

4. Routes into Xinjiang

4.1. Afghan Opiates in China

Very little is known about the current volumes of trafficking between Afghanistan and China. The traditional division of the Chinese market into Afghan and Burmese segments, adhered to in the previous section, stems from fragmentary data. China's systems for the forensic testing of opiate origin are not well-developed and it has only recently begun to collate information from its data sources.⁷⁷

The authorities responsible for information on drug abuse are the National Surveillance Center on Drug Abuse and the Office of National Narcotics Control Commission. In 2003 China's Drug Abuse Surveillance Network reached 31 provinces but it is primarily a system for monitoring trends in the number and composition of abusers arrested, presenting for treatment etc.⁷⁸ The information accessible from these agencies does not present a clear statistical picture of opiate origin at a national level; nor does it give evidence for the share of Afghan opiates seized or consumed in different provinces.

In recent reports the DEA quotes Chinese government estimates that 20% of opiates in China are from Afghanistan⁷⁹ - the UNODC *World Drug Report 2004* gives a similar figure - but it is unclear what informs these views. Whilst it is fair to assume that opiates in Yunnan are Burmese, determining the origin of seizures in China's central provinces essentially depends on establishing the direction in which they were travelling. The share of Afghan opiates in the Xinjiang market is even more difficult to establish.

Other indirect evidence might be useful, such as the spread of HIV. In Xinjiang, the HIV strain is almost entirely that found in Myanmar and Yunnan and is not the same as that in Russia.⁸⁰ This does not necessarily

⁷⁷ National Surveillance Center on Drug Abuse, 2004; correspondence with UNODC Bangkok.

⁷⁸ National Surveillance Center on Drug Abuse, 2004.

⁷⁹ For example, the *China Country Brief*.

⁸⁰ S. Piyasirisilp et.al., "A recent outbreak of HIV Type 1 infection in Southern China was initiated by two highly homogeneous, geographically separate strains", *Journal of Virology* 74:23, 2000; A. Seytoff, "AIDS epidemic among Xinjiang's Uyghurs", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, July 5, 2000.

warrant the conclusion that Afghan opiates have little penetration in Xinjiang, however, since HIV is not spread by drugs but by users. Given the large numbers of migrants Xinjiang has received from further east, it would be surprising if infections from south-eastern Chinese HIV did not outnumber those from Russia. If HIV strain in Xinjiang is an accurate proxy for opiate origin then either the results from HIV studies are quite inaccurate or the 20% estimate is.

More importantly in the context of this assessment, if Afghan opiates do take 20% of the Chinese market now, this would suggest there has been a rapid expansion. Most analysts previously thought they had little market penetration - for example, in 2001 the Chinese Minister for Public Security Jia Chunwang stated that 95% of China's opiates came from South-East Asia.⁸¹ If the situation has changed so quickly it would further demonstrate a need for immediate action.

With little idea as to the present volumes of trafficking from Afghanistan to China, the following analysis of routes is a presentation of the possibilities and makes few claims as to their current usage. This is sufficient for the purposes of the broad risk assessment in Section V but it does highlight the need for more detailed reconnaissance of routes in order to assess specific risks.

4.2. Ethnic Links and Trafficking

Drug trafficking routes often run along ethnic lines. Although exaggeration of this tendency is common, there is significant evidence that ethnic links at least facilitate drug trafficking.⁸² For example, in Afghanistan ethnic Tajiks in the northern provinces are the main suppliers of routes in Central Asia and couriers that cross into Tajikistan leave the country but not their ethnic group. Similarly, ethnic Chinese occupy key positions throughout the distribution chain of Burmese heroin,⁸³ particularly in the trade over the Myanmar-China border, where

⁸¹ Quoted in "Drug problem grows, upsets social stability", *China Daily*, February 10, 2001.

