir, of which today's Gilgit-Baltistan had been a part, remains disputed territory between India and Pakistan. Designating it a province would signal that international boundaries are acceptable, undermining Pakistan's aspirations over greater Kashmir. Consequently, there is no mention of Gilgit-Baltistan in the Constitution; Gilgit-Baltistanis do not have representation in the national legislature, nor recourse to apex courts (Ali 2012; Hong 2013). Over the seven decades of Pakistan's existence, Gilgit-Baltistan has been governed from the centre, notwithstanding successive iterations in governing structures.⁶ Irrespective of these iterations, the people of present-day Gilgit-Baltistan have argued that as Pakistanis they should have the right to participate in government and have access to an independent judiciary. Yet, while there is a tacit acknowledgement of their rights, it is also understood that Gilgit-Baltistanis' aspirations for representation would undermine Pakistan's position on Kashmir

⁵ The FCR, first instated in 1872, went through a number of revisions, notably under Viceroy George Curzon (1899–1905), and was a legal mechanism for dealing with the 'wild' or 'independent' tribes of the North-West Frontier that lived in the frontier zone between Afghanistan and India. These communities were seen to fall outside of colonial judiciary and outside of the colonial sphere, too. In these areas, political agents were empowered to arbitrate and had the authority to enforce customary laws (Hopkins 2015).

⁶ The interim solution was the Karachi Agreement of April 1949, which brought the region under the federal ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas, which oversaw Gilgit Agency, Baltistan region, and the princely states of Hunza and Nagar. In 1970, a single administrative region, the Northern Areas, was formed. In what is remembered as a landmark step, during his visit to the region in 1972, President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1971–1973) abolished princely rule and the FCR (Dad 2016, 7–9).

(Holden 2019, 4).⁷ Hence, Pakistan chose liminal citizenship for Gilgit-Baltistanis so as to pursue its geopolitical aims, carrying forth colonial institutions such as ‘Agency’ as an administration unit, the FCR, political agents, and princely states in Hunza and Nagar. But a priori this should not be taken to imply weakness of the central government in the region. It is also not for secessionist or anti-state sentiment, which could have been made a pretext for extraordinary administrative measures. Far from anarchist highlanders fleeing the nation-state, the overwhelming political demands of Gilgit-Baltistanis—which over decades they have articulated succinctly, clearly, and consistently—is for equal rights and equal representation.⁸

The final historical episode I describe here pertains to Pakistan’s diplomatic representation in Kashgar after 1948. The British had had consular representation in Kashgar since 1890, which was formally recognized by the Qing in 1908. During the first year of independence, India and Pakistan split the cost of running the consulate-general. At the end of the first year in July 1948, Pakistan requested that the explorer and mountaineer Eric Shipton, who had been serving as consul-general in Kashgar since 1940, continue as Pakistan’s consul-general (FO 1948A). Shipton deferred his decision to the UK government, before leaving for a climbing expedition (reams of correspondence in the Commonwealth Relations Office speak to the non-availability of Shipton during the crucial summer months of 1948). In the end, Shipton did not end up as Pakistan’s consul-general: he abruptly left Xinjiang in October, leaving the vice-consul and medical officer Allen Mersh in charge (Everest-Phillips 1991, 33). Pakistan would never have a consul-general in Kashgar, although India would:

⁷ The inability of Gilgit-Baltistanis to attain equal constitutional status shares some similarities with what Ann Stoler describes as a ‘sliding scale of basic rights’ that have required a ‘constant judicial and political reassessment ... [and] frequent redrawing of the categories of subject and citizen’ for the British mandate in early twentieth-century Middle East, the Moroccan French Protectorate, or the acquisition of Guantanamo Bay in the early twentieth century (2006, 139).

⁸ Building on earlier scholarship by Willem van Schendel and Jean Michaud, among others, in *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, James Scott argued that the Southeast Asian Massif, which van Schendel called ‘Zomia’, and which stretched between China, Lao, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam represented a refuge for people fleeing the state (Scott 2009; also Hussain 2015, esp. 13–14; Michaud 2010; van Schendel 2002). My argument is that Gilgit-Baltistanis’s political aspirations are the opposite: they want to join the state as equal citizens.

R. D. Sathe, who would serve until the Indian consulate was ordered shut by the Chinese in 1950.

There are two important threads in this story. First, while the Commonwealth Relations Office had ‘no objection’ to Shipton serving as Pakistani consul-general, they did not want to see a ‘British officer’ become embroiled in the growing discord between India and Pakistan (FO 1948B). Put simply, by mid-1948 it was increasingly apparent to the outside world that differences between India and Pakistan were becoming insurmountable. Second, Pakistan never received permission to open a consulate-general in Kashgar, whereas India did (FO 1948C). While these decisions were taken by China’s Nationalist regime—which would flee to Taiwan a year later—the capture of power by the Communists did not tilt China in Pakistan’s direction. As the advancing Red Army sealed China’s western borders, the route to Gilgit was closed by the end of August 1949. But the route over the Karakoram Pass to Leh continued to be used by Leh and Tibetan traders into the 1950s; brick tea, incense, wool, and silver coins trickled into India, while barley, dried fruit, eggs, sugar, wheat flour, and cigarettes travelled in the opposite direction (CIA 1953B; Department of State 1949; Rizvi 1999, 174). At the time, there were no developments along the frontier to suggest that Pakistan and China enjoyed an exceptional relationship.

A geopolitical opening

In 1949, Pakistan had a new Himalayan neighbour in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Early Pakistan-China diplomacy need not be recapped here, save to say that Pakistan steadfastly championed ending the PRC’s international isolation. The Chinese leadership reciprocated support in a key area: during Premier Zhou Enlai’s visit to Pakistan in February 1964, he would depart from neutrality and called for plebiscite in Jammu and Kashmir, echoing Pakistan’s position (Montagno 1965, 316). For the next two decades, China adopted Pakistan’s Kashmir stance. Given the hostile territorial dispute between China and India, which resulted in a border war in 1962, China’s adoption of Pakistan’s stance on Kashmir was to its strategic benefit, too (Mir 2002, 103).

