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Contested Views of Contested Territories: How Tajik Society Views the Tajik-Chinese Border Settlement

Assel Bitabarova*

Abstract

This article examines the Tajik-Chinese border settlement and Tajik debates over it, both of which have yet to be extensively examined by either domestic or foreign scholarship. The long-standing territorial dispute between China and Tajikistan in the remote Pamir Mountains finally came to an end in January of 2011 with the ratification of the Tajik-Chinese Border Demarcation Protocol. Although the peaceful border settlement has laid the foundations for friendship between the two neighbours, Tajik attitudes varied significantly among different interest groups, ranging from overt opposition to overt support of the demarcation protocol.

Introduction

In January 2011, the border settlement issue with China hit the headlines in the Tajik media. The reason was the ratification of the Tajik-Chinese border settlement protocol by the Tajik Parliament, which put an end to a century-old border dispute in the remote Pamir Mountains. This enduring boundary dispute had long been considered as one of the most knotty to settle among the territorial disputes along the former Russo-Chinese border (the border between Tsarist Russia and the Qing Empire, then the Sino-Soviet boundary) for the following reasons. First, its geographic features and geostrategic location: it was geographically inaccessible – these Tajik-Chinese contested territories (*spornye territorii*) were located in the high altitude region of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast' (hereafter GBAO) – as well as strategically important, as the Pamir plateau was the southernmost point to which Russian influence extended, serving as its southern frontier. Second, these disputed territories covered a vast area of over twenty-thousand square kilometers located within territory de-facto controlled by Tajikistan.

Even though the above-mentioned factors, along with the outbreak of the Tajik Civil War in the 1990s, had hindered the resolution of the border dispute, many observers agree that, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the Pamir dispute was settled at breakneck speed. Needless to say, territorial disputes are consistently one of the most sensitive issues in interstate relations due to their direct connection to discourses of state-building, notions of identity and nationalism, as well as

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considerations of a state's socio-economic or environmental matters, amongst other factors. As history has shown, contesting claims over territories have not only amplified insecurity, but have often led to military conflict. In a nutshell, producing clear and uncontested state borders has been crucial in different parts of the world, despite the diversity of contexts in which borders have been drawn and redrawn.[1] In the context of today's Central Asia, where nation-building in newly independent states is given priority over other concerns, and state borders in general and contested spaces in particular serve as sources of interstate tension and conflict,[2] defining the border between Tajikistan and China is of crucial importance to both Tajikistan's national and regional security and stability in Central Asia. Given this context, the following questions have to be raised: (1) What was (were) the reason(-s) behind such a speedy resolution to the Pamir dispute? (2) What were the key drivers of Dushanbe's desire to settle the territorial dispute with China? (3) How was Tajik-Chinese delimitation and demarcation carried out? And finally, (4) what were the results?

These questions are only partially answered by the existing literature, as there has been little attention paid to the Tajik-Chinese border settlement. On the contrary, the origin of the Pamir dispute has drawn a greater degree of attention, albeit further investigation is still needed to fully understand this complex issue.[3] Insufficient attention to the Tajik-Chinese territorial delineation after the breakup of the Soviet Union can be explained primarily by its recentness, combined with the above-mentioned sensitivity of matters related to state borders which limits access to and disclosure of relevant information. There have been several studies that have considered the Sino-Tajik border settlement

[1] In the field of international relations, realist scholars or practitioners (such as politicians) predominantly regard borders as a marker of state sovereignty, which closely links borders to the security of states.

[2] See, for instance, the most recent news reports: Bruce Pannier, "Clash Reported along Kyrgyz-Uzbek Border," *RFE/RL,* January 7, 2013. Accessed August 20, 2015: http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyzstan_uzbekistan_conflict_soh/24816927.html; Catherine Putz, "Kazakh Fisherman Shot by Uzbek Border Guards," *The Diplomat*, July 2, 2015. Accessed August 20, 2015: http://thediplomat.com/2015/07/kazakh-fisherman-shot-by-uzbek-border-guards/; Catherine Putz, "Kyrgyz and Tajiks Clash along Disputed Border," *The Diplomat*, August 4, 2015. Accessed August 20, 2015: http://thediplomat.com/2015/08/kyrgyz-and-tajiks-clash-along-disputed-border/; Mark Vinson, "Border Clashes with Kyrgyzstan Threaten Tajikistan's Regional Integration," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 11: 94 (2014). Accessed August 20, 2015: http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42393&no_cache=1#.ViC31vn5eM8

[3] See, for instance, John W. Garver, "The Sino-Soviet Territorial Dispute in the Pamir Mountains Region," *The China Quarterly* 85 (1981): 107–118; Liu Cunkuan, "Zhong-su Pami'er Zhengyi de Lishi Beijing" [Historical Background of the Sino-Soviet Dispute over the Pamirs], *Shehui Kexue Zhanxian* [*Social Sciences Front*] 3 (1982): 164–170; Luke T. Chang, *China's Boundary Treaties and Frontier Disputes* (New York: Oceana Publications, 1982); Lü Yiran, *Zhongguo Jindai Bianjie Shi* (*Shang/Xia Juan*) [*The History of China's Borders in Modern Era (2 vol.)*] (Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House, 2007); Iskandarov B. I., *Istoriia Pamira* (Khorog: Meros, 1995): 90–170; Alexei V. Postnikov, *Stanovelnie rubezhei Rossii v Tsentral'noi i Srednei Azii (18-19 vv.) [The Formation of the Russian Boundaries in Central and Middle Asia (18-19th Centuries)]* (Moscow, 2007); Alexei V. Postnikov, *Skhvatka na "Kryshe Mira": politiki, razvedchiki i geografy za Pamir v 19 veke: monografiia v dokumentakh* [*Battle on "the Roof of the World": Politicians, Secret Agents and Geographers for the Pamirs in the 19th Century: Monograph in Documents*] (Moscow: Pamiatniki istoricheskoi mysli, 2001); Ann Sheehy, "Russia and China in the Pamirs: 18th and 19th Centuries," *Central Asian Review* 1 (1968): 4–14; Wang Enchun "Shixi Pami'er Wenti de Youlai" [The Analysis of the Origins of the Pamir Question], *Changji Xueyuan Xuebao* 1 (2008): 39–41.