⁸² F. Bovenkerk, "Crime and the multi-ethnic society: A view from Europe", *Crime, Law & Social Change* 19, 1993; P. Williams and R. Godson, 2002; G. Bruinsma and W. Bernasco, "Criminal groups and transnational illegal markets", *Crime, Law & Social Change* 41, 2004; Bovenkerk, 2001; Chin, Zhang & Kelly, 2001; H.R. Friman, "Forging the vacancy chain: law enforcement efforts and mobility in criminal economies", *Crime, Law & Social Change* 41, 2004; Friman, 2004.

⁸³ Chin, Zhang & Kelly, 2001.

they are often responsible for heroin processing prior to smuggling.⁸⁴ Also, the fact that various ethnic groups – such as the Wa – straddle that border seems to facilitate smuggling.⁸⁵ This is not to deny profit as the fundamental goal of trafficking, but ethnic links reduce the risks involved. For the route analysis that follows, therefore, figure 3.1 (next page) is a useful rough guide.⁸⁶ Note that the distributions of ethnic Han and ethnic Russians have not been mapped; ‘varied’ refers to the many minorities in Pakistan’s Northern Areas and NWFP.

This section divides routes into Xinjiang into three categories: direct transport over the Afghan-Chinese border; routes via Pakistan; and the diversion of traffic that currently flows through Central Asia.

4.3. Direct Trafficking over the Afghan-Chinese Border

There are limited opportunities for trafficking directly from Afghanistan into China. The border between the two countries is 76km long and conditions along the frontier are inhospitable. The only border crossing is the Wakhjir Pass at an altitude of 4,927m, which is closed for at least five months a year and is open irregularly for the remainder.⁸⁷ Reaching the pass is difficult and depends on bringing opiates up through the Wakhan Corridor.

The Wakhan Corridor is a narrow slice of north-eastern Badakhshan wedged between the Tajik border to the north and the Pamir mountains to the south. It is an area of opium cultivation, although this is not as intensive as in other districts of Badakhshan because locals regard opium cultivation as a difficult prospect for which the labour requirements are not easily met.⁸⁸ There have also been recent declines in cultivation and some efforts to reduce addiction, led by the Shah of Panja, a local political

⁸⁴ DEA, *Burma Country Brief*.

⁸⁵ Chouvy, 2004. Similarly, familial connections between groups at the Bangladeshi-Indian borders assist in the imports of Burmese heroin to Bangladesh – DEA, *India Country Brief*.

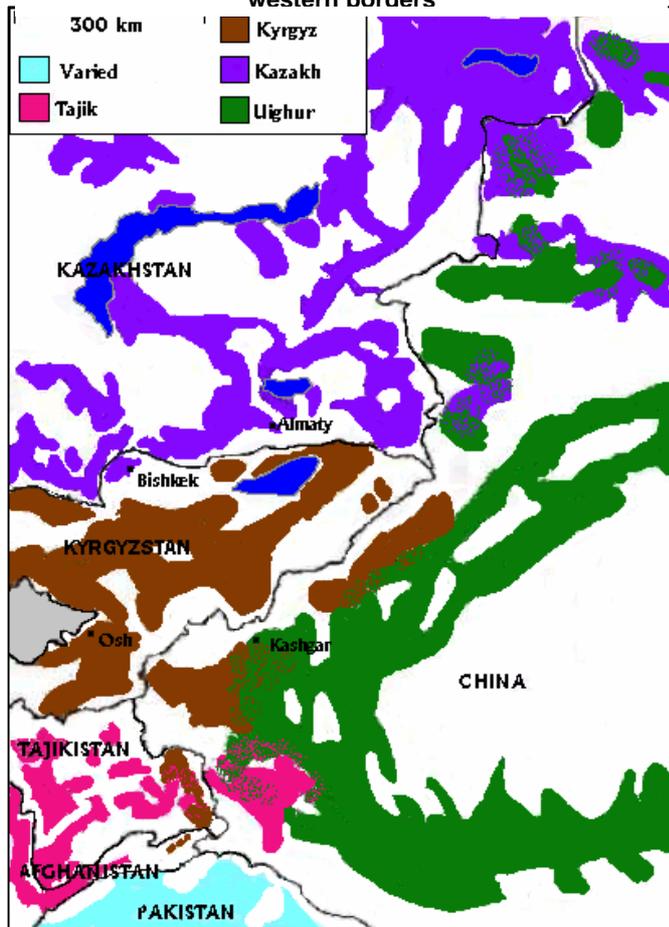
⁸⁶ Figure 3.1 draws on a variety of sources: several unreferenced maps held online at the University of Texas’ Perry-Castañeda Library; www.tajikistan.tajnet.com; and maps from Le Monde Diplomatique (mondediplo.com); H. Kreutzmann, “Ethnic minorities and marginality in the Pamirian knot: survival of Wakhi and Kirghiz in a harsh and environment and global contexts”, *The Geographical Journal* 169:3, 2003.