Along the border, however, an improvement in relations between Pakistan and China appeared to have stalled. Consider how initially, following accession to Pakistan, there were three routes into the Gilgit

Agency (a previous overland route to Srinagar had, of course, been severed). The first was an air route from Peshawar, in unpressurized C-47 Dakotas threading the narrow Indus gorge. The Dakotas were decommissioned from the United States Air Force; still decked out in original war paint, they were flown by Polish pilots for the Royal Pakistan Air Force. The second was on a jeep track from the Chilas State over Babusar Pass (4,173m). This route was passable only in summer. It was used to transport both military supplies and essentials such as cloth, matches, sugar, oil, and kerosene. The third and final route was by donkey and pony caravans from Kashgar. Into 1949, caravans carrying silk, cotton, carpets, and sheepskin coats continued to trickle over Mintaka to Misgar and traverse the Hunza gorge down to Gilgit (*New York Times*, 16 May 1949; *The Times*, 22 June 1949). Of the three, the Kashgar route was the oldest and, arguably, the least tenuous. While this trade was not regulated, it was monitored by Pakistan, and there is evidence that in 1950 the state had plans to regularize and tax the China trade (CIA 1950).⁹ By then it was too late. As I noted previously, the route to Gilgit was closed by summer's end in 1949.¹⁰

By the end of the decade, however, China was eager for dialogue with Pakistan about border demarcation, probably influenced by hostility with India and the Soviet Union. In 1959, Pakistan and China began talks. Until this time, maps from both sides had shown territory on the other side of the line of control as their own.¹¹ Although details of the accord

⁹ Pakistan's goals were similar along the Bengal-Assam-Arakan borderland, where after 1947–1948 it sought to regulate what had become a transnational trade in agro-industrial goods (van Schendel 2005, 148–149).

¹⁰ There are three related possibilities for its closure: the apparent presence of Russian troops in western Xinjiang (Xinjiang had seen growing Soviet influence in the 1930s and 1940s); banditry and the inability to secure the far reaches of the state; and the need to consolidate territory after a bitter civil war (CIA 30 August 1949; CIA 16 September 1949; also Pakistan Home Service in English, 17 December 1953). By autumn 1951, when the People's Liberation Army controlled Xinjiang and had secured the borders, Chinese authorities began arresting Pakistanis east of Kilik, Khunjerab, Mintaka, or the Shimshal Pass. Chinese authorities also evacuated residents living within 20 kilometres of the border with Pakistan (CIA, 15 September 1951). After the establishment of the PRC, it was Pakistan that was shut out. Similar to the Bengal borderland in East Pakistan, formerly routine movements of people became international migrations, over which new states exercised jurisdiction (van Schendel 2005, 211).

¹¹ For example, in 1959, Pakistan possessed Chinese maps from 1952 and 1954 showing 4,000 square miles of territory controlled by Pakistan as belonging China, including

remain classified, the alignment of the boundary was announced on 26 November 1962 (Qureshi 1962, 322), and the accord was signed on 2 March 1963. Yet even as the border was being settled, Pakistan's military ruler Ayub Khan worried about Pakistan suddenly appearing too close to China. At the time, Pakistan and Washington were Cold War allies.¹² At a meeting with the American ambassador Walter McCaughy on 12 January 1963, Ayub Khan described being distrustful of Beijing, downplayed the importance of the border accord, and suggested that the agreement could also contribute to the United States' containment policy by becoming a line the Chinese could not cross (FO 1963). An account of the meeting in British Foreign Office records alleges that President Ayub Khan complained that the Chinese had 'used Pakistan a bit' in publicizing the settlement. China had recently concluded a border war with India and the announcement of a border accord—which Ayub Khan insinuated to McCaughy had been premature—allowed China leverage over India in a region where China, India, and Pakistan had had competing territorial claims.

For Pakistan, border demarcation was an opportunity to resume caravans; of the two countries, Pakistan appeared more interested in resuming these exchanges. A year after the boundary agreement, Pakistan's Ministry of Home and Kashmir Affairs had prepared a proposal for resuming caravans over Mintaka. While Pakistan was cognisant that resuming caravan trade would help improve relations with China (the proposal speaks of how the 'Muslims of Xinjiang' had the highest regard for Pakistan), it was also enticed by caravan trade volumes in the past, said to be worth Rs 9.3 million in 1920–21. Such trade, of course, could be taxable (although it was proposed that initially, tariffs not be imposed). Crucially, this trade would benefit people in remote frontier regions (Ministry of Home and Kashmir Affairs, 1964).

With Babusar only crossable by jeep in summer, the region depended on supplies flown into Gilgit or Skardu; after unloading there, supplies were redistributed overland. In 1949, Pakistan's Orient Airways started

Shimshal and Kilik pass in north Hunza. Likewise, a 1962 Pakistani map claimed tracts in Xinjiang (Dobell 1964, 288; Qureshi 1962, 320–321).

¹² By 1957, the Central Intelligence Agency was flying U-2 reconnaissance flights over China and the Soviet Union from Peshawar. China and the Soviet Union reciprocated by flying over Pakistani airspace. For example, between July and September 1959, the Defence Ministry of Pakistan announced six violations of airspace over the Gilgit Agency by China and the Soviet Union (Field 1961, 318; Zaidi 2019, 91).

flying the route, sometimes making up to ten cargo runs daily (*Flight*, 16 November 1951). Pilots for Pakistan International Airlines (PIA), into which Orient Airways was merged in 1954, described sorties to Gilgit and Skardu as ‘the most dangerous milk-round in the world’ (*The Times*, 6 April 1960). Flights required clear weather, and a prolonged spell of bad weather could create a backlog in Rawalpindi, where supplies were now flown from. Lack of supplies sometimes led to severe shortages in the high mountain region; at these times, PIA switched from Dakotas and Fokker Friendships to larger Lockheed Super Constellations to transport wheat and other essentials. In 1964, Pakistan was forced to request assistance from the United States: seven US Air Force C-130s airlifted supplies into Gilgit for 12 days (*The Atlantic Constitution*, 4 July 1964; *South China Morning Post*, 13 May 1964). Pakistan’s eagerness to resume caravan trade should be considered in light of the difficulty of supplying the region.