within a broader research framework focusing either on China's borders or border delimitation between former Soviet countries and China. For instance, Iwashita, by examining the multilateral and bilateral border negotiations between the four former Soviet states and China, emphasizes that the "fifty-fifty" formula led to a "win-win" solution – that is, reaching mutually acceptable agreement by making mutual concessions – and serves as a vivid example of Eurasian cooperation that can be used to solve territorial issues in other parts of the world.[4] While Fravel also points to the cooperative resolution of the Sino-Central Asian border disputes, his analysis focuses on the key considerations behind Beijing's decision to make concessions over its territorial claims in Central Asia. According to him, China's preoccupation with internal stability in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (hereafter XUAR), its western province that borders the Central Asian states, was the decisive force in promptly defining borders with its western neighbours.[5] On the other hand, Gleason, in his brief overview of the Sino-Tajik border settlement, says that Tajikistan's border disputes with China "have necessarily been framed in the context" of Dushanbe's relations with Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Iran, Tajikistan's immediate neighbors that constitute major vectors of its foreign policy.[6] Indeed, we should not forget about the impact that the regional situation in the immediate neighborhood of Tajikistan has on the decision-making process in Dushanbe. In regard to the Tajik-Chinese border delimitation process and its results, Tajik scholar Kurbonova's work provides a more detailed account as she was allowed access to official documents in the archives of the Tajik Ministry of Foreign Affairs.[7] Nevertheless, the exact location of the new borderline between the two countries, specifically, the location of the territories transferred to China, still remain unclear, since none of the existing studies provides maps that depict the new Tajik-Chinese boundary.[8]

Another important question that remains under-examined is "What were the attitudes toward the border settlement with China in Tajik society?" In her analysis on Tajik perceptions of the Chinese presence in Tajikistan, Olimova touched upon the attitudes towards the land transfers to China, saying "the general public tends to be indifferent," while "some herdsmen [in the GBAO] protested against the transfer due to loss of their pastures after the demarcation of the border and

[4] Akihiro Iwashita, "A New Era of Eurasian Cooperation: Beyond the Sino-Soviet Border Disputes," in *Security Challenges in the Post-Soviet Space: European and Asian Perspectives*, ed. Adam Eberhardt and Akihiro Iwashita (Warsaw-Sapporo: Polish Institute of International Affairs and Slavic Research Center, 2007): 147–164; Akihiro Iwashita, "Kokkyo Mondai" [The Border Issue], in *Chuo Ajia no Yukue: Bei-Ro-Chu no tsunahiki* [*Central Asia at the Crossroads: Tug-of-war between US, Russia and China*], ed. Hiroshi Kimura and Akira Ishii (Tokyo, 2003): 100–103.

[5] Fravel M. Taylor, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[6] Gregory Gleason, "Tajikistan-China Border Normalization," in *Beijing's Power and China's Borders: Twenty neighbors in Asia*, ed. Bruce A. Elleman et al. (New York: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 2013): 288.

[7] Z. M. Kurbonova, "Politicheskie aspekty protsessa uregulirovaniia gosudarstvennoi granitsy mezhdu Tadjikistanom i Kitaem" [Political Aspects of the Border Settlement Process between Tajikistan and China] (Diss. of the candidate of Political sciences, Moscow, 2009).

[8] The most likely reason for this is that both governmental and commercial map publishers in Tajikistan and China have not been provided with the data, or, probably, permission to publish the latest version of such maps.

geologists expressed concern that the Rangkul mines[9] were being given to China."[10] It appears, however, that Tajik (and Chinese) authorities were cautious about making the border delineation results open to the public before the border demarcation protocol was signed in April 2010. The ratification of this protocol by the Tajik Parliament in January of the following year triggered heated debates in the country – specifically, some opposition leaders and some scholars have expressed their objections against these territorial transfers. In addition, a series of interviews with Tajik scholars conducted by the author in Dushanbe in February-March of 2011 showed that they were not completely aware of the details of the border settlement with China.

These pioneering studies undertaken by domestic and foreign scholars provide the foundation for the present study. Nevertheless, the existing research remains largely fragmentary. Therefore, the purpose of the current study is twofold: (1) to bring coherence to a fragmented body of knowledge on the Pamir dispute and its settlement question by providing a more thorough account of border delineation between Tajikistan and China; and (2) to further develop the existing body of knowledge by presenting an examination of Tajik debates over this border settlement, which, in turn, will make an empirical contribution to the emerging literature on border studies in Central Asia.[11] This article is based on a critical analysis of published materials (i.e., scholarly literature and media coverage) and data obtained via interviews during the author's field research in Dushanbe and the GBAO in February – March of 2011.

In the article, I use the terms "border," "boundary" and "frontier" interchangeably to avoid repetition of the same word. Also, I use a word "Tajik" loosely, referring to a state rather than an ethnic group.

The article is organized as follows: the first section documents the origins of the Pamir dispute by exploring border delineation between the Russian and Qing empires in Central Asia that took place in the second half of the nineteenth century. The second section examines the recent Tajik-Chinese border settlement, at both multilateral and bilateral levels. The third section, based on data obtained through in-depth interviews with Tajik scholars and residents of the border village of Rangkul, addresses the reactions/attitudes of Tajik society toward Tajikistan's border settlement with China.

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[9] In the Murghab district of the GBAO (in the Eastern Pamirs), there are gold and salt mines in the surroundings of the Rangkul Lake, which is north-east of the district center Murghab.

[10] Olimova Saodat, "The Multifaceted Chinese Presence in Tajikistan," *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 7: 1 (2008): 64.

[11] See, for example, social anthropologist Madeleine Reeves's monograph considering contested space at the southern edge of Fergana Valley based on an extensive field research: Madeleine Reeves, *Border Work: Spatial Lives of the State in Rural Central Asia* (Cornell University Press, 2014). Another example is the thought-provoking work of Berndt Kuzmits, which is based on empirical research along the state border between Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. This work examines important questions of how borders function in post-Soviet Central Asia or how they impact the attitudes of the people living in the borderlands and so on: Berndt Kuzmits, *Borders and Orders in Central Asia: Transactions and Attitudes between Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan* (Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2013).

