CHAPTER EIGHT

Road's End

Lines and Spaces across a Divided High Asia

TILL MOSTOWLANSKY AND TOBIAS MARSCHALL

On a cold afternoon in April 2019, a dozen men blast and dig a road into the rock alongside the shepherd tracks in the Wakhan Corridor, a narrow strip of territory in eastern Afghanistan.[1] These men, contracted by a major road construction company in Kabul, have been there for many months and expect to work for several years more on the road, which is planned to eventually connect Afghanistan and China. Conducting research on emerging infrastructure projects in the Wakhan, we arrive at the construction camp on foot coming from Sarhad-e Broghil, a trip that took us a few hours up the roughly ten kilometers of gravel road. By spring 2021, contacts in the Wakhan tell us that the road has progressed another sixty kilometers. It now reaches halfway to the border with China, to a place called Baza'i Gonbad. This is a milestone location on the road to China, but it is also a settlement of Kyrgyz and Wakhi herders, and thus a gateway to a world of pathways and high-altitude pastures.

As we learn during our research, there are many ways to perceive and make use of this new road. Seen from Kabul, the road to China is part of a grander vision of connectivity with Afghanistan's economically and geopolitically dominant neighbor to the east. The road to China fits into the trope of the Silk Road, which Afghan and Chinese politicians have frequently used to frame transport infrastructure. However, this vision is a fragile and heavily future-oriented one. In the Wakhan, the road—which barely fits two cars at once—also promises to create tangible new links between the region's marketplaces, pastures, and mountain settlements on a local scale.

The emphasis on new is important, as the Wakhan has long been covered by a web of routes that have, to varying degrees, accommodated motorized transportation, pack animals, and people walking, including across nation-state boundaries. The connectivity that these routes offer defies the idea that large-scale development brought by a link to China is a precondition for people's mobility, economic activity, and security, as state discourse often implies. In fact, much of what is today seen as future connectivity already exists, under various auspices and with unexpected effects. For instance, while conducting research in the high-altitude parts of

This content downloaded from 195.176.239.100 on Wed, 10 Jul 2024 12:07:11 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the eastern Wakhan in 2016, a vast area usually thought of as accessible only on foot, Marschall encountered motorcycles, cars, and tanks. Motorcycles, used to collect fodder, were brought by yak from Sarhad-e Broghil across the steepest parts of the route. A man bought a Toyota Hilux from the northern Afghan city of Faizabad that was delivered via Tajikistan on paved roads across a largely flat plateau. In that same year, Chinese tanks and soldiers used the connection across the plateau to patrol, with the permission of the Afghan government, deep in Afghan territory.

Historically, roads have been crucial sites for the expression of political ideology (Guldi 2012). This importance persists in the present era, in which connectivity with China offers new patterns of legitimacy. We thus begin this chapter with a reference to contemporary development in the Afghan Wakhan, as it points to deeper historical processes relating to infrastructure, scale, and spatial transformation in the borderland of Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and Tajikistan. Taking infrastructure and scale as guiding themes allows us to situate the story of road construction in the Wakhan today as part of a broader spatial transformation that has shaped this borderland over the past century. This has implications for our view of infrastructure projects on both empirical and theoretical planes.

Much of the literature on this part of High Asia emphasizes fracture and division over interaction and connection.[2] However, based on historiography, we argue that ideologically driven transformations of space have in fact resulted in the coexistence of overlapping networks in the borderland of Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and Tajikistan. As we show in this chapter, colonial boundary making, Cold War separation, and an emphasis on the nation-state have clearly shaped the construction of infrastructure and people's mobility. Yet this has not happened in strictly compartmentalized forms; while political boundaries have been an important factor in this area, their significance is sometimes overstated. We propose that thinking through infrastructure and scale opens up a perspective beyond preconceived territorial containers. It is a perspective onto a world of different routes—connected and disconnected, unpaved and paved—that we view as "crucial sites for an unfinished modernity" (Clifford 1997, 2).

In discussing these processes, we build on the decades-long debate about the relation of space and place[3] that has perhaps most poignantly culminated in the intellectual encounter between Doreen Massey and Tim Ingold. In their work on space and lines, respectively, Massey (2005) and Ingold (2011) take differing stances. While Massey emphasizes the virtue of space as bridging the abstract and the tangible, representation and practice, Ingold rejects this approach as prolonging an unnecessary and oppressive binary. He favors using movement between places to capture how humans inhabit their environment. However, we read Massey's

This content downloaded from 195.176.239.100 on Wed, 10 Jul 2024 12:07:11 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

and Ingold's work as compatible in seeking to understand contemporary spatial practices as embedded in abstract historical processes and daily life. We thus argue that Massey's (2005, 9) insistence on space as a "product of relations" and the "simultaneity of stories-so-far" lends historical and scalar depth to Ingold's (2011, 34) view of habitation as "lineal."

Against this backdrop, in our analysis of the contemporary Wakhan we spatialize the local history of modernity as well as follow the lines of connectivity across the borderland's multiple boundaries. Various projects of modernity, having mushroomed across the region, are fundamentally interconnected and part of a web of routes in which people and institutions interact. While state actors tend to perceive large road construction projects in this web as central, they are not economically or politically dominant over footpaths in everyday life. Thus, in this transregional web of routes, scales are not hierarchically preordered levels or layers, but should rather be imagined as "capillary" (Latour 1996, 370) and as gaining broader visibility and importance in specific sociopolitical contexts and historical moments.

The chapter is grounded in Mostowlansky's decade-long ethnographic and archival research in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan, and in Marschall's ethnographic fieldwork with the Kyrgyz of the Wakhan.[4] First, we continue the discussion of contemporary road construction and the fluid interface between roads and pathways in the Afghan Wakhan. Next, we expand on the historical legacy of Soviet infrastructure that has marked the Wakhan since the 1980s. We then deepen the engagement with this historical legacy by exploring road construction and the transformation of space in Soviet Tajikistan, which has led to a vital connection to China via the Pamir Highway (*Pamirskii trakt* or *Pamirskii shosse*). Continuing with the subject of connectivity with China, in the final section of the chapter we analyze the construction of the iconic Karakoram Highway since the 1960s as a central catalyst for the transformation of routes in northern Pakistan. In the conclusion, we return to the Afghan Wakhan to reassess the emerging web of routes in light of the history of construction and mobility in neighboring places.