Soon after the proposal to resume caravans was floated, the Pakistani Works Ministry disclosed to *The Times* (1 October 1964) that caravans would begin the following spring. This was an overstatement. The final agreement, in which trade was said to be for ‘the benefit of people living in border areas of both countries’, would not be inked until 1967 (*Dawn*, 22 October 1967). The following year, a four-member Pakistani delegation representing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce visited China to arrange details—what to exchange, board and lodging for caravaners, and pasturage for animals—for four yearly caravans (*Dawn*, 2 November and 14 November 1968).¹³

Although a caravan was scheduled for every summer month—two from Pakistan and two from China—late spring snowfall in 1969 meant that only one caravan crossed, from China to Pakistan. The Chinese caravan of 50 camels and 16 horsemen left Luggaz on 21 August and crossed Mintaka into Pakistan the next day. Two days later, on 24 August, it reached Misgar, where it rendezvoused with a Pakistani caravan that had travelled 150 kilometres from Gilgit. The Pakistani caravan had set out in 40 jeeps, then switched to mules. Goods worth Rs 300,000 (US\$60,000) were exchanged by both sides. The Chinese brought door locks, green tea, porcelain, silk, thermos flasks, and tea boilers. Pakistan sent cutlery, herbs, jute bags, leather suitcases, and

¹³ By the time caravans resumed, Pakistan and China had already signed 14 trade accords (this trade was seaborne). In 1968 bilateral trade was worth just over US\$50 million (Karachi Domestic Service in Urdu, 28 May 1968; Malik 2017, 73).

ready-made garments. Once entry formalities were completed, the Chinese goods were repacked and transported to Gilgit, a 13-day journey. Local trade syndicates were established in both countries to determine what goods would be needed in the future (*Dawn*, 6 June, 17 July, 29 August 1969; *New York Times*, 31 August 1969).

Although the US\$120,000 of merchandise exchanged at Misgar was a fraction of Pakistan's total trade with China, which was worth US\$56.7 million in 1969 (Malik 2017, 73), it immediately became a symbol of bilateral fraternity. The exchange immediately transcended consumer needs in remote regions and became an opportune platform for Pakistan and China to articulate commonality in their geopolitical aims. Pakistan had fought a second, inconclusive war with India over Kashmir (in 1965), China was in the throes of the Cultural Revolution, the Sino-Soviet split was arguably at its height, and, outwardly at least, normalization of relations with the United States had not begun. Such geopolitical and domestic pressures help to contextualize media reports in both countries. For example, Xinhua, the official Chinese news agency, described the Chinese caravan's arrival in Misgar, where they were received by a thousand-strong, cheering crowd who chanted slogans of Pakistan-China friendship. A similar festive atmosphere was reported by the Pakistani press, who described officials from the Gilgit Agency, as well as personnel from the Chinese embassy in Islamabad, being helicoptered to Misgar to witness the meeting of caravans (Peking NCNA International Service in English, 27 August 1969; also *Dawn*, 26 August 1969).

Another Xinhua story described the Chinese caravan braving frigid weather and snow storms, along with 'all sorts of difficulties', carrying with them 'Chinese people's profound friendship towards the Pakistan people' (Peking NCNA International Service in English, 10 November 1970). While this bears the hallmark of Cultural Revolution reportage, the Pakistani press was equally jubilant. For example, the day after they reached Misgar, caravan leaders Sun Xixiang and Liu Qiang were flown in separate helicopters to Gilgit. The helicopters landed at 11am to find the airport decked in Pakistani and Chinese flags, and a crowd of 4,000 waiting to greet them. In his speech at the occasion, Sun spoke of Afro-Asian people's struggle against imperialism and of China's support for the people of Kashmir in their right to self-determination. The Pakistani press reported how, during their 24 hours in Gilgit, Sun and Liu attended a banquet, saw local folk dances, enjoyed a 'thrilling' polo match and distributed prizes to the winning team, and were able to gauge the progress that was being made in the high mountain

region. As they departed Pakistan, after the leaders were flown back to Misgar and their 50 camels, now laden with Pakistani merchandise, the Chinese caravan were escorted by the Gilgit Scouts up to Mintaka (*Dawn*, 28 and 29 August 1969).

In September 1970, Pakistan sent a caravan to Lupgaz, and in October, a Chinese caravan reciprocated the visit. In 1971, there were two more caravans. Once again, the bartered goods reflected the locals' consumer needs. In 1971, for example, jute bags, sheeting, printed cloth, woollen yarn, and razor blades were sent from Pakistan in exchange for men's suits, underwear, hand tools, green tea, fountainpens, and locks (*Dawn*, 31 October 1970 and 22 May 1971; Peking NCNA International Service in English, 10 November 1970). But the 1971 caravans were the last to traverse over Mintaka. In 1972, Khunjerab became passable by motorized traffic.

In 1966, Pakistan and China had begun road construction across the Karakoram-Pamir watershed at Khunjerab. Today the Karakoram Highway is memorialized as an ambitious construction project across extreme terrain by fraternal neighbours. But it was also a continuation of road building in Xinjiang that accelerated when the Communists seized power. Between 1949 and 1957, Xinjiang's road network expanded from about 3,000 kilometres to nearly 14,000 kilometres (Joniak-Lüthi 2016, 125).¹⁴ For China, there was also a military dimension: road construction in Xinjiang acquired new urgency by the end of the decade because of hostility with India and the Soviet Union. Chinese troop deployment along the border with Pakistan also appears to have increased significantly in 1960 (CIA 1964), a reminder that bilateral relations were still at an exploratory stage.

Khunjerab was chosen for road construction instead of Mintaka or Kilik because it was the furthest from the Soviet border. The Karakoram Highway was built in segments over the following decade. The Kashgar to Khunjerab stretch was completed first, by 1968. Then, in 1971, the road from China was linked to the road in north Hunza being constructed by the Pakistan Army. An opening ceremony was held on 16 February in Baltit, central Hunza. The Chinese delegation was headed by the minister for communication, Yang Jie. Speaking at the ceremony, Yang exalted Sino-Pakistan relations and eulogized the

¹⁴ A similar road-building project in the former Soviet Union was the construction of the Pamir Highway in the 1930s. Like later-day road construction in Xinjiang, the movement of troops in frontier regions was a key consideration behind its construction (Mostowlansky 2017).

Chinese and Pakistanis construction workers who had laid down their lives building the road, before adding:

The Chinese government and people will, as always, firmly support Pakistan government in their just struggle against foreign aggression and interference, and fully support the Kashmiri people's struggle for the right to national self-determination. We firmly believe that *our* just cause will triumph and that friendship between our two peoples will be further consolidated and develop (Khalid, Vol. 2 2009, 261–262; my emphasis).

