

# Presence without Encounters

## Pending futures and the Chinese non(engagement) in the Tajik Pamirs

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### Abstract

This paper tries to make sense of the paradox of Chinese presence and absence in the Tajik Pamirs. On the one hand, Chinese trucks use the Pamir Highway on a daily basis to ship goods from Kashgar to Dushanbe, and several Chinese mining companies are actively prospecting for minerals in the Pamirs. On the other hand, there are hardly any Chinese in Khorog or Murghab. China's rhetorical presence but physical absence thereby amplifies an atmosphere of ambiguity. While Chinese capital, geopolitical interests, and grandiose plans for new Silk Roads shape ambitions and fears, actual encounters with Chinese business people, engineers or tourists remain rare and brief. In this context, people in the Pamirs find themselves waiting for pending futures – good and bad – conjured up in relation to China.

Following the story of a Free Economic Zone, trade with China across the Kulma Pass, a geologist in search for investors, and an old silver mine recently bought by a Chinese company, I analyse the paralysing limbo in which the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region finds itself at this particular historical conjuncture.

### Keywords

Tajikistan, Pamirs, Free Economic Zones, mining, Chinese investment, trade.

The Chinese presence in the Tajik Pamirs is a paradox. On the one hand, China is Tajikistan's largest investor and its second largest trading partner (Sodiqov 2012; Sattori 2013). Chinese trucks use the Pamir Highway on a daily basis to ship goods from Kashgar to Dushanbe, and Chinese mining companies are actively prospecting for minerals.

On the other hand, China is strangely absent in the lives of all but a few and actual encounters with Chinese people remain rare and brief. Despite the proximity to China and the existence of a road across the Kulma pass that links the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) with Xinjiang, there are no Chinese restaurants or shops in Murghab, Khorog, or Ishkoshim; one is much more likely to meet a Chinese in the streets of any European city than in the Pamirs. In other words, the Chinese presence in the Tajik Pamirs is largely devoid of actual day-to-day encounters.

In this respect, the Chinese presence in the Pamirs is quite different from Chinese engagements in other parts of Central Asia and beyond, where Chinese entrepreneurs open restaurants or casinos (Nyiri 2012, Rippa and Saxer 2016), work on bazaars (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2009; Olimova 2009; Zhaporov 2009; Alff 2017; Steenberg 2018) or on farms (Hofmann 2016; Zhou 2018), and act as buyers of gem stones (Rippa and Yi 2017), gold (High 2017), timber (Woods 2011) or medicinal plants (Saxer 2011). While the Chinese presence in these contexts is embedded in processes of daily interaction and "active neighbouring" (Saxer and Zhang 2017), no such thing is taking place in the Pamirs.

Nevertheless, China plays a major role in discussions about the Tajik Pamirs' current predicament and visions for potential futures. China's influence is conjured up in new Silk Road dreams, and potential large-scale investments in mining and infrastructure. These "Chinese futures" are sometimes anxiously anticipated and seen as ultimately inevitable; sometimes, they are played down as mere rhetoric and fantasy. Yet, they always remain opaque, ambiguous, and strangely pending.

My aim in this paper is to examine these pending Chinese futures. The questions I seek to address are the following: How did the current situation come into being? How and why is it different from other contexts in Central Asia and beyond? And what do the notions of a presence without encounters and pending futures tell us about the type of Chinese projects abroad that are currently bred and fostered?

I start with an account of the first International Economic Forum held in Khorog in 2013 and discuss the opaque rhetorical presence and ambiguous absence of China. I analyse the event in the context of the particular post-Soviet history of the Tajik Pamirs and argue that the Chinese presence without encounters is a result of these particularities. To explore the Chinese presence, the lack of encounters, and the pending futures further, I will look into the case of an old silver mine that a Chinese company

recently took over. I will discuss “prospecting” as a mode of (non-)engagement that reinforces the ambiguity and opaqueness of the Chinese presences in the Pamirs. Finally, I will raise the question how to understand the notion of a “presence” in general against the background of the cases discussed.

## Absent Chinese

At the end of August 2013, the GBAO’s 1st International Economic Forum took place in Khorog. The principle goal of the forum was to bring potential investors to the region, and particularly to the Ishkoshim Free Economic Zone (IFEZ). IFEZ had formally been established in 2010 together with three other Free Economic Zones in Tajikistan; 200 hectares of land had been acquired in Ishkoshim, at the entry to the Wakhan valley right on the border with Afghanistan.

The main asset of the zone, as advertised during the forum, lies in its strategic location between China and Afghanistan. In 2013, with the US Army on the way out of Afghanistan, with Chinese enterprises – many state-owned – looking for investment opportunities abroad, and with all the talk of new silk roads conjuring up prosperous overland corridors,<sup>1</sup> the idea of a transport link between Kashgar in Xinjiang and Faizabad in Afghanistan – bypassing China’s “all-weather friend” Pakistan – seemed promising.