The End of the Road on the Roof of the World

Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor, a narrow strip of land bordered by China, Pakistan, and Tajikistan (figure 8.1), is a legacy of nineteenth-century territorial agreements between the British and Russian Empires.[5] Based on its history as an imperial and Cold War buffer zone, the Wakhan and its ethnically and linguistically diverse people have long been portrayed in popular, political, and (perhaps more surprisingly) academic discourse as remote, disconnected, and somewhat

This content downloaded from 195.176.239.100 on Wed, 10 Jul 2024 12:07:11 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

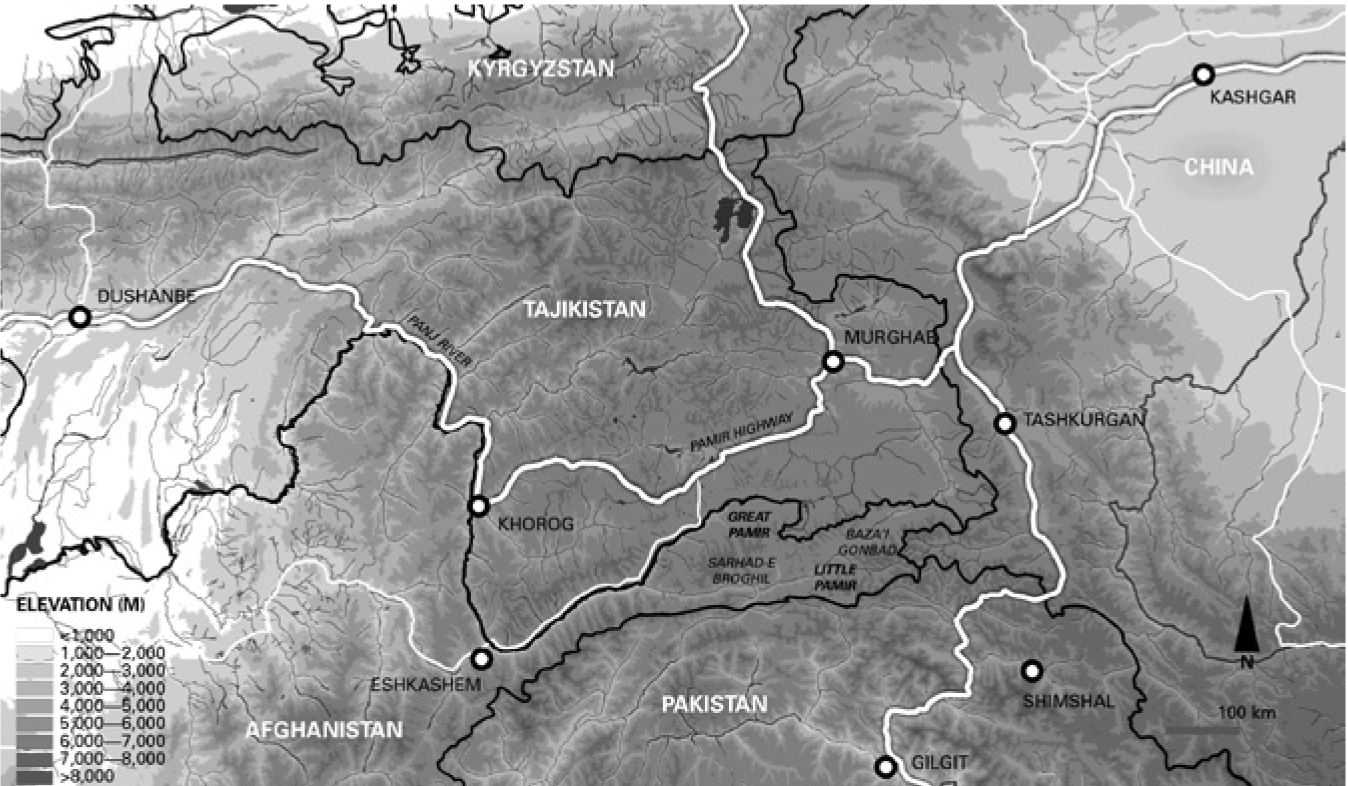

Figure 8.1. Geography of High Asia. (Map by Dorothy Tang. Made with Natural Earth and GMTED2010 data. See GMTED2010 2011.)

This content downloaded from 195.176.239.100 on Wed, 10 Jul 2024 12:07:11 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

stuck.[6] There are a number of reasons for this stance, of which the Wakhan's status as a cul-de-sac at a securitized frontier is an important one.

However, fieldwork in the Wakhan reveals that, against these odds, people there are often highly mobile, and have been so for decades (Mostowlansky 2021). In our joint and individual research periods in the Wakhan we met many interlocutors who, for instance, had gone to college in Kabul; served in the army in other parts of Afghanistan; lived in China, Kyrgyzstan, or Pakistan; ran cross-border trades and had been overseas. Thus, in contrast to many exoticizing depictions of the Wakhan as an extremely localized place that—for better or worse—provides a haven from the world, in our fieldwork we found that, as Massey (2005, 195) reminds us, the world was right there.

For discussions of infrastructure and roads in the Wakhan, this recognition is central. It offers an opportunity to perceive the road to China not as modernity coming into a backward land, but as a connection to and reshaping of already present structures. In this context, the contemporary Wakhan is linked to a number of transregional processes, including the material legacy of Soviet assistance, Cold War and post–Cold War development, and simultaneous forms of economic and social organization in neighboring areas. We therefore explore the emerging road to China as an example of third-wave state-driven construction with twentieth-century predecessors.