Work continued for another six years after the inauguration, focused now on the lower stretches of the road on the Pakistan side. A second inauguration was held on 16 June 1978 at Thakot (Kreutzmann 1991, 723–724), along a lower stretch of the highway. The Chinese delegation was headed by Vice-Premier Geng Biao who was welcomed by Pakistan's head of state General Zia-ul-Haq. In their speeches, both leaders denounced hegemonism and superpower attempts to create spheres of influence. General Zia expressed appreciation for Chinese assistance to Pakistan, which he described as bringing about 'radical transformation'. Zia hoped that the highway would deepen bilateral economic ties, a view Geng reiterated. In his remarks, Geng also called for self-determination for the people of Kashmir (*Peking Review*, 3–4 July 1978). A commentary in the official *Peking Review* (3–4 July 1978) described the historicity of the event as follows:

The [Karakoram Highway] has given reality to a dream of several thousand years. Ancient travellers in the Western Han dynasty (206 BC–25 AD) who journeyed from China's northwest to a land of what is now Pakistan today had to go through the rigours of traversing perilous mountain paths and fording swift rivers. Now it is made easy with this new highway. To describe it as a contemporary 'silk road' is not exaggeration.¹⁵

¹⁵ The Chinese were not the only ones using the Silk Road trope. In a short report on the opening of the highway, the *Washington Post* too described the highway as having been carved through 'the mountains of northern Pakistan along the ancient silk route from China'. The same report also observed that the road gave the Chinese greater influence in Pakistan and access to the Arabian Sea port of Karachi. Echoing the narrative about connectivity, a Reuters story carried by the *New York Times* noted that the Karakoram Highway would speed the journey of goods towards the port of Karachi for transshipment. It was said to connect with 'a railroad in China, cutting days, perhaps weeks off the route across the Pacific from China to the West', underscoring that geopolitics was the frame for viewing bilateral relations (*New York Times*, 18 June 1978; *Washington Post*, 19 June 1978).

References to the Silk Road frequently serve as background for geopolitical thought and action (Chin 2013, 195). In this case, it refers to a timeless connectivity, crucially one that was distant from European hegemony and its legacy of colonialism and empire in Asia; there was also a temporal immediacy, evidenced in echoes of Bandung: anti-imperialism, self-determination, South-South cooperation. Bandung had offered the possibility that an alternative to a capitalist world—and, equally importantly, an alternative to Soviet imperialism—could be had (Amin 2006, 169; also Herrera 2005, 546). Here, Maoist China's role was crucial: it exported neither revolution nor class warfare, yet many countries of the global South related to what it was trying to accomplish. Through its avowed non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, China had sought 'a clientele wary of Cold War great powers that could be cultivated in projecting power and influence beyond its national boundaries' (Dirlik 2015, 620). But the late 1970s was already the twilight of a fast-fading Bandung era; under Deng, reform and opening up to the outside world would define Chinese international engagement. Cross-border ties with Pakistan would change too with the onset of reform in China, driven now by a private, profit-making ethos, the impetus for which came from China. I describe these next.

Peddling across the Karakoram

In 1988, the last year of barter-trade across Khunjerab, Pakistan exported cigarettes, nylon, television sets, and motorcycles in return for porcelain, hardware, agricultural implements, and 38 micro-hydro generators. That year, the border trade was worth Rs 56 million, then equivalent to about US\$4.6 million (Islamabad Domestic Service, 5 June 1988). As barter trade was phased out, a new trade regime was being implemented. Under a 1986 border trading agreement, the Karakoram Highway was opened for commercial traffic, allowing people domiciled in Gilgit-Baltistan to travel to Kashgar on a border trading permit issued by the Home Office in Gilgit (Rippa 2019). It also allowed Gilgit-Baltistanis to import small quantities—until recently, up to 300 kilograms—of goods from China free from tariffs. The volume of individual imports sometimes exceeded this limit, although the evidence for this is anecdotal rather than empirical: after barter trade ended in 1988, there is no official data for overland Chinese imports (note that although the Sost port opened in 2006, yearly trade volumes are not disclosed).

After 1986, Gilgit-Baltistanis began shuttling goods across Khunjerab. Independent cross-border trading was a by-product of liberalization under Deng Xiaoping (China implemented a similar border regime with Kazakh and Kirghiz Soviet Socialist Republic). Following the independence of the Central Asian republics, and Deng's southern tour in 1992, officials in Xinjiang were directed to speed up reform and opening up, and to capitalize on Xinjiang's geographical location through border trade (*Xinjiang ribao*, 5 April 1992; Xinhua, 19 June 1992). In the 1990s, encouraging border trade was a policy decision; border trade was seen to benefit the non-Han residents of remote regions (*Liaowang*, 6 May 1991). Although this trade became institutionalized in the 1990s as companies offering logistical support proliferated in Xinjiang, self-financed, independent buyers, travelling by themselves or in small groups, remained the principle buyers.

The informal nature of this trade was evident in the goods I have seen imported into Pakistan: synthetic blankets, thermos flasks, crockery, fruit drinks—beer on those occasions when there was certainty it could be smuggled successfully. In 2003, while travelling by bus from Kashgar to Hunza, a fellow-passenger cradled a boom box, vintage mid-1980s. How much profit did that eventually net him, I still wonder today. Five dollars? Ten? Two years later, when I repeated the journey with my spouse, one of our travelling companions was a local trader in worn-out clothes. He was transporting an unmarked jute sack that my spouse spied was stuffed with sachets of detergent and an old children's mountain bike, both of which had been lashed onto the roof of our bus the day the journey began in Kashgar.

The next morning, all the luggage was offloaded at the Tashkorgan port for Chinese exit formalities. I remember how bitterly the trader in worn-out clothes fought with Uyghur porters at the port when they attempted to reload his luggage. For me, then a postgraduate student, the few Renminbi the porters were asking for their labour was an insignificant sum; we handed it over without a thought. But for our travelling companion, the porters were gouging his profit. Enraged, he clambered onto the roof of the vehicle, attempting to load his own luggage. Fists were shaken and obscenities were hurled while the rest of us watched silently from a distance: no translation was required. For the remainder of the journey to Pakistan, the trader sat by himself, not saying a word to any of us, a solitary figure, a class apart in terms of his attire and his inexpensive Chinese imports.