IFEZ offered cheap land leases as well as customs and tax exemptions. However, the Tajik government did not provide sufficient funds to establish basic infrastructure. For this reason, IFEZ was actively looking for investors to get the zone started.

More than 200 participants came for the two-day forum in Khorog. Special helicopter flights were organized from Dushanbe. When I arrived at the prestigious conference centre, a massive building with elaborate wood carvings in the style of a Tajik tea house, the parking lot was full of expensive white SUVs, many of them adorned with logos of NGOs and international development organisations. A conference kit, which included a number of concrete investment proposals, was handed out to the participants. The proposals had been drafted in corporation with GIZ.<sup>2</sup> It outlined projects in various sectors, ranging from mining to tourism and medicinal herb processing.

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<sup>1</sup> The forum took place a year before Xi Jinping announced his signature the One Belt - One Road Initiative (OBOR) that has channeled the many new Silk Road dreams ever since 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, the German development agency.

On the second day of the event, a site visit to the Free Economic Zone was on the agenda. A convoy of vehicles brought us to Ishkoshim, about three hours from Khorog. I was sitting next to the regional director of a major international development bank and asked him about his take on the zone. “It is a bold plan”, he said – adding after a pause, “we need bold plans”.



*Fig. 1: The territory of the Free Economic Zone. Photo by the author, 2013*

At the disused Ishkoshim airport, where the zone’s administrative buildings were to be situated, a massive banner showed a concept drawing of the future entrance gate to the zone. The image depicted large Chinese trucks coming and leaving on a perfect stretch of black asphalt, crossing a green lawn in front of the gate. This vision of a possible future, however, stood in stark contrast to reality. The designated zone itself was merely a large field of stones between the Panj river that marks the border to Afghanistan and the dusty road up to the Wakhan valley (see fig. 1). Standing on this rocky plain of aspiration we were listening to IFEZ director Aidibek Bekmurody. With much enthusiasm he appealed to our imagination to picture the future zone. He stressed, once more, the location’s unique strategic value and potential that was waiting to be made use of by foresighted investors.

However, as it became increasingly clear over the course of the forum, there were hardly any investors present. Most of the forum participants were representatives of NGOs, international development organisations, and local government agencies. The Afghan delegation had to

cancel their visit due to their visas being delayed in Dushanbe, and invited participants from Pakistan had also not managed to attend. Their absence was a reminder of the practical difficulties of crossing borders, contrasting sharply the rhetoric of transnational economic development at the forum.

Strikingly absent were also Chinese business people and company representatives. Apart from a small delegation of three Chinese representatives from the embassy in Dushanbe, there was no Chinese presence at all – despite the overarching imaginary of a future in which China would inevitably play a crucial role.

The Chinese absence cannot be explained by a lack of interest nor practical problems of travel or communication. Neither can the Chinese absence be read as an active attempt to keep Chinese investment out. After the forum, the management of the Free Economic Zone undertook two trips to China – one to Urumqi and one to Guangzhou – in order to promote IFEZ and also to find business opportunities,<sup>3</sup> and there were plans to invite Chinese business people to come and visit the Free Zone.

Although I never received a straight answer to my questions about the absence of Chinese investors at the forum, the most plausible explanation seems to me that the organisers of the forum opted to keep the *public* Chinese presence small and engage with Chinese authorities and business people bilaterally. Kick-starting the Free Economic Zone involved dealing with a large amount of sensitive local and national political issues. A week-long armed conflict had shaken Khorog the year before and tensions between the Pamiri Ismaili communities of the Western Pamirs and the Central State were still palpable. Furthermore, in the process of settling the borderline with the People's Republic, Tajikistan had ceded some 1000 square kilometres of territory to China. While the respective treaty had already been signed in 2004, the Tajik parliament had only ratified it in 2011, probably fearing the same type of public outcry that followed a similar cession of disputed territory in Kyrgyzstan (EurasiaNet 2011). Public opinion in the Pamirs still considered the deal as non-transparent and a form of selling out.

Thus, while China was an integral part of the imaginary of a prosperous future as presented at the forum, the Chinese presence in Tajikistan was engulfed with widespread scepticism, and discussions about China's influence frequently turned to the larger geopolitical issues at stake. Potential Chinese investment is rarely thought of purely in business terms. It is always conceived of being part of larger, and largely opaque schemes. This is directly tied to the type of large scale projects Chinese companies are typically associated with – in agriculture, infrastructure and mining (Sodiqov 2012; Hofmann 2016). During the forum, this scepticism was

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3 See <https://www.facebook.com/IFEZT-177965755740411>



openly expressed by Umed Davlatzod, Deputy Minister of the Tajik Ministry of Economic Development and Trade. Chairing the plenary session on the second day of the event, he clearly took sides, saying that he was “sceptical about those who come to develop GBAO [the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region] with Mendeleev’s table of periodic elements in one hand”. Most development professionals shared his view and saw other areas of development as better and more realistic avenues to improve local livelihoods. Although the forum’s principle organizer was the management of the Free Economic Zone, and attracting investors was its stated aim, the event consisted of two sets of panels running parallel to each other: one on investment and the Free Economic Zone, the other on sustainable community-based eco-tourism – the run-of-the-mill solution to the problem of developing remote and structurally weak areas around the globe.