The Pamir Question: The Origins of the Dispute

Chinese claims over lands in the Eastern Pamirs,[12] territories located under the de-facto control of Tajikistan within the GBAO, constituted the core of the Tajik-Chinese territorial dispute. The origins of the Pamir dispute could be traced back to the second half of the nineteenth century, when the Russian and Qing empires first delineated their common borderline by signing a number of treaties. The Additional Treaty of Peking of 1860 was a starting point in the border delineation process that defined the borderline from Mongolian territory in the north to the Kokand lands in the south. The next step in delineating the boundary was the signing of the 1864 Protocol of Chuguchak (or the Protocol of Tacheng in Chinese sources), which attempted to clarify the borderline from the Altai Mountains in the north to the Tian Shan Mountains in the south (present-day Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan territory).[13] Whereas this northern section of the Sino-Central Asian boundary was further demarcated according to Russo-Chinese sub-treaties signed in 1869–1870, the southern section was defined separately following field surveys in sub-treaties of the 1881 Treaty of St. Petersburg.[14]

Here, we should not forget that the Russo-Qing border delimitation in the southern section was affected to a large extent by the Russo-British imperial rivalry; the area of the Pamir Mountains became a playground for the so-called Great Game where the Russian and British empires met to define the boundaries of their respective spheres of influence.[15] In 1872–1873, Russia and Britain reached an agreement that established the Panj River as the dividing line with its easternmost point at Zorkul Lake – that is, the two empires divided lands that had not belonged to them at the time. As many scholars have pointed out, the British Empire was keen on seeing China and Afghanistan assert control over the southern and eastern parts of the Pamirs to preclude Russia's southern advance.[16] With Russia aware of this, in June 1883, Russian commissar General Medinskii arrived at the southern slope of the Tianshan to jointly conduct field surveys with his Chinese counterpart. As a result, in the following year, the second Kashgar treaty (in Russian sources, commonly referred to as the "Novomargelanskii protocol")[17] was signed, which defined the southernmost section of the Russo-Chinese boundary. According to the preamble to this demarcation protocol, its main purpose

[12] This region refers to the eastern part of the Pamirs, which is largely congruent with the area of today's Murghab district of the GBAO.

[13] Lee Tien Ming, ed., *Shiluo de Jiangyu: Qingji xibei bianjie tiaoyue yu tu tezhan* [*The Lost Frontier. Treaty Maps that Changed Qing's Northwestern Boundaries*] (National Palace Museum, 2010), 1. Despite its provocative title with the strong sentiment of "unequal treaties," this book, published in Taiwan, provides a consistent description on the Russo-Chinese delimitation and demarcation of the boundary in Central Asia through treaties and maps, some of which had been sealed as "strictly confidential" until 2001.

[14] Sarah C. M. Paine, *Imperial Rivals: China, Russia and their Disputed Frontier* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996): 132–145.

[15] The latest and perhaps most thorough account of the results of geographic and cartographic field surveys undertaken by the Russian and British empires in the second half of 19th century in the Pamirs as well as of the origins of the Pamir dispute between Russia (later Tajikistan) and China is given by Russian historian of science Alexei Postnikov in his: *Skhvatka na "Kryshe Mira."*

[16] Garver, "Sino-Soviet," 113; Postnikov, *Shvatka na "Kryshe Mira,"* 159–160.

[17] The auxiliary treaty of the 1881 Treaty of St. Petersburg.

was to define the boundary between Russia's Semirech'e and Ferghana *oblasts* with China's Kashgar region between Tuiun Souiok and Uzbel. The protocol stipulated:

> […] It was decided: South from the valley Irkeshtam, to establish the border along the river Mal'tabar, the left bank of which shall belong to Russia and right to China; further, from the sources of this river the borderline goes to the south following the mountain range up to the peak Mal'tabar, from which it goes in the same direction following the spur of the range towards the pass Uch Bel [Uchbel], through the river Markhansa [Markansu], along the main range, which is located to the East of the lake Karakuli [Karakol'], over the pass Kal'ta-Davon and Kar-Art (most of the year covered by snow) located in that range, through the inaccessible pass Karazak, up to the pass Uz Bel [Uzbel], which is also called Kozsyl'-Dzhiek (most of the year covered by snow), and on which also is ended the mutual border of both countries, as the Russia[n] border diverges to the south-west and the Chinese border goes to the south. All the land with the rivers flowing there, which is located to the west from this borderline, belongs to the Russian Empire, and the land with all rivers, which is located to the east of this borderline, belongs to the Chinese Kingdom.[18]

Thus, the agreement seemed to imply that the borderline followed the natural watershed between the two countries. However, as shown above, the protocol stipulates that "the boundary of the two countries terminates at this [Uzbel] Mountain"[19] and further states that: "The Russian boundary turns to the south-west. The Chinese borderline runs straight south."[20] In other words, the protocol created a vast stretch of "no-man's-land" in the Eastern Pamirs, and the Sino-Russian (Sino-Tajik) border in this area remained undefined on Chinese maps. Several possible explanations for such obscurity of the formulation in the document have been offered. First, the topographic data may have not been sufficiently accurate. By the same token, the borderline north of the Uzbel Pass depicted in the protocol may have contained some inaccuracies, too. For instance, while the protocol states "[…] from the sources of this river [Mal'tabar] the borderline goes to the south following the mountain range up to the peak Mal'tabar […]," the Russian map to the protocol, however, did not depict the mountain range between the Mal'tabar River and the peak Mal'tabar.[21] Second, Russia may have lacked either awareness of the strategic role of the Pamirs or solid arguments against China's territorial claims.[22]

Nevertheless, at that time, this undefined borderline became a de-facto boundary. In 1894, Russia and China exchanged notes establishing the Sarykol Range as the de-facto border between them. However, Peking made explicit reservations to this note, stating that "…[the] Chinese government does not at all mean to abandon the rights China possesses over the territories of the

[18] Postnikov, *Skhvatka na "Kryshe Mira,"* 161.
[19] Garver, "Sino-Soviet," 111.
[20] Lü, *Zhongguo jindai* (vol. 1): 454.
[21] Postnikov, *Skhvatka na "Kryshe Mira,"* 162.
[22] Garver, "Sino-Soviet," 111–112; Postnikov, *Shvatka na "Kryshe Mira,"* 161–162.

Pamirs…"[23] Moreover, these notes were only a "provisional agreement," which would not stop further border negotiations. The Russo-British agreement over the Pamir boundary in 1895–1896 (China was excluded from taking part in border negotiations), with the creation of the Wakhan corridor as its main outcome, however, served Russia's interest in terms of recognizing its possession rights over the territories on the right bank of the Panj River. Further border talks on the Pamir section during the Soviet era between Moscow and Beijing could not bear fruit and the vast stretch in the Pamirs remained in dispute until the recent border settlement between Tajikistan and China. In addition, it should be noted that maps published in China during the Soviet era suggest us that Chinese claims in the Pamirs region differed over time.As shown in figure 1, there were (at least) two clear differing claims: 1) a claim line formulated on the basis of the Novomargelanskii protocol which runs from Uzbel Pass toward the south-west; 2) an area to the east of a line running straight south from Uzbel Pass (roughly 20,000 square kilometres).