This was peddling across the Karakoram: hard travel and daily sparring, cash transactions and tariff evasion, calculation of profit and loss at every

turn. It rested on the production of a particular type of private property, which, according to Marx, was ‘founded on the labor of its proprietor’ (1990 [1867], 929). Marx would have dubbed these exchanges as ‘appearing’ primitive; they marked a low or, in Marxian parlance, a ‘pre-historic’ stage of capital and labour (ibid., 874). While these earnings were rarely the sole household income in Gilgit-Baltistan—which tended to diversify between remittances, selling livestock and produce in local markets, and seasonal tourism work—trips to Kashgar with family and neighbours injected cash into rural household economies, even if in small quantities.

After the 1980s, markets in the Karakoram became better connected to Pakistan’s distribution networks. Yet daily reminders about the material connections across transnational spaces remained ubiquitous: the Chinese solar panel in a *pamir*, giant vacuum flasks brimming with milky tea, the can of Chinese beer hidden at the bottom of a freezer at the corner store. The circulation of such goods signalled localized, cultural processes (Bayly 1986, 296), with biography, labour, and social milieu captured in an object (Gell 1986, 112–114). The sachets of detergent lugged across an international border add nuance to our understanding of how a community borders; simultaneously, these unremarkable everyday use items are material references to the stony-faced trader in a bus reeking of cigarette smoke as it jostles through the Karakoram. It is not his only story, of course, but it is an inextricable part of it.

Besides contributing to household economies, material exchanges foregrounded ideas about connectivity. Many Gilgit-Baltistanis I have spoken to or travelled with mention transnational associations with people and places that transcend national boundaries. This is not because of abstract ideas about silk roads or an imaginary central Asian Muslim ecumene. Rather, there is a memory of kinship and community that once extended across a discursive space. While it is true that the majority of Gilgit-Baltistanis have not maintained cross-border ties, the ability to travel across the border affirmed local memory and was constitutive of local identity. Returning from the Shuwerth *pamir* one year, a Shimshali companion explained how, being Wakhi, he felt at home in Tashkurgan amid the Wakhis there. We have family there, he explained, even though he admitted he could name no one in Tashkurgan to whom he was actually related. Others describe former ancestral property across the border, proudly emphasizing its prime location; living on one side of the border, memory of past kinship enables emotive belonging in other milieus. Such mobile

cosmopolitanism was aided by people's ability to move across borders (Ho 2004; Marsden 2008). In conversations, Gilgit-Baltistanis describe ties to Kashgar, Khorog, Ladakh, Wakhan, and Yarkand (Kreutzmann 2015; Mostowlansky 2019; Rippa 2014). Even for those who have never crossed a border, communal identities have a core transnational component; these are 'cultural memories' reaching back in time (Ho 2004, 241).

In the process, new communities are also formed, most recently through Gilgit-Baltistani traders marrying Uyghur women. In early summer 2017 traders in Gilgit estimated that dozens of Uyghur women who had married Gilgit-Baltistani traders were being held in internment camps in Xinjiang. One morning I walked into a conversation in Gilgit bazaar where the chief minister of Gilgit-Baltistan was being assailed for his silence on the crisis. 'There was only one purpose behind his [March 2017] visit to Xinjiang: debauchery. That, and getting photos taken,' a trader bellowed before launching into a string of expletives. 'Why did he not get the women released and brought to Pakistan? Those Uyghur women are our daughters.' Notwithstanding the masculine, patriarchal undertones, this diatribe reflected how powerful the idea of a transnational community can be.

Interregnum: a port and a disaster

The Karakoram Highway had opened to commercial traffic in 1986, but for the next two decades, there was no port. Although a customs and immigration facility had appeared in Sost by the mid-1980s—an empty lot adjacent to it was dubbed 'dry port'—it was not an official port. Arriving by bus from Kashgar in 2003, I was surprised to see passengers and wares being spilled onto an empty lot. A lone official, twig in hand, strolled amid the passengers who were scrambling to gather their luggage and leave. The official randomly whacked a few items and enquired of their ownership and contents, which led to negotiations for getting the luggage released. As for myself, only after exiting into the adjacent Afyatabad bazaar with my own luggage, did it dawn on me that getting an entry stamp would be prudent. I traipsed from one deserted building to another to find someone who could stamp my passport (albeit not before I had filled out a form attesting I had none of the symptoms of SARS). As opposed to the vigilance on the Chinese side—where travel documents were scrutinized multiple

times—in north Hunza the exercise of authority appeared whimsical. ‘Is everyone aboard this bus Muslim?’ border guards inquired cheerily in Urdu as they clambered aboard our vehicle when it pulled up to Khunjerab. ‘Good. You are cleared to go.’ The traders broke out in cheers; two Japanese backpackers stared back blankly. In day-to-day practices, procedural discretion was possible here. This was different from entry protocols at airports or the land port with India.

In 2005, when I made the same journey again, entry procedures were less informal. Getting an entry stamp was no longer optional; this time, luggage was unloaded in an orderly manner under the watchful gaze of two officials, one of whom was a uniformed Chinese. The manner in which fellow passengers negotiated the border—most of them made multiple such journeys every year—illustrated that they knew that there was now a different border regime. New entry procedures preceded the port at Sost, the agreement for which had been signed in 2002 with Sinotrans (one of China’s largest SOEs that specialized in logistics and shipping), which finally opened in 2006.

The new port marked four transitions. First, it was part of a privatization wave that followed General Pervez Musharraf’s coup in 1999: under Musharraf and his technocrat advisers, public institutions and services were privatized at unprecedented speed (Akhtar 2005). Second, it was an attempt to accurately assess imports over the Karakoram Highway for taxation purposes. For example, in 2005 Chinese data showed almost twice as many exports out of Xinjiang as being registered at Sost. Information sharing through a port and formal procedures could bring trade out of the shadow and make it taxable (*Nation*, 27 April 2006). Third, what had begun as peddling, over time had opened up opportunities for much larger import volumes. For example, around the time the port was opening I met a Pushtoon trader individually importing a container of pencils; another Hunza resident recalled being approached by a Peshawar-based financier wanting to employ him to import *eight containers* of dried fruit (the expectation was that as he was domiciled locally, he could evade taxes; he refused). These were substantial flows of capital and merchandise. A port would tax these. Fourth, the port was envisioned as a pivot in a new, expansive imaginary of markets that would be networked through Sost.