Thus, in brief, the forum highlighted the very tensions regarding China’s influence in the Tajik Pamirs: a deep-rooted scepticism that met with a tacit understanding that a Chinese presence was necessary and probably inevitable for all kinds of imagined futures; a China that is omnipresent, yet remains largely a matter of rhetoric, rumour and futures conjured up rather than actual encounters. The absence of powerful Chinese investors at the forum reflected this ambivalent situation.

The question is how this situation came into being and what it means for the Chinese projects already under way in the Pamirs.

## Post-Soviet Pamirian History

Tajikistan had without doubt a difficult post-Soviet history. In 1992, shortly after independence, the country descended into a devastating civil war that lasted until 1997. In the first few years of this conflict, the Tajik Pamirs were cut off from the rest of the country and the region found itself on the verge of a famine, which was only averted thanks to international help organised by the Aka-Khan Foundation (Bliss 2006: 298-304).

While Tajikistan was mired in civil war, in other parts of the former Soviet Union bordering China a gradual process of opening up took place. In the borderlands of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Siberia, day-to-day exchange with China began to reshape local economies and people’s aspirations (Karrar 2016). The end of the Cold War and the re-opening of borders coincided with China’s policies to establish a socialist market economy and facilitate private entrepreneurship.

Small-scale trade began supplying Siberian and Central Asian markets with cheap Chinese goods produced in the booming factories of Guangzhou and Shenzhen. Around the turn of the millennium, the bazaars of Bishkek, Irkutsk or Ulan Ude were bustling with Chinese traders. While

anti-Chinese sentiment and, at times, outright hostility against Chinese business people were implicit features of this era of new contact, it also offered an economic niche for those with the skill and will to engage in the China trade. In Kyrgyzstan, Dordoi Bazar in the outskirts of Bishkek, became Central Asia's biggest market and a crucial provider of employment and income. At its peak, between 30,000 and 40,000 traders, vendors, and helpers were making a living on the bazar economy (Alff 2017).<sup>4</sup>

During the initial phase of revived cross-border relations between China and Central Asia during the 1990s, business was characterised by so-called shuttle-trade (Kaminski and Raballand 2009; Shinn et. al 2010; Reeves 2014; Ryzhova 2018). In Central Asia, this trade was often in the hands of local borderland populations with former ties across the border and the necessary social and linguistic skills – Uighurs on the Chinese side and Dungans in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (Peyrouse 2007: 11; Laruelle and Peyrouse 2009; Zhaporov 2009; Stenberg 2014, 2018). Since the late 1990s, however, the shuttle-traders have largely been replaced by wholesalers and professional logistics companies. These, however, are predominantly run by Han Chinese, Kyrgyz or Kazakh business people rather than Dungans or Uighurs (Stenberg 2018).

In summary, during the late 1990s and early 2000s, the presence of Chinese citizens in the bazars of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Siberia was obvious, palpable, and a matter of day-to-day interaction. Although this presence is less visible now due to new sets of immigration regimes, this phase of intensive contact laid the basis from which many of the current cross-border business relations evolved.

By contrast, no such thing happened in the Pamirs. Although the Government of Gorno-Badakhshan signed an agreement to facilitate border trade with the Tashkurgan district of Xinjiang in 1993, it did not have any real effect – mainly due to the civil war (Pomfret 1995: 104). The Sino-Tajik border remained sealed. Only in 2004, a border agreement between the two countries settled remaining territorial disputes. Tajikistan agreed to cede about 1000 square kilometres of territory in the Rangkul area in exchange for China dropping any further claims and, allegedly, an unofficial debt writing-off (Sattori 2013).

In the same year, the Kulma pass between Murghab and Tashkurgan was formally opened (see fig. 2). For a moment, it seemed like the opening of Kulma could boost the local economy and herald a similar phase of shuttle-trade as in other parts of central Asia (Mostowlansky 2017: 31–33).

In October 2004, a trade fair took place in Murghab. A high-ranking Chinese delegation arrived from Xinjiang. The delegation was met with

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<sup>4</sup> Although this number is coming down rapidly since Kyrgyzstan has joined the Eurasian Economic Union in May 2015 (see Alff 2017).

salt and bread and the Chinese flag on the pass was blowing in the wind of the Eastern Pamirs, as a local reporter from the Murghabi Sary Kol newspaper described the scene (Sary Kol 2004). The trade fair lasted four days and attracted crowds from all over the Tajik Pamirs. While many visitors complained that the prices at the fair were higher than they expected, especially compared to Chinese goods arriving from Kyrgyzstan, there was clearly excitement and hope in the air. After 70 years of a tightly sealed border, old cross-border connections were about to be revived. Surely, there would be ample opportunities for local entrepreneurs on both sides of the border.