In April 2019, we stayed at the camp of the workers who are building the road that is supposed to eventually connect the end of the Afghan road system in Sarhad-e Broghil with the Chinese road system. The construction workers and engineers, employed by a government contractor from Kabul, began by building a sixty-eight-kilometer stretch from Sarhad-e Broghil to Baza'i Gonbad. Only in the coming years can a plan be made for links across the borders with China and Pakistan. The road is an arduous and slow ten-year project, and it largely follows older shepherd tracks carved into the steep slopes above the Wakhan River. While workers approaching from Sarhad-e Broghil blast and dig the new road into the rock, construction teams on the plateau around Baza'i Gonbad employ heavy machinery to grade less hazardous stretches. Large excavators and dump trucks have been brought in via both Tajikistan's nearby road system and yak and camel tracks in the Wakhan, and their presence demonstrates the fluid interface of routes and nation-state boundaries in the area.

Both the Afghan state and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the Wakhan differentiate, on maps and in reports, between two distinct systems of mobility: a motorized one that operates on the road from Eshkashem to Sarhad-e Broghil, and one based on walking and animal transport on the high-altitude pastures of the Great and Little Pamirs at the border with China. However, this static

This content downloaded from 195.176.239.100 on Wed, 10 Jul 2024 12:07:11 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

distinction is rarely valid in daily life, as many people walk or ride horses on the road due to a lack of vehicles, and motorcycles, tanks, and construction machinery routinely appear on the pathways. Routes in the Wakhan are all called *jol* in Kyrgyz, no matter whether they are designed for motorized transport or walking. This acknowledges that rugged and unstable terrain can change quickly depending on location and weather.

As road construction progresses, the question of who gets to use and profit from a potentially more stable motorized route has gained importance. Echoing a number of recent anthropological studies on road construction,[7] Marschall's research among the Kyrgyz of the Wakhan shows that the new road is not met solely with appreciation in places where the main mode of transportation is on foot or by horse. He encountered frequent worries that the road would infringe on the Kyrgyz's systems of pathways and creep into their modes of life, and thus into an existential form of wayfaring (Ingold 2011, 148). For instance, in Andamin (at the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border) in April 2019, Marschall met Raimberdi, a Kyrgyz cattle breeder in his twenties, who saw the emergence of the road as a dark event that had to be opposed by "the people" (*el*) as it would bring "destruction" (*nukus*) of sociality and hospitality, the rise of "self-focus" (*özü köröt*), and the eventual decay of both "spiritual merit" and "divine blessings" (*sawab* and *barakat*). As they rode and walked along the steep path down to the valley, Raimberdi told Marschall that he feared the motorized road would serve only the wealthiest, and that "the people" would continue to move by horse or on foot.

Perceptions of state-driven modernization projects as transformative and violent incursions that come with unequal opportunities have existed in the Wakhan for several decades. The emergence of roads and bridges in the area began with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. In order for tanks and other military supplies to reach strategic locations at the border with Pakistan at the Broghil Pass, dirt roads and steel bridges had to be built. While the Soviet army's forts and checkpoints in the Wakhan have largely decayed, stretches of roads and, particularly, bridges remain as significant traces. These stand for a state of occupation, but they also evoke nostalgic memories of employment and protection that many of our middle-aged and elderly interlocutors framed in the oft-repeated words "the [Soviet] Union was good" (*shuravi khub bud*).

Since the early 2000s, international development projects have mushroomed throughout the Wakhan. These projects build on and aim to transform Soviet paternalistic visions of modernity and state-citizen relations through a decentralized blend of NGO initiatives and internationally sponsored government projects that are often only loosely coordinated. However, with respect to the motorized road leading through the Wakhan, there has been a clear distribution of labor. On the

This content downloaded from 195.176.239.100 on Wed, 10 Jul 2024 12:07:11 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

one hand, there is the Aga Khan Development Network, a group of Ismaili Muslim institutions strongly anchored among the Wakhi population in the lower parts of the Wakhan. The network's engineers have focused exclusively on the construction of bridges. On the other hand, road construction has been left to the Afghan government, whose contractors improve and extend roads at a comparatively slow pace. As a result, throughout the Wakhan bridges can be found in places where paved roads are still missing.

Meanwhile, on the plateau of the Afghan Pamirs, more than 4,200 meters above sea level, people have been affected rather differently by these developments. In the absence of large international NGOs, which often follow paved roads, a need for military infrastructure has driven the extension of footpaths and the construction of camps. Former Soviet army bases have been transformed into outposts for the Afghan army, and (like Soviet forces decades earlier) Chinese tanks have rolled across the flat parts of the Pamirs in the pursuit of border security cooperation.

In July 2016, Marschall observed the simultaneous presence of decrepit Soviet army bases, Afghan soldiers, and Chinese tank tracks in the area of Baza'i Gonbad. The long-standing incursion of motorized military personnel into the area indicates alternative ways of reaching the plateau. Soldiers crisscross international borders in the triangle of Afghanistan, China, and Tajikistan, and they arrive in the Pamirs without having to actually walk on pathways. Instead, they make use of the interconnected Tajik and Chinese road systems to enter Afghanistan, moving across passable mountain pastures and well out of the way of official border crossings.

The daily life of Kyrgyz and Wakhi shepherds in the Afghan Pamirs is entangled with this fluctuating presence of outsiders, but in the process of herding livestock between summer and winter pastures, it also runs a separate course. In the Great Pamir in May 2019, Marschall observed, as part of the World Food Program's Food for Work Program, the broadening of footpaths to allow caravans of Bactrian camels to move more freely and efficiently across the region. Using simple tools and shovels, Kyrgyz and Wakhi laborers worked on these pathways in exchange for tea, dairy products, flour, and rice. Likewise, *sawabkhanas* (houses of spiritual merit), which have been constructed across the borderland to provide communally funded accommodation for travelers, remain outside the reach of foreign investment. They are sites of local giving and reciprocity, and allow for the display of wealth as well as the reward of spiritual merit. Unlike those in northern Pakistan, *sawabkhanas* in the Wakhan are exclusively constructed and maintained by people who actually traverse the area.