The Tajik-Chinese Border Settlement

Towards the Establishment of a Multilateral Framework

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the four former Soviet republics that border China – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan – inherited their respective sections along the former Sino-Soviet boundary. Although Sino-Soviet border talks in the second half of the 1980s put the Pamir dispute, or, more precisely, the western sector along the Xinjiang frontier on the back burner by giving priority to the eastern sector (of the Sino-Soviet border)[24] of the settlement, they laid the foundation for the post-Soviet border settlement between the newly independent nations of Central Asia and China. That is, these bilateral Sino-Soviet talks paved the way for the establishment of the framework "joint delegation plus China (Four plus One)" to continue border negotiations with the joint delegation of the four former Soviet states on one side and with China on the other side in 1992.[25] In particular, Sino-Soviet border talks during the Gorbachev era were of great importance due to the following interrelated reasons. First, the Central Asian representatives were allowed to take part in these talks, which in fact was their first experience with border negotiations. Second, the Central Asian representatives recognized the existing agreements made during the previous rounds of border negotiations – specifically, existence of contested territories – between Moscow and Beijing (without

[23] Garver "Sino-Soviet," 115–116.

[24] The western sector stretched from Mongolia across the steppes and the Tianshan and Pamir Mountains to the Wakhan corridor, while the eastern sector stretched from Mongolia eastward to the Pacific. After the Sino-Soviet border negotiations were restored in 1987, a new round of border talks proved fruitful, as the two parties came to an agreement on the eastern sector of their common frontier and signed a border treaty when Chinese leader Jiang Zemin visited Moscow in May 1991.

[25] Interestingly, this framework, which was initially established to resolve the border disputes between the former Soviet countries and China, later developed into a new regional organization, what is now known as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

participation of the representatives from the Central Asian republics).[26] Against this background, one could conclude that the establishment of the "Four plus One" was a resumption of Sino-Soviet border negotiations.

It is neither clear whether Beijing was in favour of the "Four plus One" framework, nor is it clear whether the former Soviet republics in Central Asia favoured it. Some scholars argue that Beijing was concerned whether or not the newly independent Central Asian nations would recognize the existence of the territorial disputes with China by pleading with their colonial past, and, hence, bringing the border settlement to an utter standstill. Meanwhile, others claim that Beijing preferred to have separate border talks with its small Central Asian neighbours, since a joint delegation under Russian leadership could put greater pressure on China.[27] Both of these viewpoints could be relevant at different times, as attitudes are subject to changing perceptions of facts. The former view seems plausible due to security concerns. The 1969 military clashes in the Sino-Soviet border area were still fresh in many people's memory. China was well aware that the absence of clearly defined borders with Central Asia could undermine stability and good-neighbourly relations in the region. As has been mentioned, Fravel underlines the decisive role of China's concerns with regard to stability and security in the XUAR behind Beijing's keenness to settle border dispute quickly with its northwestern neighbours. In view of that, the emergence of new states with Turkic-speaking populations in Central Asia served to reinforce Uighur nationalism; therefore, China was undoubtedly concerned about the rise of separatist sentiments within Xinjiang and was eager to settle the territorial disputes along Xinjiang's boundary. In an interview, Tajik expert Iskandar Asadullaev recalled a conversation with former Chinese Ambassador to Tajikistan Wu Hongbin on this matter.[28] According to Wu Hongbin, Jiang Zemin was concerned that if his successors were ambitious young leaders, there might have been delays in the dispute resolution. As a result, the Chinese leader was in a hurry to create a basis for achieving a quick solution to the border issue.

On the other hand, the latter viewpoint of separate border talks also seems valid if one takes into consideration the fact that Beijing prefers to deal with such issues bilaterally rather than through multilateral channels. Central Asian experts pointed out that the Chinese side was initially reluctant to begin border talks within a multilateral framework, favoring separate negotiations, and only after extensive diplomatic efforts did China finally agree to conduct negotiations with the joint delegation.[29] Another example is that Beijing has been unwilling to negotiate trans-boundary river issues with its former Soviet counterparts at the multilateral level.[30]

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[26] Z. A. Amanzholova et al., *Pravda o gosudarstvennoi granitse Respubliki Kazakhstan [The Truth about State Borders of the Republic of Kazakhstan]* (Almaty: Zhibek Zholy, 2006): 24–71.

[27] For instance, in the interviews with Chinese experts conducted by the author of this article, both of these opinions were expressed.

[28] Author's interview, February 2011. I. Asadullaev served as a director of the Centre for Strategic Research under the President of Tajikistan in 1998-2001.

[29] Amanzholova et al., *Pravda o Gosudarstvennoi*, 46; Nurgul Kerimbekova and Vladimir Galitskiy, "On the State Border between Kyrgyzstan and China," *The Central Asia and the Caucasus* 5 (2002). Accessed March 27, 2013: http://www.ca-c.org/journal/2002/journal_eng/cac-05/14.kereng.shtml

[30] For instance, the Irtysh river originates in the Chinese Altai mountains and flows through northeast

Similar to the border negotiations of the late 1980s, all the participants of the "Four plus One" talks confirmed that the nineteenth-century border treaties between Russia and China would serve as the legal basis – that is, the former Soviet states recognized the existence of the territorial issues with China.[31] In addition, the joint delegation framework provided essential technical assistance to the Central Asian states. As Kazakh experts have noted: "First, it was necessary to use the many years of experience [*mnogoletnii opyt*] possessed by Russian experts. Second, all the archival documentary and topographical materials that were necessary for border talks were primarily located in Moscow."[32] That is, the knowledge the Central Asian republics acquired during these talks proved to be valuable in future negotiations with their eastern neighbour at a bilateral level. After the parties had identified their respective disputed areas within the "Four plus One" forum, they continued to hold negotiations with China through bilateral consultations, and their results were reflected in separate borders agreements.

The Tajik-Chinese Border Settlement: From Multilateral to Bilateral Border Negotiations

The Tajik-Chinese border dispute was the most difficult to settle along the Central Asian-Chinese borderline. By signing the Joint Declaration on the main principles of relationship between the two countries in March 1993, Tajikistan and China confirmed that (Article 8): "They will continue to carry out consultations concerning unresolved border issues based on the previous agreements on the present boundary between the two countries, universally recognized norms in international law, through equal-footing consultations, mutual understanding and mutual concessions in order to find mutually acceptable, fair and rational solutions."[33] Furthermore, the "Four plus One" negotiations confirmed the existence of three disputed areas in the Pamirs. The largest disputed area was located in the Great Pamirs region and comprised approximately 28,000 square kilometres. The other two disputed areas – the Markansu River section and the Karazak Pass section – comprised more than 400 square kilometres.[34] The two smaller disputes were settled with the signing of a Tajik-Chinese border agreement in August 1999. The Markasu River section was divided between

Kazakhstan and then Russia to join the Ob' River. However, China prefers to discuss water issue with Astana and Moscow separately.