Pakistan’s then head of state General Pervez Musharraf spoke at the port inauguration on 4 July 2006. Underscoring Pakistan’s location between Afghanistan, Central Asia, China, India, and the Persian Gulf, he noted how Pakistan could serve as a trade and energy corridor for

both China and the landlocked Central Asian markets. At its opening, the dry port had the capacity to handle 40 containers daily; Musharraf promised a hundred-fold increase in capacity, forecasting ‘immense prospects of trade and economic growth’. Among those flanking Musharraf was his finance minister Salman Shah, a former academic with a PhD in economics and finance from Indiana University, who also underscored Pakistan’s transit potential. As the first port in north Pakistan, Shah echoed how Sost could play a crucial role in linking Pakistan and China (Associated Press of Pakistan, 4 July 2006). Pakistan sought new advantages through the free movement of capital and merchandise between countries and regions; this is, of course, a tenet of neoliberalism (Harvey 2005, 66).

But Pakistan’s vision of connecting different parts of Asia came to a halt on 4 January 2010 when a massive landslide at Attabad, south of Sost, swept the namesake village off the mountain slope, killing 19 villagers in the process. The landslide debris covered two kilometres of the valley floor, burying the Karakoram Highway. More worryingly for the 20,000 people trapped on the other side of the landslide debris in north Hunza was that the flow of the Hunza river was also blocked. This led to a steady water build-up; eventually, the reservoir grew to 22 kilometres, with a depth of a hundred metres. The only way across the reservoir was by long-tail boat, run by private operators. Many small traders were forced out of the China trade. Loading and unloading trucks, boats, and jeeps added to operational costs that cut into small traders’ already thin profit margins. Larger traders—the majority of whom were from down-country Pakistan—were able to bear the additional costs.¹⁶

Another consequence of the disaster was the transformation of local politics. The Attabad disaster had, in fact, long been foretold: the mountain slopes had shifted first in the mid-1990s and had become visibly unstable in the years leading up to 2010. By the end of 2009, all but a handful of people had evacuated the village; those who remained were protesting against insufficient government compensation (*Pamir Times*, 7 March 2009). Local activists had visited Attabad in the spring of 2009, including one Baba Jan of the Progressive Youth Front.

¹⁶ The destruction of vital infrastructure—the Karakoram Highway—and the use of boats affirms my argument about how change in connectivity transformed trade (Karrar 2013, 476).

After the landslide, Attabad residents were scattered in temporary settlements locally. Once again, the state was slow in providing compensation. On 12 August 2011, after failing to get compensation, again—the bank having declared that the account on which compensation cheques were drawn was empty—the affectees held a demonstration in Aliabad in which nearby police were pelted with stones. The police retaliated by opening fire, killing Afzal Baig (22) and his father Sherullah Baig (50). Among those who now took up the cause of the displaced was Baba Jan. Soon afterwards he was tried and sentenced to life in prison on terrorism charges. Baba Jan's incarceration was in keeping with allegations that have been documented by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan which laments how the Anti-Terrorism Act has been used against hundreds of rights activists who 'continue to languish in jail' (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan 2016, 17). The incarceration of local activists—and hundreds of others placed under the Fourth Schedule of the Anti-Terrorism Act (which puts people under surveillance and restricts their movement without trial)—began at the time that Chinese investment was making inroads.

Corridors and ports: connectivity, redux

The first epigraph at the beginning of this article, 'Everyone knows there are no true forests in England', was Karl Marx's impassioned cry at the disappearance of the commons, as the sheepwalks of the English countryside, used by all, were transformed into deer preserves for the elite. The deer have 'the demure of domestic cattle, as fat as London aldermen', Marx scornfully observed (1990 [1867], 892). Both the sheepwalk and the deer preserve represented property relations; the latter ultimately replaced the former—elite interests empowered by state institutions. A century later, punk, a new counterculture, gave creative expression to exclusions that continued to be created within contemporary society. 'It could be anywhere any hemisphere', The Clash observed in 'Straight to Hell', their 1982 anthem against injustice. 'There ain't no asylum here', they concluded—a lament for a vanishing moral economy. Marx, The Clash, and scores of others remind us that the creation of exclusions is an *active* process engendered by new economic or political relations, often both.

In this penultimate section, I address neoliberalism in Gilgit-Baltistan by considering regional Chinese investments since 2006, and changes introduced since the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Chinese President Xi Jinping's signature initiative for global connectivity. As a result of bordering China—and because of the Karakoram Highway—Gilgit-Baltistan has become the de facto CPEC gateway.

First, a brief chronology of CPEC. It was announced on 23 May 2013 by Pakistani President Asif Zardari and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang during the latter's visit to Islamabad. Li's overtures were part of Beijing's new South Asian diplomacy, the initial focus of which, I think, had been India. Before Pakistan, Li had visited India, his first foreign destination as premier, where, according to a commentary published in *The Hindu* on 20 May 2013, Li offered a 'handshake across the Himalaya'. Describing China and India as 'the two pillars of the civilization of the East', Li praised India's 'amazing splendor and diversity', forecasting how the two most populous countries of the world were 'destined to be together' and become a new engine for global economic growth.

By comparison, when it was announced in 2013, CPEC *anticipated* future cooperation: few details were on offer then. It was projected as reviving Pakistan's economy while stimulating economic growth in western China (*People's Daily*, 23 May 2013). Arguably, CPEC started taking form only after President Xi Jinping's announcements of the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' (in Astana) and the 'Maritime Silk Road' (in Jakarta) in the autumn of 2013, which were quickly merged into 'One Belt, One Road' (and later rebranded as the 'Belt and Road Initiative' and written into the Chinese Constitution).

Thus, CPEC became one of the six economic corridors under BRI, and was labelled a BRI flagship project. During a brief visit to Islamabad in April 2015, Xi Jinping elevated bilateral relations to 'all weather friendship'. Although Li Keqiang's May 2013 visit to New Delhi had indicated where China was hoping to steer its South Asian diplomacy, it was in Pakistan that it found a partner eager for investment, particularly in the power generation sector (at the time Pakistan suffered from crippling electricity shortages; consequently, the majority of CPEC investments are funnelled into power generation). The BRI's emphasis on connectivity resonated with aspirations of connectivity within Pakistan which placed the country, including Gilgit-Baltistan, at the centre of a connected Asia.