In the following section of the chapter, we explore more deeply an essential part of what Massey (2005, 9) calls the "simultaneity of stories-so-far"—one that

This content downloaded from 195.176.239.100 on Wed, 10 Jul 2024 12:07:11 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

is central to an understanding of routes not only in the Wakhan but in the High Asian borderland more broadly. Examining the lasting impact of Soviet modernity (and hence road construction), as well as its afterlife in the practices of contemporary state institutions and NGOs, is relevant with respect to the Tajik road system just across the high-altitude border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan. The Soviet legacy's continuous influence in the Wakhan makes this a historical as much as a contemporary issue.

Overcoming Roadlessness

When people in the Afghan Wakhan glimpsed Soviet modernity during a decade of occupation in the 1980s, inhabitants of the Soviet Union's territory just across the river had already lived through decades of state-driven modernization. Roads played a central role in the imaginary of an integrated, coherent, and self-sufficient socialist space (Siegelbaum 2008a, 125–172). By the end of the first decade of Soviet rule, "roadlessness" (*bezdorozh'e*) had been identified as a major issue on the path to communism. Hence, the 1930s brought widespread construction across the Soviet Union. As Lewis Siegelbaum (2008b, 277) describes, quoting a Soviet official speaking about rural Russia in 1929, the lack of a sophisticated road system was increasingly seen as a sign of "the survival of barbarism" and of "Asiaticness, indolence, and idleness."

Accordingly, the Soviets launched road projects across their country, which bore some similarity to Nazi autobahn construction programs. They improved connectivity between major cities that had already been linked by highways (*shosse*) in the Russian Empire, but they particularly sought to end roadlessness in much more remote parts of the Soviet Union. To this end, the mountainous region of today's eastern Tajikistan, bordering the Afghan Wakhan and China, became the site of a large road construction project that lasted in different forms throughout the Soviet period, and continues to captivate the imagination of planners and politicians.

Rather than linking major urban centers, the Pamir Highway was built to connect the Pamirs with the closest town, Osh, in southern Kyrgyzstan. The highway leads across a number of mountain passes and through the plateau of Murghab to the settlement of Khorog, at the former Soviet-Afghan border. Clearly, there was a military rationale behind the highway's construction, but Soviet aspirations were multidimensional and extended into taming and transforming space (that is, territorialization) through the creation of modern roadside communities (Mostowlansky 2017). Thus, while the highway eventually facilitated Soviet tanks' rolling into the Afghan Wakhan in 1979, more than four decades of "the fight for the

This content downloaded from 195.176.239.100 on Wed, 10 Jul 2024 12:07:11 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

road" (*bor'ba za dorogu*) had also aimed to bring socialism into a hitherto "inaccessible periphery" (Slavinskii 1935, 3). The transformation of a previously roadless mountain region at the edge of socialism came to symbolize Soviet progress and connectivity.[8]

In his book *Naqliyoti Tojikiston* (Transport in Tajikistan), Ahmadjon Ismoilov (1962, 42) demonstrates that the transformation of remote areas of Central Asia depended on the increasing penetration of the Soviet state via road and railway networks. Ismailov's account begins with pre-Soviet pathways that characterized poor districts, and it ends with large construction projects that had, step by step, brought connection to the imagined periphery (Ismoilov 1962, 58). Similarly, Sadullo Nazrulloev (1979, 91) points to the essential role of the road in establishing political and economic legitimacy. Prior to construction of the Pamir Highway, Tajikistan's eastern border region with Afghanistan and China was inaccessible to motorized transport. The highway provided connectivity to Dushanbe (the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic's capital) to the west, and to the closest railway station (in Osh) to the north.

In official Soviet representations, unpaved roads and footpaths were viewed as undesirable remnants of the past that were expected to disappear with the rise of an increasingly dense network of paved roads. Research from across the former Soviet Union shows that this was typical of the idealization of a progressing socialist space whose available resources were often grossly overstated.[9] In the case of the high-altitude environment of the Pamirs, two additional factors significantly complicated the relationship between different routes traversing the region.

First, the paved road between Osh and Khorog, roughly 730 kilometers long, leads through hazardous mountain terrain that is susceptible to avalanches and mudslides, and where a freshly tarred road surface can erode within weeks. While continuous maintenance is part of every road construction project, roads like the Pamir Highway that are subject to extreme environmental conditions require particularly intensive economic and political investment. Thus the "fight for the road" in the Pamirs, or the lack of it, has always been characterized by where political and economic actors see necessity, potential, and gain.

Second, what began as an underfunded Soviet project to connect the periphery in the 1930s has morphed over the past twenty years into a rerouted corridor to China. Throughout this process, neglect has led to such a degree of decay on certain stretches that travelers occasionally have to walk. In his research with road construction workers and drivers along the Pamir Highway, Mostowlansky found that such stretches are considered inferior even to unpaved gravel roads or pathways across mountain pastures, since they are unpredictable, damaging to vehicles, and symbolic of the general retreat of Soviet modernity in the region.

This content downloaded from 195.176.239.100 on Wed, 10 Jul 2024 12:07:11 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Although the use of the highway has been contested by state institutions, NGOs, foreign governments, and local residents, it has also fostered a web of interlinked routes. From the 1940s onward, the development of the highway in combination with Soviet policies of border closure and forced isolation led to the decline of trade links and cross-border pastoral herding (Kraudzun 2011, 173). The most frequently used trade route between the Pamirs and Kashgar (a city in nearby Xinjiang) was severed, and people's mobility began to depend on the railway hub in Osh. Cutting local residents off from their customary economic and kin connections with China and Afghanistan was an essential component of the Soviets' creating a loyal borderland population (Kassymbekova 2011, 362). The highway became a center around which checkpoints, research stations, and jeep tracks and pathways to mountain pastures were organized within the confined space of a Soviet Cold War frontier. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the end of the Cold War loosened this arrangement and provided room to extend the existing web of mobility across the border. This happened in a manner that remains state-controlled and securitized. To this day, contact between Tajikistan and Afghanistan citizens is largely restricted to humanitarian missions, medical treatment, border markets, and a few NGO initiatives.