⁸⁷ This information came from a member of ISAF, drawing on what he termed a ‘very reliable source’ near the Afghan-Chinese border.

⁸⁸ Pain, 2004, p.iv.

and religious leader.⁸⁹ Instead of opium farming, labourers move to other areas in search of work, mostly in opium cultivation in central Badakhshan (but also for work in northern Pakistan⁹⁰). As a result, the Wakhan Corridor experiences large seasonal migration flows.⁹¹

Figure 4.1 : Distribution of ethnic groups on China's western borders



The overwhelming majority of opiate consumption here is of imports from further west. In the last few years asset loss among the population has accelerated due to addicts and their families being forced to clear their debts through sales. As a result, opium dealers from other districts have acquired a significant proportion of the productive potential of the Wakhan Corridor.⁹²

Opium use is endemic and drug addiction rates are quite high. The GTZ-AKDN Badakhshan

Programme estimates a range of 500-1,200 addicts in an adult population of around 4,200, a proportion of between 12% and 28%.⁹³ On this basis, the annual consumption of opium in the Corridor is between 660kg and 2,680kg.⁹⁴ Traders make bulk deliveries by 4WD,⁹⁵ indicating that there is

⁸⁹ *ibid.* p.24.

⁹⁰ Kreuzmann, 2003.

⁹¹ *ibid.* p.38.

⁹² Goodhand, 2000; Pain, 2004 p.iv.

⁹³ Pain, 2004 p.32.

⁹⁴ *ibid.* p.33.

⁹⁵ *loc. cit.*

the capacity to move sizeable amounts of opiates to the end of the Corridor.

Figures 4.2 - 4.5 show the route from the Wakhan Corridor into China (borders are shown in red). Links to the rest of Badakhshan are restricted to a road following the Tajik border from Sultan Ishkashim to Kala-e Panja, then to Sarhad-e Wakhan (this follows the low elevations in figure 3.2). This is rough but well-used – it is along this road that the 4WDs mentioned above travel.⁹⁶ From there, the route follows paths along the river, breaking right away from the Little Pamir and ascending to the Wakhjir Pass (see figure 3.4 and 3.5).⁹⁷ From Sarhad-e Wakhan to the pass is approximately 100 km along these paths. It is a short descent (approximately 15 km) from the border to a road on the Chinese side, which can be seen at the top of figure 3.4 and the bottom-right of figure 3.5. On this, it is a further 80 km to the Karakoram Highway.

In the opinion of a source near the Afghan-Chinese border this route is impossible for half the year and challenging for the other half.⁹⁸ The lack of road links restricts trafficking loads to those that can be carried on foot or by pack animal, although the many such crossings of the Afghan-Tajik border show that this is not an insubstantial risk. For China, the security risk of this border became apparent in early 2001, when it claims Taliban fighters crossed into its territory via the Wakhan Corridor.⁹⁹ Overall, however, the effort required to reach the Chinese border renders this an unattractive option while trafficking through Tajikistan remains unchallenging.