[31] It was important due to the fact that all these contested lands were located within territories under de-facto control of the former Soviet republics.

[32] Amanzholova et al., *Pravda o gosudarstvennoi*, 47.

[33] Sovmestnaia Deklaratsiia ob osnovnykh printsipakh vzaimootnoshenii mezhdu Kitaiskoi Narodnoi Respublikoi i Respublikoi Tadzhikistan [Joint Declaration on Main Principles of Relationship between the Republic of Tajikistan and People's Republic of China], see in: Rashid Alimov, *Tadzhikistan i Kitai: Kursom strategicheskogo partnerstva. Mezhdunarodno-politicheskie, ekonomicheskie i gumanitarnye izmereniia sotrudnichestva* [*Tajikistan and China: Toward Strategic Partnership. International Political, Economic and Humanitarian Dimension of Cooperation*] (Moscow: 2014): 317–319.

[34] The data sources differ on the exact size of these disputed areas. According to Kurbonova, the two disputed areas comprised 412 square kilometers: the Markansu River section with a total area of 226 square kilometres and the Karazak Pass section with a total area of 186 square kilometres; while in Fravel's work they cover 430 square kilometers. See: Kurbonova, "Politicheskie Aspekty," 81; Fravel, *Strong Borders,* 165.



Figure 1: Map of the Territories Handed over to China (author's design)

Tajikistan (32%) and China (68%), while China relinquished its claims to the Karazak Pass.[35]

If in regard to the two smaller sections, the Tajik part had more or less solid arguments concerning the inaccuracy of the definition of the boundary line or differences in cartographic materials; however, in regard to the third disputed section in the Great Pamirs, the Novormagelanskii Protocol (noted above) could not be of benefit to Tajikistan. The protocol was the core argument of China's claim to the vast area, nearly one-fifth of total Tajik territory. Dushanbe, in turn, insisted on saying that, besides the imperial treaties, the parties should also take into consideration the economic development of the disputed territories (*"khoziaistvennaia osvoennost' spornykh territorii"*) carried out by the Tajik side.[36] As a result, in 1999, the Great Pamirs were left unresolved.

Significant progress was made in negotiations between the two neighbours in 2000, when Dushanbe and Beijing reached an informal agreement on the Great Pamirs. Over the following year, a document was drawn up. In 2002, Tajikistan signed a supplementary border agreement with China, declaring that the two neighbours had resolved all their territorial problems. According to the agreement, sovereignty over the area that covered approximately 1,100 square kilometres was transferred under Chinese jurisdiction. That is, China received about 4% of the 28,000 square kilometres it initially claimed (see Figure 1).

The border demarcation work on the ground was carried out in 2006–2008, and two years later, in April 2010, a Tajik-Chinese demarcation protocol was signed in Beijing. On January 12, 2011, *Majlisi Namoyandagon*, the lower house of Tajikistan's Parliament ratified the demarcation protocol (hereafter the Protocol).

[35] Kurbonova, "Politicheskie Aspekty," 81.
[36] Ibid, 82.

Tajik Attitudes toward the Tajik-Chinese Border Settlement

Majlisi Namoyandagon Debates on the Protocol

The ratification of the Protocol went relatively smoothly,[37] and Tajik parliamentarians overwhelmingly voted to approve it. However, there were opposing voices. Two representatives of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT),[38] the only opposition members in the Tajik parliament at that time, voted against its ratification. In his speech during parliamentary hearings on the Protocol, Tajik Foreign Minister Hamrokhon Zarifi emphasized the "rationality" of the border agreement by saying that "Tajikistan handed over about 1,000 square kilometres, i.e., only 3.5% of the disputed area, to China."[39] Whereas Muhiddin Kabiri, the leader of the IRPT, expressed strong protest, accusing the government of violating the country's constitution, which states that the territory of Tajikistan is "inseparable and inviolable." During these debates, Shodi Shabdolov, a member of parliament and leader of the pro-government Communist Party of Tajikistan (CPT), called for approval of the Protocol, suggesting that they should not leave the issue unresolved into the next generation. In addition, he stressed that the resolution of the territorial dispute would provide a big boost to bilateral relations and, in particular, to trade between the two neighbours. However, Shabdolov also pointed out that there was a lack of transparency on this border protocol, which, in turn, has led to the emergence of rumours proclaiming that Tajikistan ceded vast territories to China.[40]

Nevertheless, these parliamentary hearings became breaking news in the Tajik media. Furthermore, the role of the media was crucial in generating public debate, especially when compared with 2002 or 2010, when the supplementary border agreement and the border demarcation protocol were signed, respectively. In other words, if in previous years the Tajik government had controlled the flow of information,[41] the 2011 parliamentary debates opened the border settlement results to the general public. In neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, the border deal with China provoked some heated reactions and was used by the political opposition to topple the government. There is no doubt that Dushanbe has been extremely cautious in releasing information to the wider public. Apparently officials in Beijing were no less cautious than their Tajik counterparts. In this regard, Abdugani Mamadazimov, the chairman of the National Association of Political Scientists of Tajikistan, said that at the outset of border negotiations China insisted upon announcing the details of the border

[37] For instance, compared to Kyrgyzstan. See, Iwashita, "Border Issue," 97–100.

[38] The IRPT was the second largest political party in the country and the only legal Islamic political party in Central Asia until most recently. In August–September 2015, Tajik authorities banned the activity of the party labeling it as "terrorist."

[39] R. Mirzobekova, "Tadzhikskii podarok vostochnomu sosedu [Tajik Present to the Eastern Neighbour]," *Asia-plus*, January 19, 2011.

[40] Ibid.

[41] The thorough examination of the Tajik print media of 1999–2010 both in Russian and Tajik by the author has shown that the border deal with China was not sufficiently covered by the mainstream media. Whereas the ratification of the border demarcation protocol in 2011 received a great deal of attention in Tajik media.

settlement only after a border treaty was signed.[42]

Contested Views of Contested Territories

During a research trip to Tajikistan, which took place right after the ratification of the border protocol in February – March of 2011, many of my interviewees (including political opposition representatives, scholars, residents of Dushanbe and the GBAO) either refused to recognize the existence of the contested lands between Tajikistan and China or if recognized that a territorial dispute existed, still criticised the Tajik government for making large concessions to the eastern neighbour. Unequivocally, the major reason is that all of the contested lands between the two countries were situated within territory under de-facto control of Tajikistan (of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union before 1991), which sharpened the sensitivity of the issue and led to the emergence of the discourse of "territorial loss." Needless to say, such an attitude was detectable in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, too.