Connectivity between Afghanistan and China is similarly controlled, although since 2004 a road link between the Pamir Highway and the Chinese road system has greatly increased trade activity between the two countries (Mostowlansky 2017, 135). Moreover, since 2016, the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism has resulted in military cooperation among Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and Tajikistan, and has enabled new forms of mobility on the region's routes.[10] Having put a military base in place in Shaymak, at the Tajikistan-China-Afghanistan border, Chinese forces now navigate freely between the three countries (Shih 2019). Its military vehicles and personnel travel via Tajik roads and across pastures into the Afghan Wakhan, where they participate in joint exercises, surveillance, and border patrols.

By contrast, in northern Pakistan, road construction to and with China has a much longer history and has informed connectivity across the border since the 1960s. The ways in which this has transformed the relationship between existing pathways and new tarmac are illustrative of the ongoing process of building the road to China in the Wakhan.

New Routes Abound

The Karakoram Highway, connecting Pakistan's capital, Islamabad, with Kashgar in China, is perhaps High Asia's most iconic and widely advertised road construction

This content downloaded from 195.176.239.100 on Wed, 10 Jul 2024 12:07:11 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

project. The 1,300 kilometers of tarmac are the result of a close political and military alliance between Pakistan and China since the 1960s. The highway is intricately intertwined with the ongoing conflict in Kashmir between Pakistan and India, but it also facilitates international and domestic tourism and has fostered rapid social transformation.[11]

The highway's origins date back to Cold War considerations in which anti-imperialism and South-South cooperation played an important role (*Dawn* 1963). In this respect, the highway can be seen as a counter to the Soviet Pamir Highway across the border, which was built on the legacy of Russian colonialism. However, the Karakoram Highway, like the Pamir Highway, has been as much a military endeavor as an economic one. The former highway, which today is officially part of China's Belt and Road Initiative through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, was predominantly built by the Chinese and Pakistani armies, and it has facilitated the movement of troops in border areas (Joniak-Lüthi 2016). The building of roads in Xinjiang by the People's Liberation Army and, more generally, the territorialization of China's western provinces through infrastructure were preconditions for the construction of the Karakoram Highway in Pakistan. The involvement of Pakistan's Army Corps of Engineers in infrastructure projects since the 1960s eventually became formalized as the Frontier Works Organization, which remains a major public works provider tied to the country's military-economic complex (Khalid 2009).

In Pakistan's far north, at the border with Afghanistan and China, the construction of the Karakoram Highway has had a particularly transformative effect, literally turning footpaths and cattle trails into paved roads within the course of a decade. In this area, directly bordering the Afghan Wakhan, the opening of the road to China in 1982 has been less significant than the access that the highway has provided for NGOs and state development. Similar to current processes in the Afghan Wakhan and the Tajik Pamirs, the Aga Khan Development Network built upon existing and emerging infrastructure by introducing health care, education, and social and economic programs.[12]

Much research on northern Pakistan has dealt with the socioeconomic changes that the Karakoram Highway has brought to the region: how lifestyles and livelihoods have been transformed and how people's interactions with the environment have adapted to altered agricultural practices and increasing tourism.[13] The highway's existential importance, developed over the past four decades, has repeatedly become clear in the face of disaster (Rest and Rippa 2019, 380)—most recently in 2010, when the Attabad landslide led to the destruction of a stretch of highway and to the creation of a twenty-two-kilometer-long lake. Against this backdrop,

This content downloaded from 195.176.239.100 on Wed, 10 Jul 2024 12:07:11 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the Karakoram Highway's central and iconic status has overshadowed an intricate system of seemingly less significant routes that intersect with it.

The construction of the Karakoram Highway left many settlements far from the main artery still disconnected from motorized transport, and walking to the road remains an integral part of daily life for the people there. One of these settlements is Shimshal, an assemblage of three village communities where Mostowlansky conducted several weeks of fieldwork in 2016. Shimshalis sustain themselves through a mix of mountain farming, herding, and labor migration, the latter of which has grown in importance since the completion in 2003 of a forty-kilometer road linking the village to the highway.

Connectivity has steadily increased since the 1970s, when a journey to the nearest market town required a week of walking and additional days of riding on a pony track (Butz and Cook 2011, 356). However, Shimshalis continue to experience fluctuation between accessibility and road closure. Shimshalis began to construct the forty-kilometer road in 1985 themselves, and in the following eighteen years they worked with the occasional assistance of international NGOs and the local government (Ali and Butz 2005). While the road, as a communal achievement, is a source of pride, it is often seen as fragile, given that floods and landslides frequently damage the road and leave Shimshalis once again without access. At the same time, due to much broader changes in political ecology, the road is seen as a threat to a calmer, less mobile life in Shimshal (Hussain 2015). As David Butz and Nancy Cook (2016, 206) point out, Shimshal's subsistence-based mode of life has undergone massive changes since the 1980s, including the arrival of new work opportunities outside the valley, an increase in cash transactions, the appearance of NGOs, global conservation governance, access to health care, changes in diet and education, and the emergence of agricultural machinery and tourism.

These changes in Shimshal have been strongly linked to the construction first of the Karakoram Highway and later of the local link road. Yet it is easy to overlook the fact that, as these roads came into existence, Shimshal's nonmotorized routes began to play a new role—not only with regard to road closures, but also in realms that remain seemingly untouched by the speed of motorized transport. At the end of the link road, a system of footpaths and cattle trails extends to Shimshal's high pastures. The end of the road thus embodies the difference between transport and wayfaring (Ingold 2007, 81). Yet it is also there, on the narrow pathways carved into the rock high above the river, that the road's transformative force has penetrated a world of cattle, shepherds, and communal labor.

The routes from the village to the pastures around Shimshal Pass, leading from 3,100 meters up to 4,735 meters above sea level at the border with China, have been

This content downloaded from 195.176.239.100 on Wed, 10 Jul 2024 12:07:11 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

important lifelines for Shimshali yak breeding. They constitute entry points into a world of natural beauty and idyllic disconnection, and are in need of constant maintenance.[14] The annual repairs are organized communally, and Shimshali men take turns working on sections of the paths damaged by heavy snowfall, rain, landslides, and avalanches.