However, the trade fair imagined as the first in a series of yearly events, only took place once. While according to official statistics, the volume of trade across Kulma grew by a factor of 25 between 2002 and 2006, and reached USD 524 million in 2007 (Olimova 2009: 63), it was never in the hands of local shuttle traders as it was the case in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan or Siberia. By the mid 2000s, when the Kulma Pass opened, the era of shuttle trade between China and Central Asia was already coming to an end. While several shopkeepers in the bazar of Murghab told me that they initially travelled to China themselves in order to set up business relations, the amount of red tape and the relatively small volume of goods sold on local markets in the Pamirs rendered direct contact with China unprofitable for most local traders (see also Parham 2016; Bitabarova 2016).

In other words, the kind of small-scale, informal border trade never developed between Tajikistan and China. There are several reasons for this difference between the situation in the Tajik Pamirs and other border regions in Central Asia and Siberia. First, there is a certain mistrust both by Tajikistan and China against border minorities in the region. In the Tajik case, this lingering mistrust directly stems from the role that Gorno-Badakhshan played in the Civil War. In the case of China, the mistrust against Uighur business people forging relations with fellow (and mostly Turkic-speaking<sup>5</sup>) Muslims of Central Asia has always been an issue and following the Xinjiang riots in 2009, this mistrust has been growing substantially. Both Dushanbe and Beijing clearly prefer to see trade in the hands of larger, well-established companies rather than informal, local shuttle-traders (cf. Steenberg 2014; 2018).

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5 In the western Pamirs, several Pamiri languages belonging to the Iranian language family are spoken; the eastern Pamirs are predominantly Kyrgyz speaking.





*Fig. 2: The road to Kulma. Photo by the author, 2016.*

Second, as there was no previous phase of shuttle trade between China and Tajikistan in the 1990s and early 2000s, there is also no recent legacy of informal relations at the Sino-Tajik border. Whereas the majority of goods imported from China to Kyrgyzstan has until recently evaded customs taxation, and the official figures of Chinese exports to Kyrgyzstan were ten times higher than the Kyrgyz figures of Chinese imports, the differences in Chinese and Tajik figures were always relatively minor (Peyrouse 2007; Kaminski and Raballand 2009; Shinn, Beshimov, and Usubaliev 2010; Alff 2017).

Third, both Chinese and Tajik citizens need visas to cross the border. There is no border pass regime that would allow people living close to the border to cross freely and stay on the other side for a limited amount of time. Visas or business permits must be obtained in Dushanbe and Beijing, which involves costly travel to the capital or the services of a visa agent.<sup>6</sup> There is also no free trade zone at the border that would allow both sides to interact and do business without the need for a visa.

As a result, trade is largely in the hands of wholesalers and logistics companies. Chinese goods sold in Murghab and Khorog are either first

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<sup>6</sup> Border pass regimes exist, for example, between China and Nepal, Pakistan and Myanmar, respectively, but not with Tajikistan. However, Tajik citizens can currently get a one-month business permit stamped into their passports, which entitles them to travel to China. This permit is not a regular visa granted by the Chinese Embassy in Dushanbe but rather issued by the Tajik authorities through a travel agent.

transported to the wholesale markets of Dushanbe and then brought back to the Pamirs, or they are still imported from Kyrgyzstan, where informal border arrangements between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have a long history.<sup>7</sup>

China's current Belt and Road initiative has added another layer to the idea of reviving old Silk Roads and is rapidly reshaping the borderlands at China's edge (Rippa 2017). At this moment, however, it seems that Tajikistan plays, at best, a minor part in these larger schemes; the focus clearly lies on the route from Xinjiang through Kazakhstan and a railway linking Osh (Kyrgyzstan) with Tashkent (Uzbekistan) bypassing Tajik territory (Peyrouse 2009; Alff 2016; Ying 2016; Islamjanova et al. 2017; Kassenova 2017; EurasiaNet 2018). The vision of orderly and frictionless corridors for international trade is clearly gaining ground, channelling trade along major routes, favouring larger players, and pushing small-scale shuttle trade even further to the margins.

In summary, I argue that China's presence without encounters stems at least in part from the comparatively late opening of the Sino-Tajik border. Gorno-Badakhshan "missed" the era of small-scale shuttle trade that was so characteristic for cross-border relations in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Siberia. The opening of the Kulma Pass in 2004 coincided with a general trend toward wholesale trade and professionalised logistics, which requires less day-to-day interaction than local, small-scale shuttle-trade – a trend further boosted in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. Today, sealed Chinese trucks just pass through the Pamirs on their way to Dushanbe, and the drivers are predominantly Tajiks from outside Gorno-Badakhshan. The heavy 60-ton trucks take their toll on the old Pamir Highways. The potholes and deformed tarmac left behind are a testimony to the Chinese presence without encounters and the imagined futures that have not yet come to be.

