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Riding the Silk Road

Ayaz Achakzai

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The snow-clad peaks of the Himalayas separate China from South Asia. Although distinct civilizations have sprung up on either side of these lofty mountains, their geography and ethos have shaped each other. The heating of the Tibetan plateau draws in the monsoons from the Bay of Bengal—the torrential lifeline of a sun-scorched subcontinent. The Ganges and Indus rivers spring from these mountains while Buddhism, originating in eastern India, has flowed the other way.

These linkages are set to become stronger. China's economic miracle has pulled millions out of poverty, yet geographically it has been largely concentrated in that country's littoral areas. All that is set to change with China's Silk Route Strategy. The eponymous trade route was not a single road but a host of caravan routes that connected China with the Middle East and ultimately Europe. Similarly, the modern variant is envisioned to be a web of road and railway links, combined with industrial and energy projects, that revives these ancient trade routes and brings prosperity to China's western hinterland and the countries it will trade with.

A link in this infrastructure chain is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), an ambitious plan to connect Pakistan's coast to China. The ambition of the project can

be gauged not just by its estimated price tag of \$46 billion or that shipping time to the Middle East will be reduced from 45 to 10 days, but the fact that the area where the two countries meet is some of the toughest and highest terrain on the planet. Dubbed "the roof of the world," this region is a junction of three of the world's highest mountain ranges—the Himalayas, Hindukush, and Karakorum—and contains five 8,000-meter-plus peaks. It was also the start of my journey across a region that looks set to witness momentous change.

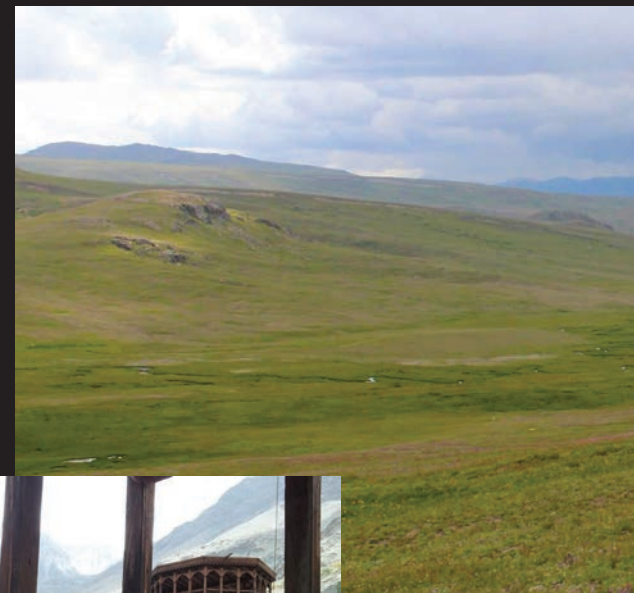
I majored in economics and math at Colby, but one of my passions, and therefore a healthy dose of course work, was in political science. The impact of changing commercial ties on everyday life has been an abiding interest. Working in development after graduation, I always had the sense of missing the "before picture." What did a place look like before it was transformed? Often, such changes have taken place before my lifetime—all the more reason for me to witness the one currently underway.

Traveling through Pakistan, two sights are a constant: while the stunning alpine scenery is hard to miss, the sometimes millennia-old vestiges of the ancient Silk Route—ancient drawings, writings in classical languages such as Sanskrit and religious, especially

RIDING THE SILK ROAD

As development approaches, a mountain trek is an opportunity to contemplate what lies in its path

By Ayaz Achakzai '09



Buddhist, symbolism—require a closer look. Isolated for centuries, these remote valleys have developed unique languages and cultures of their own.

To enter Xinjiang, China, one has to cross possibly the highest motor-able border in the world at the Khunjerab Pass (4,700 m). The pass itself is a watershed, with water on the Chinese side flowing into the South China Sea while water flowing down the Pakistani slope makes its way into the Arabian Sea. Xinjiang is a largely Muslim province of China that is geographically larger than all of Pakistan (slightly smaller than Alaska). Skirting the edges of the Taklamakan Desert along the ancient Silk Route, I passed through Kashghar of Great Game fame—the competition for dominance of this area in the 19th century between the British Empire then ruling South Asia and Czarist Russia ascendant in Central Asia at the time. The old Russian consulate still stands, albeit as a cavernous hotel.

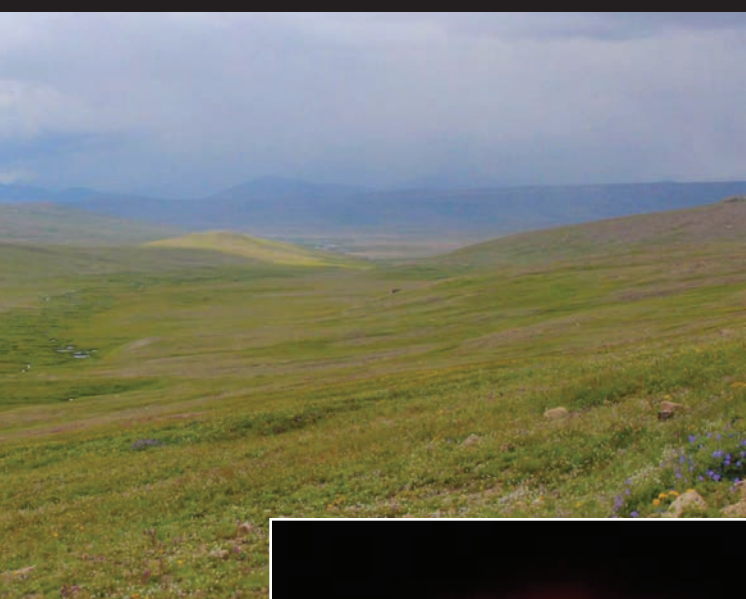
From Urumqi in the north of Xinjiang I caught a high-speed train that took me from the Turpan Basin (parts of which are below sea level) through some snowy mountains to Lanzhou, a town squeezed between hills and in some respects the gateway to Han China. From Lanzhou the highest railway line in the world (reaching heights of 5,200 m) whisked me to Tibet and its

famed capital, Lhasa. After this experience I was confident that geography was unlikely to thwart CPEC. Although Tibet evokes strong and often conflicting emotions, I believe most will agree that its rugged topography, unique culture, and architectural heritage—the Potala Palace is one example—justify its allure.

My next stop was Nepal, a former alpine kingdom now a republic nestled in the Himalayas. Trekking its famous Annapurna Circuit, the realization of being in a contact zone hits you — alpine grasslands give way to tropical forests, Buddhist villages are replaced by Hindu ones, and the dry cool of the highlands is replaced by sticky humidity.

With an Indian visa hard to procure, I was unable to loop back home overland. Yet one hopes that economic cooperation is not stalled in the same manner. China and South Asia together account for 40 percent of the globe's population, many of those people desperately poor. The revival of an old caravan route might just transform the lives of many.

Ayaz Achakzai '09 has worked in development in Pakistan, earned a master's in public affairs degree from Princeton, and has consulted for the World Bank in West Africa and Pakistan and for the United Nations Development Programme.



More of Ayaz Achakzai's breathtaking images from his trek of the ancient trade routes in today's Pakistan, China, and Nepal appear online at colby.edu/mag. 