Along these paths, travelers encounter simple stone huts that provide shelter for the night. As in the Afghan Wakhan, these huts are called *sawabkhanas*, and their funding and construction are acts that generate merit in relation to God. Yet while *sawabkhanas* in the Wakhan are part of a local moral economy that remains disconnected from outside actors, Shimshali *sawabkhanas* have developed into a transnational phenomenon that is directly related to the emergence of the Karakoram Highway. With the rise of tourism in northern Pakistan, and in Shimshal in particular, mountaineers from all over the world have visited the area, developed personal relationships with Shimshalis, and claimed stakes in local practices. As a result, and as observed in the course of Mostowlansky's fieldwork, many *sawabkhanas* are now financially supported by foreign donors and have been named in their honor (such as Shimshal's Leutkircher Hütte, whose name refers to its German sponsors). While the centrality of herding for economic purposes has decreased on Shimshali mountain pastures, the maintenance of pathways is now financed by international visitors. Local communal endeavors have thus become linked to a much wider web of connections spanning footpaths, roads, and circuits of global mobility.

Conclusion

Much of the research on the Afghan Wakhan, and indeed on other parts of High Asia, invokes a sense of timelessness and inertia. This is not surprising, given the area's long-standing status as an imperial buffer zone, surrounded by international boundaries of geopolitical concern. It is convenient to think of roads to China as providing visions of future connectivity and new beginnings (Rippa, Murton, and Rest 2020). In contrast, we argue that ongoing road construction in the Wakhan is a spatial encounter with what Massey (2005, 195) calls "the radical contemporaneity of an ongoing multiplicity of others, human and non-human." In other words, the afterlives of the modernization projects that have been present in the Wakhan for many decades influence how emerging projects of modernity become both locally specific and connected to a wider world.

For people in the Wakhan, the road to China stands for an array of possibilities, among which actual connectivity to the Chinese paved road system is only one. The current construction project also promises the people of the lower

This content downloaded from 195.176.239.100 on Wed, 10 Jul 2024 12:07:11 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Wakhan much easier access to the world of cattle trails and mountain pastures where they can seek short-term employment as shepherds, and it formalizes the Chinese military presence in the borderland that has existed for years. Afghanistan's road to China is being inserted into a web of routes throughout the borderland that remain largely hidden behind large infrastructure projects. The transregional dimension of this process is related to spatial encounters on the thoroughfare between east and west, often embedded in tropes of the Silk Road. But it is also linked to frequently neglected north-south connections (Marsden and Mostowlansky 2019). As the road to China progresses, the plateau between Tajikistan and Afghanistan—where for centuries small-scale traders have navigated the pathways that now feed into the Karakoram Highway—is already busy with traffic despite the absence of paved roads.

We thus argue that routes in High Asia provide tangible materializations of spatial encounters on different scales, past and present. We imagine these routes in the borderland of Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and Tajikistan as part of a larger web, or a "texture of interwoven threads" (Ingold 2011, xii), that is neither confined by the nation-state nor determined by hierarchical differentiations between global and local. Rather, routes in this part of High Asia are—in scalar terms—lines that are connected to each other to different degrees and across various types of movement and transport.

Notes

1. We would like to express our gratitude to our interlocutors in High Asia, who appear pseudonymously in the text. We are also indebted to a number of people who read and commented on different versions of this chapter, including Brook Bolander, Max Hirsh, Galen Murton, and the two anonymous reviewers. Till Mostowlansky's research for this chapter was supported by two grants from the Swiss National Science Foundation (P300P1_161161 and PZ00P1_174163).

2. See, for example, E. Callahan 2013; T. Callahan, 2007; Dor 1975, 1979; Finkel 2013; Ispahani 1989; Levi-Sanchez 2017; Shahrani 2002.

3. See, for example, Bender 2001; Cresswell 1996, 2004; Escobar 2001; Feld and Basso 1996; Lefebvre 1991; Low and Lawrence-Zuniga 2007; Reeves 2011; Saxer 2016; Turton 2005.

4. Mostowlansky began ethnographic fieldwork and archival research on road construction in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in 2008, in Pakistan in 2012, and in Afghanistan in 2016. The material presented here derives from interviews and participant observations, as well as from archives in Bishkek, Karachi, and Khorog. Marschall's contribution is based on his ethnographic fieldwork in the Wakhan between 2015 and 2019. In addition, we conducted several weeks of joint ethnographic fieldwork in the Wakhan in 2016 and 2019 (see Marschall and Mostowlansky 2019).

5. See Barfield 2010, 146–154; Saikal 2012, 31.

6. See Anderson 2005; E. Callahan 2009, 2013; Dor and Naumann 1978; Finkel 2013; Kreutzmann 2003; Leithead 2007; Shahrani 2002.

This content downloaded from 195.176.239.100 on Wed, 10 Jul 2024 12:07:11 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

7. See, for example, Baptista 2018; Dalakoglou 2017; Khan 2020; Mostowlansky 2017; Snead, Erickson, and Darling 2009.
8. See, for example, Dzhumaev 1984; Ismoilov 1962; Nazrulloev 1979.
9. See Kotkin 1997; Siegelbaum 2008a.
10. See Clover 2017; Gibson 2016; Panda 2017; Snow 2017.
11. See Ispahani 1989; Karrar 2019; Karrar and Mostowlansky 2018.
12. See Mostowlansky 2018, 2019, and 2020.
13. See, for example, Allan 1989; Kreutzmann 1991; Kamal and Nasir 1998; Rippa 2018.
14. See Fontanari 2018, 2019.

References

Ali, Inayat, and David Butz. 2005. *Report on Shimshal Nature Trust (SNT), Ghojal, Northern Areas, Pakistan*. Governance Stream of the Fifth World Parks Congress.

Allan, Nigel. 1989. "Kashgar to Islamabad: The Impact of the Karakorum Highway on Mountain Society and Habitat." *Scottish Geographical Magazine* 105 (3): 130–141.