## Prospecting

Another area in which China's ambiguous engagement in the Pamirs is palpable is mining, or rather exploration and prospecting, to which I will now turn.

Mining has a very long history in the Pamirs. The Ruby (Spinel) mine in Kuh-i Lal (Ishkoshim district) goes back to the 9th century, and the sil-

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7 This might change with Kyrgyzstan's accession to the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union and its obligations to guard the borders customs borders of the Union. In summer 2015, informal border trade was still possible both between China and Kyrgyzstan and between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. However, the associated "fees" were quickly rising and there was a considerable amount of uncertainty as to whether these arrangements would continue in the future.

ver mines of Bazar Dara (north of Alichur) date from the 11th century. The vision of the Pamirs as realm of precious minerals has thus long been a crucial factor in imaginaries of the region.

Despite Deputy Minister Umed Davlatzod's critical remarks on those coming to develop Gorno-Badakhshan with Mendeleev's table of periodic elements in one hand, the investment brochures handed out at the 2013 Economic Forum stated that there were more than 200 mineral deposits in the Tajik Pamirs, of which twelve were once actively mined and 54 were mentioned as "perspective mining sites". However, apart from several smaller mining endeavours, including the Ruby mines in Kuh-i-Lal and Kurkut (Murghabsky Rayon), the mining industry in Tajikistan has so far focused on locations outside the Pamirs, despite the obvious potentials of the region. In Gorno-Badakhshan, international mining companies have limited their engagement to preliminary prospecting, following the footsteps of Soviet geological exploration in the region.

During the Forum I shared a hotel room with a Tajik geologist whom I will call Farood. He had spent the past eight years prospecting for potential mining sites, largely on the basis of the reports of preliminary Soviet expeditions. Farood loved the Pamirs and had moved his official registration to Murghab, the main settlement in the Eastern Pamirs. He had founded eight companies to stake his claims in a number of potential mining sites and position himself strategically for the future. "I have all the data!" he told me enthusiastically. "Locations, soil analysis, mineral contents, etc. I just needed to find investment partners".

Farood's was clearly looking west to find such partners – to Europe, America, or Russia. On the way back from Ishkoshim to Khorog, I translated between him and an Indian-American Ismaili businessman – one of the very few real potential investors at the forum. We passed a talc mining site close to the road, which was also listed as a USD 2.5 million investment opportunity in the brochure we received as part of the conference package. Farood had already talked to the Aga Khan Investment Fund and Sberbank Tajikistan. With securities abroad, interest rates for a three-year loan would be around thirteen percent, he said. If one established the company in the Free Economic Zone and bought equipment from China, import taxes would be waved. But one could even start smaller, Farood suggested: with an initial investment of about USD 200,000 to complete the road to the pit, and another USD 250,000-300,000 to lease Chinese machinery and basic equipment for a processing facility in the Zone. Or, alternatively, why not just begin without building any processing facility and simply ship excavated material to Dushanbe for processing?

During and after the forum, Farood was actively looking for investors to kick-start one of his many plans. He had talks with several officials and representatives of the Asian Development Bank. He also met with the

American Ismaili businessman again. Alas, when I went out for tea with him a few days later, he was frustrated. None of the discussions had led to any progress. There was simply no investor in sight for any of his endeavours.

“So, I will have to go and ask the Chinese”, he said stubbornly. He had heard that the governor of Xinjiang had appealed to companies to invest abroad. Moreover, there were rumours of a tacit agreement that only Chinese companies would henceforth get mining concessions in the Pamirs.

Farood showed me some video footage that he had shot on his cell phone near the Chinese border. Close to a new fence the Chinese had erected after Tajikistan had handed over some contested territory, but clearly still well within Tajik territory, the tracks of an excavator and trucks could be seen. Farood reasoned that the Chinese must have prospected up there for a couple of months and probably shipped quite a bit of excavated material back to China for analysis. He was clearly upset about this and had already shown the evidence to the authorities in Dushanbe – so far without any response. The Chinese were clearly present on Tajik soil, but they were difficult to get hold of. Their activities on the ground remained shrouded in obscurity. Most probably, Farood reasoned, they had the backing of the highest levels of the Tajik government in one or the other way.

## Bazar Dara

The case of Bazar Dara, an old silver mine dating back to the 11th century, shall illustrate this mode of obscure engagement and the Chinese role in it.