Given that CPEC and BRI are in initial stages—having been announced only five years prior to the time of writing in 2019—it is

valuable to place ongoing developments in Gilgit-Baltistan within a longer continuum of overland connectivity since 1969. Doing so allows us to see continuity of the three arguments I identified at the outset: overland connectivity enabled Pakistan to imagine and project expansive ties; new forms of connectivity led to new types of commercial exchanges; and, finally, these processes are resulting in the emergence of new administrative practices, which I consider to be axiomatic of neoliberalism: primacy of investments, the privatization of public goods and services, and securitization. In Gilgit-Baltistan, CPEC appears at the end of this continuum and was predated by neoliberal measures.

Deploying neoliberalism as an analytical lens also underscores how minimizing public spending and maximizing profit has become a governance priority. The privatization of public assets and services is a result of a neoliberal tendency to approach governance through a free-market ethos of competition and profit maximization (Hilgers 2011, 358; also Kotsko 2018, 5–6; Tironi and Barandiarán 2014, 306). Unlike the barter and small-scale trading that had defined cross-border trade across the Karakoram, the new port anticipated thousands of tons of shipment daily, not only between Pakistan and China, but to and from the Central Asian republics too. As we saw in the previous section, this was not only General Musharraf's view, but that of his technocrat finance minister as well. The port also sought to protect against a tragedy of the commons: localized cross-border commerce, perceived as benefiting only the individual trader. The port marked a clear shift in how future connectivity in and out of Gilgit-Baltistan was being envisioned.

If neoliberalism is one dimension of global trends being localized in Gilgit-Baltistan, then another is the growth of China's economy over the last four decades. Giovanni Arrighi and Beverly Silver have described China's economic growth as a 'major reorganization' in the 'world capitalist system'. Following Fernand Braudel, they have argued that over a *longue durée* capitalism has undergone successive accumulation cycles (Arrighi and Silver 2001, 258); in his later writing Arrighi has described China as the latest centre of global accumulation (2007). Hence Gilgit-Baltistan, where the local economy had been organized around high mountain agriculture and pastoralism, found itself in the path of new transnational investments. The opening of the port in 2006 outside the north Hunza village of Sost, which was partly financed by a Chinese SOE, marked the first inroads of investment-driven capitalism into this region. Aihwa Ong has argued that under neoliberalism, the

market has encouraged the 'coordination' of public and private interests that cluster in spaces to facilitate global capital flows (2006, 77–78).

Capital flows are expected to intensify under CPEC by allowing the Chinese government, Chinese SOEs, and Chinese firms to invest in infrastructure in Pakistan (Akhter 2018, 234). In official discourse, Pakistan describes CPEC as a win-win, choosing to ignore for now that China will be seeking to recoup its investments. It also disregards broader trends in Chinese global investments, such as China becoming the second largest source of outward foreign direct investment (FDI) in 2016 (Xinhua, 8 June 2017)—where China invests globally, and not only in Pakistan—or that since the turn of the century, China has been absorbing its own labour surplus and overcapacity through infrastructure projects, initially at home, but increasingly abroad. There is little discussion of the fact that in the first stage of its foreign investments, China responds to local demand for physical infrastructure, such as a road or a power plant. In the second stage, the initial investment is meant to facilitate a cycle of capital accumulation (Harvey 2004, 65–67).

Consider the two ports at either extreme of Pakistan. In the north is the Sost dry port, financed by Sinotrans. Between 2006 and 2016, Sinotrans held controlling shares in the Sost dry port. At the other geographical extreme of Pakistan is the port at Gwadar in Baluchistan. Management of this port was awarded to another SOE, the China Overseas Port Holding Company, in February 2013. Note that Chinese SOEs acquired management of both ports prior to the announcement of CPEC or BRI.¹⁷ Where Pakistan hoped to acquire transit taxes by being part of an Asia connected through new Chinese infrastructure, profit-making Chinese enterprises were acquiring management of public services in anticipation of profits, which would be repatriated. Consider also that for the next 40 years, 91 per cent of profits from Gwadar will be repatriated to China (*Dawn*, 25 November 2017).

In Gilgit-Baltistan, cross-border trading by local traders declined after CPEC. This is despite the fact that in 2015, a series of new roads and tunnels were inaugurated that skirted the Attabad reservoir: it was no longer necessary to load and unload cargo onto boats. 'Making a living importing goods from China is becoming less and less viable for us,' a

¹⁷ These were examples of private management of a public service. Another example of a similar process was when, in 2008, the Karakoram Highway was upgraded by another Chinese SOE, the China Road and Bridge Corporation. On its website it describes itself as one of the largest SOEs to enter the international contracting market.

local trader told me in 2017. 'If the corridor is as beneficial as we are told it is, why is it that since CPEC there are less and less people applying for border-trading permits?' He then went on to explain how the number of people applying for the border trading permits decreased from 2,500 in 2015, to 350 in 2017. 'Why have 4,000 people not applied for a border trading permit after CPEC? The answer is simple: now we cannot import a pebble without paying tariffs.' In the past, mobility and, with it, a sense of community would have extended across the Karakoram and the Pamir. But as cross-border mobilities change, local exchanges became increasingly marginal.

This view corroborates what I have been told by shopkeepers in Afiyatabad, a bazaar adjacent to the Sost port, which I visited four times between 2012 and 2017 to understand how connectivity with China impacts on border locales. In Afiyatabad, shopkeepers complain of declining activity in the border market, despite the fact that the volume of cargo entering Pakistan has multiplied. More broadly, since CPEC there are growing concerns across Gilgit-Baltistan about speculation and increasing land prices, lost control of communal land (especially along the highway), securitization, and how increased vehicle traffic affects the community and ecology.¹⁸

Finally, neoliberalism allowed other interest groups to exert leverage. Consider that although Sinotrans held controlling shares in the Sost port, a local partner, the Silk Route Dry Port Trust, held minority shares and provided land for the port. Its chairperson was the *mir* of Hunza, Ghazanfar Ali Khan. Although *mir* became a ceremonial title after the 1972 abolishment of princely rule, Khan was also the chief executive of the Northern Areas (as the region was known until 2009), unelected and appointed by Musharraf. From the beginning, the port was mired in controversy over massive loan scams in which the *mir*, his son and heir, as well as senior Chinese port officials were implicated (*Dawn*, 6 February 2009; *Pamir Times* 26 April 2008). Controversy continued to plague the port until October 2016, when the Gilgit-Baltistan apex court awarded port management to the National Logistics Cell (NLC), a paramilitary arm of the Pakistan Army which is

¹⁸ The counterpoint is that improved roads and telecommunications have benefited residents' access to down-country education, employment, and health services. Many also find seasonal employment in the tourism industry which has grown rapidly, partly because of decreasing travel times to Gilgit-Baltistan. How much of these developments are an offshoot of CPEC projects, or to what extent they were reflective of developments that were already underway, is difficult to ascertain with certainty.

allowed to bid for public funds. The NLC had been famously born during the Afghan War when it shuttled military supplies offloaded at Karachi port to Mujahidin groups in the North-West Frontier Province. Now, the NLC was positioning itself to benefit from the latest geopolitical bonanza: CPEC.