Anderson, Jon Lee. 2005. "The Man in the Palace: Hamid Karzai and the Dilemma of Being Afghanistan's President." *New Yorker*, May 29, 60–73. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/06/06/the-man-in-the-palace.

Baptista, João Alfonso. 2018. "The Road of Progress: Individualisation and Interaction Agency in Southeast Angola." *Ethnos* 83 (3): 521–543.

Barfield, Thomas. 2010. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Bender, Barbara. 2001. "Landscapes on the Move." *Journal of Social Archaeology* 1 (1): 75–89.

Butz, David, and Nancy Cook. 2011. "Accessibility Interrupted: The Shimshal Road, Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan." *Canadian Geographer / Le géographe canadien* 55 (3): 354–364.

Butz, David, and Nancy Cook. 2016. "Political Ecology of Human-Environment Change in Gojal, Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan." In *Mapping Transition in the Pamirs: Changing Human-Environmental Landscapes*, edited by Hermann Kreutzmann and Teji Watanabe, 197–214. Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Springer.

Callahan, Edward. 2009. "Die Vergessenen." *GEO Magazin*, January 1, 30–52.

Callahan, Edward. 2013. "To Rule the Roof of the World: Power and Patronage in Afghan Kyrgyz Society." PhD diss., Boston University.

Callahan, Edward. 2007. "The Kyrgyz of the Afghan Pamir Ride On." *Nomadic People* 11 (1): 39–48.

Clifford, James. 1997. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Clover, Charles. 2017. "Mystery Deepens over Chinese Forces in Afghanistan." *Financial Times*, February 26. https://www.ft.com/content/0c8a5a2a-f9b7-11e6-9516-2d969e0d3b65.

Cresswell, Tim. 1996. *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Cresswell, Tim. 2004. *Place: A Short Introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

This content downloaded from 195.176.239.100 on Wed, 10 Jul 2024 12:07:11 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Dalakoglou, Dimitris. 2017. *The Road: An Ethnography of (Im)Mobility, Space, and Cross-Border Infrastructures in the Balkans*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.

Dawn. 1963. "China to Defend Pakistan throughout the World." June 18, 1963.

Dor, Rémy. 1975. *Contribution à l'étude des Khirgiz du Pamir Afghan*. Paris: Publications Orientalistes de France.

Dor, Rémy. 1979. "Nouvel exil pour les Kirghiz?" *Afghanistan Journal* 6 (1): 24–27.

Dor, Rémy, and Clas M. Naumann. 1978. *Die Kirgisen des Afghanischen Pamir*. Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt.

Dzhumaev, D. 1984. *Doroga druzhby*. Khorog: Tipografiia Khorog.

Escobar, Arturo. 2001. "Culture Sits in Places: Reflections on Globalism and Subaltern Strategies on Localization." *Political Geography* 20: 139–174.

Feld, Steven, and Keith Basso. 1996. *Senses of Place*. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research.

Finkel, Michael. 2013. "Stranded on the Roof of the World." *National Geographic*, February. https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2013/02/wakhan-corridor/.

Fontanari, Thibault. 2018. "Les architectures du don chez les habitants de la valée de Shimshal du Karakoram au Pakistan." *Revue du MAUSS* 52 (2): 347–358.

Fontanari, Thibault. 2019. "Making Pathways while Walking and Singing in Shimshal Valley, Pakistan." *World of Music* 8 (1): 87–104.

Gibson, Giles. 2016. "Exclusive: Chinese Security Forces Caught Patrolling Deep Inside Eastern Afghanistan." Wion, October 27. https://www.wionews.com/south-asia/exclusive-chinese-security-forces-caught-patrolling-deep-inside-eastern-afghanistan-8008.

Guldi, Jo. 2012. *Roads to Power: Britain Invents the Infrastructure State*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hussain, Shafqat. 2015. *Remoteness and Modernity: Transformation and Continuity in Northern Pakistan*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Ingold, Tim. 2007. *Lines: A Brief History*. London: Routledge.

Ingold, Tim. 2011. *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*. London: Routledge.

Ismoilov, Ahmadjon. 1962. *Naqliyoti Tojikiston*. Dushanbe, Tajikistan: Nashriyoti Davlatii Tojikiston.

Ispahani, Mahnaz Z. 1989. *Roads and Rivals: The Political Uses of Access in the Borderlands of Asia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Joniak-Lüthi, Agnieszka. 2016. "Roads in China's Borderlands: Interfaces of Spatial Representations, Perceptions, Practices, and Knowledges." *Modern Asian Studies* 50 (1): 118–140.

Kamal, Parveen, and M. Jamal Nasir. 1998. "The Impact of the Karakorum Highway on the Land Use of the Northern Areas." In *Karakorum–Hindukush–Himalaya: Dynamics of Change, Part I*, edited by Irmtraud Stellrecht, 303–338. Köln, Germany: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag.

Karrar, Hasan H. 2019. "In the Shadow of the Silk Road: Border Regimes and Economic Corridor Development through an Unremarkable Pakistan-China Border Market." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 39 (3): 389–406.

This content downloaded from 195.176.239.100 on Wed, 10 Jul 2024 12:07:11 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Karrar, Hasan H., and Till Mostowlansky. 2018. "Assembling Marginality in Northern Pakistan." *Political Geography* 63 (March): 65–74.

Kassymbekova, Botakoz. 2011. "Humans as Territory: Forced Resettlement and the Making of Soviet Tajikistan, 1920–38." *Central Asian Survey* 30 (3–4): 349–370.

Khalid, Muhammad Mumtaz. 2009. *History of the Karakoram Highway*. Self-published.

Khan, Mustafa Ahmed. 2020. "Making Them Look the Other Way: The (Ir)rationality of Road Building in the Sindh Borderlands of Pakistan." PhD diss., University of London.