According to one source, the first Soviet expedition visited Bazar Dara in 1955 (PR Newswire 2004). However, according to the head of the Tajik Main Geology Administration, the first Soviet expedition exploring the silver deposits was carried out in 1979. A group of Soviet geologists spent the summer in Ak Jilga, some eight kilometres up the valley from the historical settlement of Bazar Dara (Ergasheva 2006). Later, between 1985 and the collapse of the Soviet Union, prospecting was intensified. The remains of this phase of exploration, the adit driven into the mountain side and the equipment left behind, can still be seen today. However, the mine never reached production stage. A 1994 report by the “Tajikgeology” State Agency, based on these prospecting activities, mentions exploitable reserves of around 84,000 tons of ore with a silver content of about 2.2kg per ton (Kazakhmys 2007: 142f).

Two agreements in 1995 and 1997 gave a company named Kaizan Business Corporation the right to explore and exploit three mines in Gorno-Badakhshan, including the Ak Jilga silver deposits. Then, in 1997, Harambee Mining Corporation, an agent of Société Alliance Minérales,



bought these rights for USD 85,000 and agreed to spend no less than USD 30,000 during the first year of exploration. The company commissioned Rescan Engineering Ltd. for prospecting and the Tajik Government provided them with all previous reports (PR Newswire 1997). However, I was not able to find any records on actual work carried out by Rescan.

Exploration rights seem to have changed hand once more around 2004, when an US-registered company named Anglotajik Minerals acquired the exploration and mining license for an area of 400 square kilometres (PR Newswire 2004). But again, there are no traces of actual prospecting work carried out. In 2006, the Tajik news website Asia-Plus reported that a company by the name of *S.A. Minerals* was planning to invest USD 5 million in Ak Jilga (Ergasheva 2006). Most probably, this is a transliteration error and refers to CA Minerals, a subsidiary of Kazakhmys Gold, which is itself a branch of Kazakhmys, the major Kazakh copper miner. In 2007, the prospecting rights were officially purchased by *Eurasia Gold Inc.*, which was shortly after again acquired by Kazakhmys (Shelley and Bream 2007).

Kazakhmys – which, after another round of restructuring, is now called KAZ Minerals<sup>8</sup> – mentions Ak Jilga in its annual report 2007 as one of its three major new development projects. The project seemed promising. Exploration started in 2007 and continued in 2008, extending the existing tunnel built by the Soviet expedition in 1979 (Kazakhmys 2007: 08, 27, 143). However, by the end of 2009, Kazakhmys came to the conclusion that the Ak Jilga deposit was not “of sufficient scale to develop further and accordingly is reviewing options for the deposit”. An “impairment charge” of USD 23 million was written-off following the decision not to pursue the project in the foreseeable future (Kazakhmys 2010: 18, 24). In July 2010, Asia-Plus reported that “S.A. Minerals” – or “CA Minerals Kazakhmys Gold” as other sources put it – risked losing its licence because they did not abide by their contractual obligation to spend at least USD 2 million in that year. This threat did apparently not materialise but Kazakhmys tried to sell the mine in the following year. Red October Resources Ltd – a company registered in Perth, Australia – agreed to buy the licences and operation in 2011. In the end, however, Red October did not follow through with the acquisition. A settlement was reached by which Red October paid Kazakhmys – or, more precisely, its subsidiary Kytco BV, a company registered in Amsterdam, which officially owned the mine – a fee of USD 100,000 for breaching the agreement (Red October Resources Limited 2011). Thus, the mine remained with Kazakhmys and exploration continued on a small scale with about twenty employees working in Ak Jilga.

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8 See the KAZ Minerals website at <https://www.kazminerals.com/>.



Under the management of Kazakhmys, a camp was built in Ak Jilga. It consisted of a hangar where the equipment is kept, dormitories and a canteen for the workers, a coal-fired *banya*, and a little barrel-shaped cabin on blade springs in which the local Pamiri crew stays. Over the winter, the mine is completely cut off from the outside world and no work is carried out. One employee with his family guards camp and equipment. The pass that leads from Alichur and the Pamir Highway to the camp gets much snow; the wind piles it up to five or six metres.

In 2015, Kazakhmys finally found a buyer. A Chinese company agreed to purchase the Ak Jilga operations and paid the first instalment. During my stay in August 2015, work had stalled and the future of the mine was up in the air. The remaining Pamiri staff – a foreman, a couple of workers, and a driver – were unsure whether the Chinese would really take over the mine, and whether they would be able to keep their jobs. A few weeks prior to my visit, a first Chinese delegation had come up to Bazar Dara to take stock of the equipment and inspect the tunnels and the mining camp's infrastructure. The Pamiri staff remembered their visit with a fair amount of humour. Communication was difficult as the delegation's translator spoke no Tajik and only basic Russian. The Pamiri, completely unaccustomed to dealing with Chinese but equipped with a healthy amount of prejudice, were not sure what to expect and what was expected from them. How to make them feel comfortable? And what to cook for them?

The camp's foreman, a Pamiri from Khorog, went to meet the Chinese delegation on the Kulma Pass. On the way down from the pass, the leader of the mission started eating a Chinese noodle soup which he had brought along. "Not with a fork, but with these sticks!" the foreman remembered. This was one of the first stories he told me, and he made no secret of his prejudice against the Chinese. They were loud and rude and not *kulturni*, he said. And they had no manners and no respect for their surroundings. Surely, they would not take care of the camp and destroy everything they had spent so much effort to build and maintain. There was no denying that the foreman and his crew would much rather work with some European, Russian, or Kazakh company. "This is where we belong, this is where all the cultural similarities lie", the foreman stressed.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, however, the staff also had much respect for China's economic development and Chinese work ethics. Furthermore, they agreed that a Chinese company was in a much better position to develop the mine than their Kazakh predecessors. The border was near, and the new road over the Kulma pass provides quick access to the Karakoram Highway and Kashgar, mitigating the problem of transport that had been a major issue in the profit calculations of Kazakhmys. The Chinese came

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9 See Mostowlansky (2015) and Reeves (2014: 110ff) for similar observations.

with plans to build a new and shorter road to Alichur, the closest settlement on the Pamir Highway. And if they managed to obtain electricity from Pamir Energy's hydropower station in Khorog, a processing plant could be set up in Alichur, which would provide jobs and radically better the current predicament of the settlement. The Chinese arrived with a vision of future development on which the former owners of the mine had long given up.



*Fig. 3: The winter quarters at Bazar Dara. Photo by the author, 2015.*

After their site visit, the foreman drove the Chinese delegation to Dushanbe. On the way, they were caught in the devastating landslide that blocked the Pamir Highway near Barsem. The foreman led his Chinese guests up a steep mountain slope to circumvent the lake that was building up in the valley. He helped them cross the river using a rope, carrying the small and slender Chinese on his back. At one point, when standing at the top of a ridge, his guests started taking pictures and he feared that they would be blown away by the wind of the Pamirs.

The camp (see fig. 3) – and the future of the Pamiri that were still working there – were in limbo. Using old stocks of diesel, the foreman and his crew cleared the road to Bazar Dara that had also been washed away during the heavy rains in the summer of 2015. The winter would come in a couple of months and supplies needed to be organised. Kazakhmys had always looked out for them in the best way possible, the staff assured. There was always plenty of coal, fuel, and food. The only provisions the Chinese

delegation visiting the camp had left behind were a box of instant noodles and tinned fish in fermented soy bean paste, which nobody developed a liking for. Against the background of all this, the staff at Bazar Dara focussed on the concrete challenges at hand. Provisions for the winter were to be acquired and the satellite TV, bringing entertainment and world news to the little cabin on leaf springs during the winter, needed to be repaired. Hopefully, the Chinese would be able to help at least with that.<sup>10</sup>

Coming back a year later, the Pamiri foreman had left and been replaced by a Chinese who had worked in a mine in Tibet before. A few dozen Chinese workers and about 30 locals from Alichur were building a processing facility and a tailing pond right next to the river. In Alichur, the settlement on the Pamir Highway about three hours from the mine, I met a group of Chinese geologists working together with a group of Tajik geology students, mapping the Eastern Pamirs. For a moment, I felt that, finally, the pending Chinese futures were taking shape.

Visiting the mine again in August 2017, the processing facility was completed, three more adits were under construction, and a road further up the mountain slope was being built. However, things were back to a state of limbo. Most Chinese workers had left, and the foreman was in Dushanbe sorting out a problem with the concession. Apparently, the mining license only covered exploration and scaling up operations to preliminary production turned out to be more complicated than expected. Again, the future seemed pending, there was not much to do in the camp, and the waiting for an uncertain future had again engulfed the camp.

I met an elderly Pamiri who had worked in the mine as a foreman during the phase of Soviet exploration in the late 1980s. He had a hearing problem from the years of working in mines, but he clearly enjoyed being back in Ak Jilga. His name was Millionaire, he told me with a smile, adding, as he must have done a million times, “but no money” – a name and a biography reflecting, with charming irony, the promise of future wealth inherent in mining in the Pamirs that always seems around the corner but has never quite come true.

The encounters in Bazar Dara – against the backdrop of a Chinese presence that is usually devoid of encounters – and the limbo in which the staff at Bazar Dara still find themselves are in many ways characteristic for the entire situation. Mining is often shrouded in a cloud of secretive dealings, baroque holding structures, opaque responsibilities, and uncertain futures. In this sense, prospecting is emblematic for the mode of engagement in which mining companies approach a promising reserve.

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<sup>10</sup> In October 2015, I heard that “the Chinese” indeed came back; what this means for the future, however, remains to be seen.

Symptomatically, I was never able to find out the name of the Chinese company or conglomerate that took over Bazar Dara. The Pamiri staff in the camp didn't know, and the Chinese staff were not willing or able to clarify the situation. No logos or signboards adorned the facilities, and the operations in Ak Jilga have not gained any media attention.