Conclusion

Since 1891, the history of the region now known as Gilgit-Baltistan has been animated by connectivity and enclosure. In this story, 1969 stands out as a turning point, when, at the height of the Cold War, Sun Xixiang and Liu Qiang led a weary caravan down Mintaka Pass on the icy Karakoram-Pamir watershed to a heroes' welcome at Misgar. The opening of the caravan route had two immediate effects. It offered Pakistan a land link to China, which, over the next 50 years, engendered increasingly expansive imaginations of connectivity. And, scripted in the Bandung lexicon, it fomented solidarity between Pakistan and China, in no small part through China adopting Pakistan's position on Kashmir, even though China's demand for plebiscite in Kashmir was quietly dropped in the 1980s in favour of a 'peaceful solution'.¹⁹

In the meantime, new material exchanges were changing everyday life on the geographical margins of the state. In the new century, the arrival of foreign investment was accompanied by neoliberal administrative

¹⁹ Since that time, China has been careful to set its own narrative towards India. For example, following India's recent revoking of Article 370 of the Constitution, which had given special status to Kashmir, the foreign minister of Pakistan, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, boasted of China's 'complete support' for Pakistan taking the matter to the United Nations Security Council (*Dawn*, 10 August 2019). Yet barely two weeks later, China's ambassador to India Sun Weidong published an opinion piece in *The Hindu* describing 'the historical and cultural ties between Chinese and Indian civilization' and 'the light of inter-civilizational exchanges and mutual learning'. Sun, who had previously served as ambassador to Pakistan (2013–2017), described an age-old Silk Road connection between China and India through historical figures such as the Han dynasty envoy Zhang Qian (d. 114? BCE), Ming admiral Zheng He (1371–1433?), as well as pilgrims such as Bodhidharma (d. 540?), Kumarajiva (334–413), and Xuanzang (602?–664). Sun concluded that the two 'ancient oriental civilizations [had] engaged in exchanges and mutual learning ... and made great contributions to the development of human civilization' before calling for a new chapter of 'mutual respect and harmonious coexistence between Chinese and Indian civilizations'.

practices. When coupled with a lack of constitutional representation in Gilgit-Baltistan 70 years after the formation of Pakistan, the result is liminal citizenship in a securitized milieu. Gilgit-Baltistan remains a frontier today. But Gilgit-Baltistan is not Zomia; it is both integrated within Pakistan's governance and military structures, and is part of China's investment regime in Pakistan. It enjoys no insulation due to altitude or topography. What Scott has described as the 'friction of terrain' is not a political buffer, if it ever was in Gilgit-Baltistan (2009).

As late as 2004, Arif Dirlik, the late Marxist historian of China, argued against a hegemonic 'Beijing consensus', holding out hope that working within a global neoliberal order, Beijing might offer a 'Bandung for the age of global capitalism' by 'including the voices of the formerly colonized and marginalized' (Dirlik 2004). That moment appears to have passed. During a debate in the upper house, a Pakistani senator wondered if CPEC was not a new East India Company (*Dawn*, 11 May 2016). This was a pointed question that came from within Pakistan, where officialdom and people have traditionally cherished close friendship with China. Pakistan's friendship with China is 'higher than the Karakoram and deeper than the oceans', Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto announced to Chinese road builders in Gilgit in 1974 (*South China Morning Post*, 24 September 1974), a phrase that has been inflated to include 'sweeter than honey, stronger than steel, dearer than eyesight' and has today become official parlance for Pakistan-China friendship.

During the Sino-Soviet split, 'imperialist' became an ideological barb traded by the two Cold War antagonists. It was an ideological attack and referenced geopolitical anxieties. Today when it is used for China, it signals apprehensions about extraction, indebtedness, and dependency. China being labelled as imperialist from *within* the global South appears a new great divergence in the making. Official historiography in China has steadfastly depicted the Middle Kingdom as a victim of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European imperialism, and rightly so. But the same Chinese narratives would be likely to resist China's ongoing overseas engagements being seen as 'the projection of political power across large spaces' where 'influence rather than presence is what counts'. This is how Engseng Ho has described American imperialism after September 11 (2004, 225) and it is as good a starting point—a working definition—for critically parsing China's new international engagements as any other.

In Dirlik's final article before his death, he warned that China's economic power was fuelling 'a chauvinistic nationalism' and 'suggestions of fascist political repressiveness' within the country and 'a

lebensraum imperialism abroad' (2015, 623). Consider also how David Harvey has described accumulation by dispossession: privatization, transformation of collective property rights into exclusive property, and the suppression of indigenous forms of production and consumption (2005, 74–78).

I evoke Dirlik and Harvey not to hastily conclude that China is an imperialist in Gilgit-Baltistan. Although profits earned abroad are going to be a core feature going forward, neoliberalism presents differently around the world. For example, Gilgit-Baltistan has neither the violent enclave extraction of the mining or oil industry in sub-Saharan Africa nor the deindustrialization and urban precarity that was created in the United States and Latin America. The core countries in the above regions were also not China, but instead Australia, Canada, South Africa, and the United States (Ferguson 2006, 203–205; Natera 2013, 259–261). Furthermore, the takeover of the Sost port by the NLC in 2016 underscores the role of other, local interest groups, such as the Pakistan military, seeking to leverage new market-based opportunities. All of the above requires that we consider local particularities and take history on board, as I have sought to do here.

Yet we can safely conclude that recent developments in Gilgit-Baltistan represent localization of a new global cycle of capitalist accumulation. They do indicate that a new epoch is upon us, one determined by an ascendant and self-assured global China. Independent traders—and local activists such as Baba Jan, who remains imprisoned—matter profoundly: their stories reveal how global process bear down, often violently, on the individual. They remind us that what is celebrated as benefit-for-all under globalization not only manifests highly unequally, but also creates losers as well as winners, frontiers in the wake of global capitalist flows, enclosures in moments of unprecedented connectivity.

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