For example, another opposition figure, head of the Social-Democratic Party of Tajikistan (SDPT) Rakhmatullo Zoiirov, accused the Tajik government of violating the country's constitution by ceding lands to its eastern neighbour. In addition, Zoiirov, who is a lawyer by training, expressed his protest against the land transfers to China as follows:

> There were not any "disputed territories" between Tajikistan and China, because the imperial treaties [concluded between Czarist Russia and the Qing Empire] do not have obligatory force (*imperskie dogovora ne imeiut obiazatel'nogo kharaktera*). Since the establishment of the United Nations (UN) in 1945, its principles have been recognized by many countries. And the principle of territorial integrity is one of them. The so-called disputed territories between Tajikistan and China have been situated in Tajikistan and have long been under the effective control of Tajikistan. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China should respect this principle of non-violation of existing state borders.[43]

Along with the notion of the country's "territorial integrity," however, there was a complex range of (often intertwined) reasons explaining why people opposed to the territorial transfers to China. In an interview with the media, for instance, prominent Tajik scholar Rakhim Masov, who served as a director of the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences, said that he refused to sign any documents concerning border delimitation with China, because China denied recognizing the boundary line that was defined by the Russian Empire.[44] In this interview, Masov refused to recognize the "historical grounds" of Chinese territorial claims over the Pamirs and gave a brief outline of developments that took place in this area in the second half of the nineteenth century. According to Masov, before Russia occupied Kokand Khanate, the territory of present-day GBAO,

[42] Author's interview, February 2011.
[43] Author's interview, March, 2011.
[44] However, it remains unclear whether he was a member of the border delineation commission as Tajik officials denied it.

and the East Pamirs had been under the rule of Kokand. In 1867, after the fall of Kokand, its territories along with the territories of the present Badakhshan area were absorbed into the newly-established Fergana province of the Russian Empire. Moreover, he added that:

> If one state is conquered by another one, in most cases, its territories would come under control of the conqueror. That was the case of the Kokand khanate. Apart from the disputed territories between Tajikistan and China in the Eastern Pamirs, the Sarykol valley and Tashkurgan – today located in Xinjiang – had also been the lands of the Kokand khanate.[45]

Historian Muzaffar Olimov commented, in an interview with the author, that the Tajik government should have taken a "wait-and-see approach (*vyzhidatel'naia pozitsiia*)" instead of making such a rapid (and possibly thoughtless) decision to settle a dispute that had existed for over a century.[46]

Also, one can observe Tajik (and Central Asian) voices with an anti-imperial tone in regard to the border delineation between Czarist Russia and the Qing Empire: some in Tajikistan point to their colonial heritage by underlining the fact that the borders of the Pamir Mountains, an arena of imperial rivalry, were defined by empires without consideration for the interests of the local peoples. This anti-imperialist narrative may sound rather obvious in this post-colonial Central Asian society due not only to its colonial past but also the current state of relations with the former metropole. However, there is another point worthy of our attention here: the narrative of anti-imperialism is shared by China, the inheritor of Manchu and other earlier Chinese empires. In the Maoist era when the red banner of anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism was held high, and in present-day China an anti-imperialist and anti-hegemonist stance is still salient. Therefore, it is not surprizing that many Chinese still see the nineteenth-century border treaties with the Russian empire as "unequal."

Despite divergent perceptions and narratives of contested territories in the Eastern Pamirs, many of the interviewees from the academic milieu emphasized that one should bear in mind the framework and context in which the post-Soviet border settlement with China took place. Political scientist Mamadazimov pointed to the decisive role of multilateral border talks that determined the imperial treaties as the legal basis for further border settlement. Indeed, no one would deny that the multilateral border settlement in a wholesale manner along the former Sino-Soviet border was decisive.

Securing National Interests: What was at Stake?

Another question that attracted a considerable amount of concern in Tajik society was "What is the mineral potential of the lands handed over to China?" According to Zurmakhmad Erov, who took part in a Soviet geological expedition to the Pamirs, there are precious metal deposits and gem

[45] Mirzobekova, "Tadzhikskii podarok."
[46] Author's interview, February, 2011.



Figure 2: Map Depicting the Ceded Lands to China in the Tajik Media*

* Author's design based on Mirzobekova, "Tadzhikskii Podarok."

mines around the central part of the Sarykol Range, and there are some alluvial gold deposits in the surroundings of the Markansu River and Rangkul Lake. IRPT leader Kabiri supposed that the ceded lands had some geopolitical or economic (uranium mines) value to China.[47] However, the exact location of the lands transferred to China remained unclear. Even Shabdolov, who actively supported the demarcation results, found it difficult to show where the new borderline was, saying that: "As far as I can tell, the ceded lands are located in the surroundings of the Kulma Pass. Anyway, these lands are situated in an impassable mountain range."[48]

Similarly to the political establishment, many of the interviewed academics found it difficult to show me the exact location of the territories that were transferred to Chinese sovereignty on a map. The reason is that there were no maps or official data available to the general public to show the new boundary. In addition, "maps of the ceded lands" appearing in the Tajik media seemed to be designed in a way to confuse the public even more (see Figure 2). In an interview, Mamadazimov said that he was unaware of the exact place of the ceded lands and of whether the mineral mines and even Rangkul Lake were handed over to China.[49] Attempts to contact a competent member of the border settlement commission[50] and to obtain an interview proved fruitless.

In addition, given China's in creasing investment in the Tajik economy in recent years, it is not surprising that many in Tajikistan (and beyond) have been trying to examine the resolution of the Tajik-Chinese border dispute in connection with growing Tajik-Chinese economic ties. In early 2011, China, Tajikistan's second largest trading partner after Russia, had already provided low-interest soft loans worth over 1 billion USD to Tajikistan for building roads, laying electric cables and other large-scale projects. In regard to this, Zoiirov evaluated "the redefining of the boundary between the two

[47] N. Khamrabaeva, "Kitai khorosho pozhivitsia na territorii Tadzhikistana [China Profits from Gaining Tajik Territories]." Accessed May 5, 2015: http://infomoika.wordpress.com/2011/01/18/китай-хорошо-поживится-на-территории/

[48] Ibid.

[49] Author's interview, February, 2011.

[50] Amak Sattorov from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, one of the key members of the border delineation commission.

countries" as a "commercial deal (*kommercheskaia sdelka*)."[51] Another opposition leader, IRPT Deputy Chairman Mahmadali Khait, similarly believes there is a link between the border settlement and China's growing presence in the country. In an interview, he expressed concern that China's growing economic power would translate into political influence over Tajikistan.[52]

Meanwhile, there are a significant number of scholars who have expressed their support of the border settlement results. Sukhrob Sharipov, who served as the director of the Tajik Presidential Centre for Strategic Studies at that time, expressed his opinion on the issue under question at a media briefing held on January 13, 2011 (a day after the Protocol was ratified). He stressed that the resolution of the border dispute with China eliminated a serious threat to national security and stability. Sharipov noted that China first laid claim to the Eastern Pamirs in 1994 when a civil war was raging in Tajikistan. According to him, at that time, with the chaos occurring in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan also staked territorial claims to Tajikistan. Moreover, he went as far as to say that China could simply intervene militarily in the GBAO, and if that had happened, no one would have been able to withstand China.[53] Most Tajik experts regard such a scenario (of a military intervention) somewhat unrealistic. In the meantime almost every interviewee mentioned a profound (power) imbalance between "small state Tajikistan" and "global power China," saying that Tajikistan's limited resources leave little room for manoeuvre, which places Dushanbe at a disadvantage in negotiations with the major powers such as China.

Nevertheless, as discussed above, we should bear in mind that the regional situation in Tajikistan's immediate neighbourhood greatly affects the security and economic situation of the nation and thus the decision-making process in Dushanbe. While Afghanistan continues to be the major security concern in the south, Tajikistan's northern border with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan has been a source of tension. Specifically, the poor state of relations between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (the worst bilateral relations in Central Asia so far) over much of the last decade has hit the Tajik economy hard. Unfortunately, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, tensions between the two neighbours resulted in the severing of Tajikistan's transport and communications networks. Moreover, Tajikistan, the poorest of all the former Soviet republics, experienced a civil war at the onset of its independence and has been struggling with poverty and social and economic instability ever since.

The opening of the Tajik-Chinese border crossing at the Kulma Pass in 2004 and the subsequent rapid growth in the Tajik-Chinese bilateral trade as well as Chinese investments in the Tajik economy have played a critical role in breaking the isolation faced by Tajikistan. Against this background, Tajikistan seemed to have a clear understanding of what was at stake in fixing the border with China. Therefore, many scholars – from the representatives of state-run research institutes to independent experts – speak in favour of the border dispute resolution in China. If Khudoiberdy Kholkinazarov, the present head of the Tajik Presidential Centre for Strategic Studies, emphasizes that the resolution of territorial dispute serves as a basis for fostering friendly relations with China,

[51] Author's interview, March 2011.
[52] Author's interview, February 2011.
[53] "Ratifikatsiia pomogla sniat' ser'eznuiu ugrozu [The Ratification Helped to Eliminate a Serious Threat]," *Biznes i Politika*, January 20, 2011.

independent expert Rashid Gani Abdullo suggests that ceding uninhabited lands of no real economic value was a wise decision (in fact, this view is shared by many).[54] In a similar manner, Guzel Maitdinova, the director of the Centre for Geopolitical Studies at the Tajik-Russian (Slavic) University, positively assesses the resolution of the territorial dispute, saying that it has laid the foundations for friendship between Tajikistan and China.[55]

To conclude, even though there has been explicit opposition in Tajik society from some politicians and scholars who argue that any border agreement with China violates Tajikistan's "territorial integrity," the author's interviews with academics in Dushanbe, illustrated how pragmatic their views are, as the majority put forward economic and strategic arguments in favour of the border settlement with China.

Attitudes of the General Public and Voices from the Borderland

So, what was the attitude of the general people? As mentioned above, in 2008 Saodat Olimova, a Tajik expert from the Sharq Analytical Research Centre, noted that the general public tends—apart from the herdsmen of the GBAO of Tajikistan due to loss of their pasture lands—to be indifferent toward the lands transfers to China.[56] Indeed, this appears plausible given that the vast majority of Tajik citizens remains largely passive in political participation. Many in Tajikistan are preoccupied with the hardships of everyday living, which makes them uninterested in matters other than their own survival. At the same time, however, it seems that such an attitude was partly due to the lack of information since a high level of secrecy surrounded the border settlement process. As discussed above, the ratification of the Protocol in early 2011 gave rise to heated debates that revealed significant divergences in Tajik attitudes towards the border settlement results ranging from overt opposition to overt support. Furthermore, just a week after the Protocol was ratified, public outrage was fuelled by another announcement: Tajikistan decided to lease 2,000 hectares of land in the Bokhtar and Kumsangir districts of the Khatlon oblast' to Chinese farmers from the XUAR.[57] Many interviewees expressed their discontent on this matter, as they were fearful of China's expanding physical presence. Therefore, due to the timing of the announcement of this news, these fears have only intensified on-going debates over the territorial transfers to China. This has in turn led to the emergence of a new discourse of Chinese expansion into Tajikistan.

Meanwhile, on the Russian-language social networking website Mail.ru, widely used in the post-soviet space, a survey conducted among the members of the group called "Tajikistanis from all over the world" found that 96% of the respondents were opposed to the border settlement results with China. In their comments, they often used the term of "sell out lands" instead of "transfer lands," which presumably reflects Tajik citizens' distrust of their own government. In general, on the internet,

[54] Author's interviews, February 2011.
[55] Author's interview, February, 2011.
[56] Olimova, "The Multifaceted," 64.
[57] Bruce Pannier, "Tajikistan Agrees to Allow Chinese Farmers to Till Land." Accessed on May 5, 2015, http://www.rferl.org/content/tajikistan_china/2289623.html

the response of Tajikistanis – specifically the youth who constitute the majority of internet users in the country – toward the issue was overwhelmingly critical. This actually reflects another broader trend in Tajikistan and internationally; namely, the internet has become an important platform for expressing personal opinions and thoughts that might be considered unacceptable in other contexts.

However, missing from conversations with the expert community in Dushanbe were voices from the borderland. In addition, the interviews conducted with academic representatives seemed to provide more questions than answers with regard to the details of the border settlement. While few could show the location of the lands transferred to China on the map, most experts could not explain the economic value of these lands, especially, about whether the gold and salt mines remained in Tajikistan as Tajik officials affirmed. Some of them, however, pointed out that the media reported about the local herdsmen of the Eastern Pamirs who had to leave their pasturelands in the ceded territories.[58] Their knowledge about the situation in the borderland was largely limited to information from the media. This made me decide to go to the Murghab *raion* (district), which borders China, in the first week of March (certainly not the best time to visit this region) for further investigation. This field research in the locality ground, albeit a spontaneous "journey" to the borderlands, provided valuable information.

As noted above, the Murghab district is located within the GBAO and correspond largely to the area of the Eastern Pamirs. The Eastern Pamirs plateau is a dry, high altitude desert that borders Kyrgyzstan in the north, China in the east, and the Wakhan corridor in the south. The vast district of Murghab[59] is sparsely populated with 14,000 residents, mostly Kyrgyz (approximately 77%).[60] Nearly half of the population resides in the administrative capital Murghab, while the other half lives in villages. During the trip, the author visited Murghab town and the village of Rangkul, which is 60 kilometres northeast from the district centre near the border with China. In particular, the border village of Rangkul was chosen because the lands handed over to China according to the second Tajik-Chinese border agreement of 2002 were located in adjacent areas.

Conducting border research in this part of the world is certainly not easy, due not only to poor access geographical features along with bad road conditions) but also the sensitivity of the issue under question. This author was fortunate to meet people who were not only knowledgeable about the recent Tajik-Chinese border demarcation – such as the locals who took an active part in protests against the border agreement with China or the herdsman who was well aware of the surrounding pasture lands and their use by locals – but also were willing to talk about it. One possible explanation for this "willingness" was that they wanted to spread information as far as possible; in fact, one of the local interlocutors said that they had also contacted *Radio Azattyk* (Kyrgyz service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty) to gain media attention to the matter.

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[58] For instance, see, "Tadzhikskie pastukhi pokidaiut 37 gornykh ushchelii, ustuplennykh E. Rakhmonom Kitaiu" [Tajik Herders to Leave 37 Gorges Ceded to China by E. Rakhmon], *CentrAsia*, May 27, 2008. Accessed September 2, 2015: https://ca-news.info/2008/05/28/50

[59] With an area of 38,300 square kilometres.

[60] Tobias Kraudzun, "Bottom-up and Top-down Dynamics of the Energy Transformation in the Eastern Pamirs of Tajikistan's Gorno Badakhshan Region," *Central Asian Survey* 33: 4 (2014): 552.

Specifically, the conversations with the people of Rangkul shed light on some details of border delineation with China. So, according to them, in 2006, when demarcation work began, strong protests from the villagers forced the Tajik-Chinese joint demarcation commission to cease their work for a while. The local people, including the *aqsaqals* (highly respected older men), expressed their disagreement with the land transfers to China to the village head, and sent a protest letter to the country's president, demanding the abolition of the border treaty of 2002. However, demarcation work soon resumed. The reason they opposed border delineation was that, besides the above-mentioned pasturelands, the graves of their ancestors were also situated in the lands transferred to China. Here, we should not forget that pasturelands are of great importance to local herdsmen in this area given the sparse vegetation cover, since livestock breeding is vital to sustain local livelihoods. Moreover, according to Kraudzun, one of the few scholars whose research has focused on the post-Soviet Eastern Pamirs, people of the Rangkul sub-district used to hunt wildlife such as the Marco Polo sheep and the endangered snow leopard in the disputed area before border demarcation between the two countries took place.[61] In addition, one of the local informants said that the new boundary line between Tajikistan and China lies along the Karasu River and took me to the closest border marker. Gold and salt mines, at least those under exploitation, have remained on the Tajik side of the new boundary, according to locals.

What is also noteworthy here is that there seems to be less interest in what has happened on the eastern edge of the Great Pamirs by residents of Murghab town compared to the people of Rangkul, who have been most directly affected by the recent border demarcation. In the meantime, the impact of the opening of the border crossing checkpoint Kulma-Karasu on the Murghab district as well as on the Tajik economy should not be overlooked. The opening of the border, which allowed for the movement of people and goods between Tajikistan and China and led to the rapid growth in Tajik-Chinese bilateral trade (specifically, rapidly growing Chinese exports to Tajikistan), has apparently had a greater impact on the administrative centre than Rangkul. Murghab town has now become the first large settlement along the only direct trade route between the two countries. Despite the fact that "the local population rarely participates in this border trade, as traders are usually from the central regions of Tajikistan, where most goods are transported to,"[62] increasing trade great potential to change and reshape the configuration of the borderland economy. I recall a conversation with a young man in Murghab who told me that I had chosen the wrong time to visit as things are different in the summer months. Then he took me on a walk to show me the building of a dormitory where Chinese traders live during the summer and the warehouse where Chinese goods arrive. There is no data available that shows the scale of borderland trade and its impact on the borderland economy. Nevertheless, if one takes into account the fact that the "Kulma-Murghab-Khorog" route, which is the only direct connection between the two neighbours, has been playing an important role in transporting not only commercial goods by traders but also the construction materials and equipment

[61] Tobias Kraudzun, "From the Pamir Frontier to International Borders: Exchange Relations of the Borderland Population," in *Subverting Borders: Doing Research on Smuggling and Small-Scale Trade,* eds. Bettina Bruns and Judith Miggelbrink (VS Verlag fuer Sozialwissenschaften, 2011): 176.
[62] Ibid. 182.

of Chinese companies carrying out major infrastructure projects in the country, then it is clear that the route is extremely significant to Tajikistan's economy and national security.

Conclusion

This article offered a detailed analysis of the border delineation process between Tajikistan and China and the Tajik debates over it. First, this study examined colonial boundary-making in the Eastern Pamirs between the Russian and Qing empires in the second half of the nineteenth century. By doing so, it aimed to give a better understanding of the historical roots of the Pamir dispute, and specifically Chinese territorial claims in this mountainous region. The second section, based on the recent publications of foreign and domestic experts, discussed how Tajikistan and China handled the Pamir dispute by exploring multilateral and bilateral frameworks of the Tajik-Chinese border settlement. In particular, it emphasized that the establishment of the "Four plus One" framework played a decisive role in resolving territorial disputes along the former Sino-Soviet border. I also argued that the spatial and temporal contexts as well as peculiar characteristics of the actors (i.e., states) matter: while taking imperial treaties as a basis to redefine interstate borders may sound absurd in Europe, the borders between the former Soviet republics and China have been redrawn upon mutual agreement according to the Russo-Chinese imperial treaties. The empirical analysis presented in the third section, which focuses on Tajik responses to the border settlement with China, showed that Tajik attitudes varied depending not only on the political orientations and economic considerations of different interest groups but also on the information and knowledge they had at their disposal. Furthermore, these debates did not merely reflect divergent attitudes within Tajik society but they also revealed the characteristics of the country's particular socio-political context and political discourse, highlighting factors such as the self-perception of being a "small state," physical and financial survival as the primary preoccupation at the individual and national levels, distrust of the ruling government (especially among Tajik citizens), as well as fears of China's growing presence in the country.