Kotkin, Stephen. 1997. *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kraudzun, Tobias. 2011. "From the Pamir Frontier to International Borders: Exchange Relations of the Borderland Population." In *Subverting Borders: Doing Research on Smuggling and Small-Scale Trade*, edited by Bettina Bruns and Judith Miggelbrink, 171–191. Wiesbaden, Germany: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Kreutzmann, Hermann. 1991. "The Karakoram Highway: The Impact of Road Construction on Mountain Societies." *Modern Asian Studies* 25 (4): 711–736.

Kreutzmann, Hermann. 2003. "Ethnic Minorities and Marginality in the Pamirian Knot: Survival of Wakhi and Kirghiz in a Harsh Environment and Global Contexts." *The Geographical Journal* 169 (3): 215–235.

Latour, Bruno. 1996. "On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications." *Soziale Welt* 47: 369–381.

Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space*. 1st ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Leithead, Alastair. 2007. "Doctor on Call in Afghanistan." BBC News, September 11. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6988551.stm.

Levi-Sanchez, Susanne. 2017. *The Afghan-Central Asia Borderland: The State and Local Leaders*. London: Routledge.

Low, Setha M., and Denise Lawrence-Zuniga, eds. 2007. *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Marschall, Tobias, and Till Mostowlansky. 2019. "Affective Labor: Afghanistan's Road to China." *Roadsides* 2: 73–87.

Marsden, Magnus, and Till Mostowlansky. 2019. "Whither West Asia? Exploring North-South Perspectives on Eurasia." *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 10 (1): 3–10.

Massey, Doreen. 2005. *For Space*. London: Sage.

Mostowlansky, Till. 2017. *Azan on the Moon: Entangling Modernity along Tajikistan's Pamir Highway*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Mostowlansky, Till. 2018. "Development Institutions and Religious Networks in the Pamirian Borderlands" In *Routledge Handbook of Asian Borderlands*, edited by Alexander Horstmann, Martin Saxer, and Alessandro Rippa, 385–395. London: Routledge.

Mostowlansky, Till. 2019. "Faraway Siblings So Close: Ephemeral Conviviality across the Wakhan Divide." *Modern Asian Studies* 53 (3): 943–977.

Mostowlansky, Till. 2020. "Humanitarian Affect: Islam, Aid and Emotional Impulse in Northern Pakistan." *History and Anthropology* 31 (2): 236–256.

Mostowlansky, Till. 2021. "Astronauts of the Western Pamirs: Mobility, Power, and Disconnection in High Asia." In *Methods, Moments, and Ethnographic Spaces in Asia*,

This content downloaded from 195.176.239.100 on Wed, 10 Jul 2024 12:07:11 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

edited by Nayantara S. Appleton and Caroline Bennett, 3–20. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Nazrulloev, Sadullo. 1979. *Dorozhnoe stroitel'stvo i razvitie transporta v Tadzhikistane v 1917–1941 gg*. Dushanbe, Tajikistan: Donish.

Panda, Ankit. 2017. "Are Chinese Forces Conducting Patrols in Afghanistan?" *Diplomat*, February 27. https://thediplomat.com/2017/02/are-chinese-forces-conducting-patrols-in-afghanistan/.

Reeves, Madeleine. 2011. "Introduction: Contested Trajectories, a Dynamic Approach to Place." *Central Asian Survey* 30 (3–4): 307–330.

Rest, Matthäus, and Alessandro Rippa. 2019. "Road Animism: Reflections on the Life of Infrastructures." *HAU* 9 (2): 373–389.

Rippa, Alessandro. 2018. "Old Routes, New Roads: Proximity across the China-Pakistan Border." In *Routledge Handbook of Asian Borderlands*, edited by Alexander Horstmann, Martin Saxer, and Alessandro Rippa, 114–126. London: Routledge.

Rippa, Alessandro, Galen Murton, and Matthäus Rest. 2020. "Building Highland Asia in the Twenty-First Century." *Verge* 6 (2): 83–111.

Saikal, Amin. 2012. *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival*. London: I. B. Tauris.

Saxer, Martin. 2016. "Pathways: A Concept, Field Site, and Methodological Approach to Study Remoteness and Connectivity." *Himalaya* 36 (2): 104–119.

Shahrani, Nazif M. 2002. *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan: Adaptation to Closed Frontiers and War*. 2nd ed. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Shih, Gerry. 2019. "In Central Asia's Forbidding Highlands, a Quiet Newcomer: Chinese Troops." *Washington Post*, February 18. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/in-central-asias-forbidding-highlands-a-quiet-newcomer-chinese-troops/2019/02/18/78d4a8d0-1e62-11e9-a759-2b8541bbbe20_story.html.

Siegelbaum, Lewis. 2008a. *Cars for Comrades: The Life of the Soviet Automobile*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Siegelbaum, Lewis H. 2008b. "Roadlessness and the 'Path to Communism': Building Roads and Highways in Stalinist Russia." *Journal of Transport History* 29 (2): 277–294.

Slavinskii, M. M., ed. 1935. *Sbornik statei o stroitel'stve Pamirskogo i Velikogo Kirgizkogo traktov*. Frunze, Soviet Union: Kirgosizdat.

Snead, James E., Clark L. Erickson, and J. Andrew Darling, eds. 2009. *Landscapes of Movement: Trails, Paths, and Roads in Anthropological Perspective*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Snow, Shawn. 2017. "Chinese Troops Appear to Be Operating in Afghanistan, and the Pentagon Is OK with It." *Military Times*, March 5. https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2017/03/05/chinese-troops-appear-to-be-operating-in-afghanistan-and-the-pentagon-is-ok-with-it/.

Turton, David. 2005. "The Meaning of Place in a World of Movement: Lessons from Long-Term Field Research in Southern Ethiopia." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 18 (3): 258–280.

USGS. 2011. Jeffrey J. Danielson and Dean B. Gesch. "Global Multi-resolution Terrain Elevation Data 2010." United States Geological Survey Open-File Report 2011-1073. https://pubs.usgs.gov/of/2011/1073/pdf/of2011-1073.pdf.

This content downloaded from 195.176.239.100 on Wed, 10 Jul 2024 12:07:11 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms