

# Affective Labor: Afghanistan's Road to China

Tobias Marschall and Till Mostowlansky

We arrive at the road construction camp by foot on a cold afternoon in April 2019. It is snowing and a chill wind blows through the narrow gorge carved by the Wakhan river. Coming from Sarhad-e Broghil, at the eastern end of Afghanistan's road network, it takes us a few hours to make our way up the roughly ten kilometers of gravel road. Here, a dozen men spend months on end blasting and digging a narrow road into the rock along old shepherd tracks. This road – which barely fits two cars at once – is part of a grander narrative and vision of connectivity with China to the east.



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### Paving the Way

As in many countries in the region, the promise of connectivity to China has become a political fetish. In Afghanistan, links to China have flourished at several points in history: from the transmission of Buddhism from India, to the provisioning of Chinese weapons to the mujahedin in the 1980s, to the current influx of Chinese goods. Against this backdrop, Afghan and Chinese politicians have passionately reproduced the trope of the Silk Road to frame economic projects from copper mining to road construction. Paradoxically, the stretch of road covering the sixty-eight kilometers from Sarhad-e Broghil to Baza'i Gonbad, and then possibly across the border with China, has received comparatively little publicity. This arduous and slow ten-year project does not lend itself very well to political marketing and in Afghan politics a decade is an eternity. Thus, while many economic endeavors across the region have become sites of intense emotional investment due to their official inclusion in the Belt and Road Initiative, this particular road has not. Instead, the affective dimensions of Afghanistan's road to China manifest on a much more personal, local and tangible scale. As we approach the end of the road and the makeshift camp of a government subcontractor on this cold spring afternoon, the workers pause to extend warm greetings. Asfand, an excavator driver from Kunduz, comes for a cigarette and a chat, and Farid invites Tobias to join him at the jackhammer.





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### Tent sociality

For people in Sarhad-e Broghil and other places in the Wakhan, the road to China does not invoke ideas of progress and wealth. Rather, this is about getting a viable route up to mountain pastures where people seek short-term employment as shepherds. Similarly, for the road construction workers with whom we stay in the camp – whose location moves with the shifting end of the road – the goal is not China. The aim is to finish a day's labor, to be able to sit in the warmth of the tent around a gas heater and share stories about travel and family, to smoke, to pray, to look at images on offline phones, to see eight-month shifts in rarefied, cold air come to an end and to safely return to their homes across north Afghanistan.

As night draws in we join the workers for dinner and later follow Asfand to his tent, which he shares with Afzaar, a mechanic from Kunduz, and Amooz, a young engineer from Faizabad. While a snowstorm blows outside we get lost in conversation, laughter and music. Jansen (2016) sees affect as linked to moments of intensity and a shared sense of history. He thereby builds on Massumi (1996: 91), who locates the source of such intensity in a process in which the body does not simply absorb stimulations, but infolds “contexts,” “volitions” and “cognitions.” Sitting around the gas heater, listening to Dari pop songs, we are all haunted by such intensity. While cigarette smoke fills the tent, Afzaar, Asfand and Amooz tell us about loneliness and their distant families, about Facebook timelines frozen in time and about how they are constructing this road because they wish to live “peacefully” (*ārām*) in their country and home, and because this road might achieve both.

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