This wilful opaqueness is typical for Chinese mining exploration in the Pamirs. In 2014, I witnessed a small team of another Chinese company building a road to a potential mining site near Madian, about 30km from Murghab. For a year, they stayed with a family in a small village and went to work every day. Then, they left. Asking around if they planned to come back and whether the company still wanted to develop the mine, nobody had an answer. Next to the house where they stayed, there were several signboards giving credit to NGOs and development organizations for some smaller projects they had carried out in the valley. By contrast, there were no signboards referring to the Chinese mining project, nor were there any community information events informing the local population about the state of affairs. One day, they were just gone.

Prospecting as a mode of engagement, and sometimes – like in Madian – even prospective prospecting, is a hallmark not just of Chinese mining endeavours but the Chinese presence in the Tajik Pamirs in general. The future conjured up remains pending – sometimes it seems to be just around the corner, sometimes it feels suspended, maybe for good, and maybe just for the time being.

## Conclusions: Presence without Encounters and Pending Futures

In summary, I argue that the Civil War of the 1990, the comparatively late opening of the Kumla Pass, and the heightened political tensions in Xinjiang since 2009 led to a situation of uncertainty and ambivalence in which the Chinese presence has not been one of day-to-day interactions as elsewhere in Tajikistan, Central Asia and, in fact, most areas along the 22,000 km of Chinese land borders. The resulting limbo in which the Tajik Pamirs find themselves reinforces a widespread nostalgia for Soviet times when the border was sealed, the role, position, and orientation of the region were clear, and the future seemed more or less set.

The Chinese presence that has grown over the past decades – often more imaginary and rhetorical than actual – falls in an era of securitization and new geopolitical agendas, many of them related to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. In this context, grand and opaque Chinese investments brokered in Dushanbe are welcome while small-scale cross-border business is impeded by a strictly enforced border regime. The Chinese presence is thus one without frequent actual encounters on the ground.



This combination of background presence and non-encounters are symptomatic; it increases the feeling of uncertainty, and when actual encounters do indeed take place they are undergirded by asymmetry and opacity. This, in turn, intensifies the feeling that the Chinese futures, while ultimately inevitable, are suspended or still pending.

This leads to a larger question at stake, namely what we mean when we talk about the Chinese presence in the countries and regions of the former Soviet Union and, indeed, Chinese presences around the globe.

The phenomenon of a presence without – or with limited – encounters is, of course, not unique to the Pamirs. Chinese investments abroad, for example in mining or infrastructure development, usually come as packages of loans and Chinese state-owned enterprises implementing the project at stake (see, for example, Kynge 2018). While these enterprises often do hire local unskilled workers, they typically bring in a skilled Chinese workforce. As a result, little Chinese enclaves emerge. In these distinctly Chinese enclaves, day-to-day engagement with the surrounding social contexts remain asymmetric and limited. I have witnessed this, for example, in a Chinese-run casino town in northern Laos and a road construction projects in northern Nepal. However, in most contexts, such large Chinese investment projects are also accompanied by a myriad of Chinese migrant entrepreneurs setting up businesses and engaging with the social world around them. As this has so far not happened in the Pamirs, the case highlights the gaps and tensions between presence and encounter particularly well.

In a certain sense, the Pamirian phenomenon of a Chinese presence without encounters is reminiscent of the discursive presence and physical absence of refugees in a rural village somewhere in Europe – much discussed over a beer in the pub, politically highly relevant, yet not necessarily related to actual encounters with real refugees on the street. This is not to say, however, that the Chinese presence in the Tajik Pamirs is just a spectre, a chimera conjured up by fearful minds. The presence is real beyond doubt; it cannot be ignored. Compared to the European village with next to no refugees but ample rumours and anxieties, the stakes and power relations in the case at hand are radically different. On the one hand, the Chinese presence, despite its opacity, remains tied to local dreams of a better life; on the other hand, it is enmeshed in grand development schemes in which local residents fear they may not be included.<sup>11</sup>

Hence, the Chinese presence goes far beyond the question of actual encounters. In a context like the one at hand, it can even be amplified by the absence of encounters and the opacity of the few that actually

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<sup>11</sup> See Hofman (2016) for a somewhat similar dynamic in Chinese farm practices in Tajikistan.



take place. Prospecting – or prospective prospecting – as a mode of (non) engagement fits this picture very well.

This mode of presence without encounters is not just a result of Sinophobia and scepticism but an outcome of a very real contemporary historical conjuncture and a particular form of interaction: high-level rather than daily encounters, prospecting rather than production, grand schemes involving big capital investments rather than day-to-day exchange. Naturally, rumours abound and the Chinese presence becomes even more shrouded in ambiguities and opaqueness; it is, at once, present in public debate but hidden from public political engagement. In this context, presence without encounters and pending futures keep reinforcing each other.

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