⁹⁶ Afghanistan Tourism Authority; Pain, 2004; tourism companies offering treks in the Corridor.

⁹⁷ Different maps and cartographers perceive different degrees of development of this route and to paths through the Little Pamir - maps and insights provided by Markus Hauser and the Pamir Archive (www.pamir.org); Soviet military maps; satellite images and data.

⁹⁸ Information from the same ISAF member – see note 87.

⁹⁹ D. Gladney, "Islam in China: Accommodation or separatism?" *The China Quarterly* 174, 2003. This would seem unlikely given that Badakhshan is the heartland of the Northern Alliance.

Figure 4.3: The Wakhan Corridor

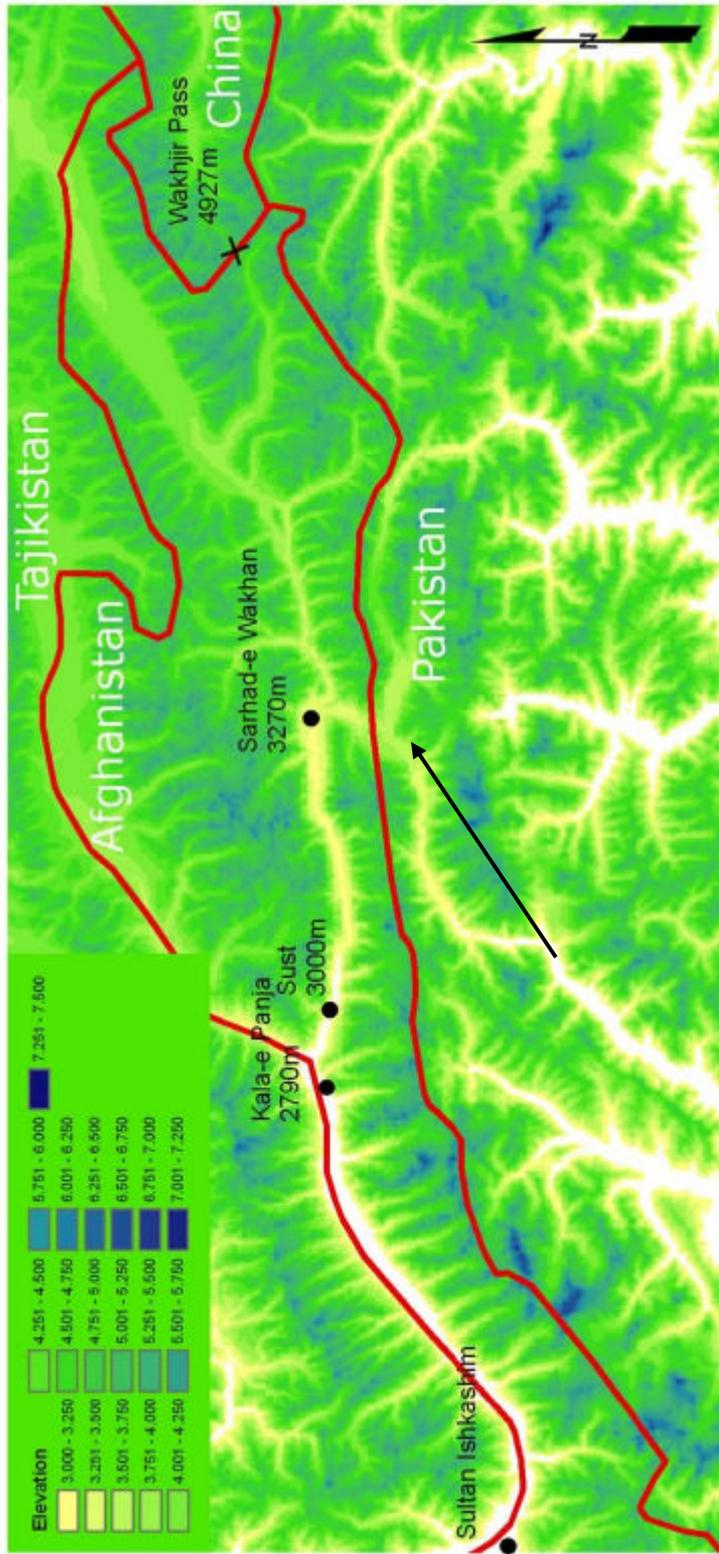
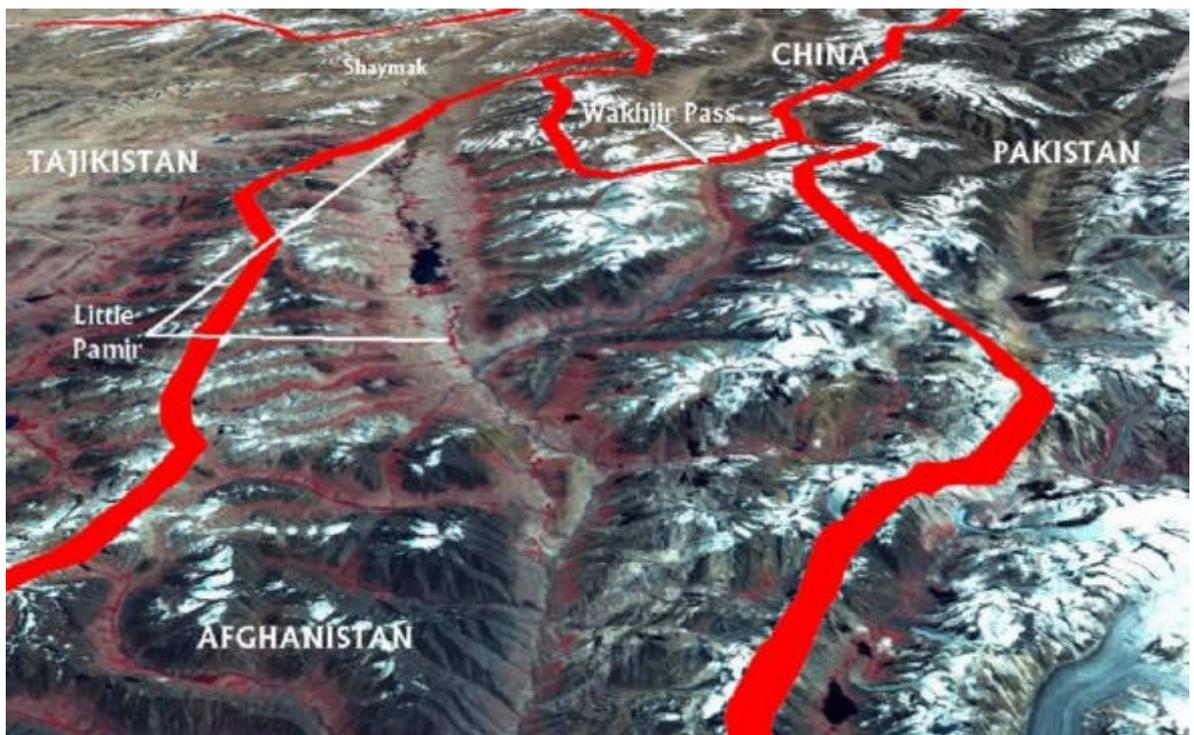


Figure 4.3: Photograph down the Wakhan Corridor

Figure 4.4 : West to east aspect view of the route into China



Figure 4.5: East to west aspect view of the route into China



4.4. Trafficking via Pakistan

Opium cultivation has a long history in Pakistan, both for domestic consumption and for export. Current figures suggest that it is in a state of flux - for the period 1995-2002 the area under opium cultivation was below 1,000 hectares, but in 2003 the government reported cultivation on 2,500 hectares, following eradication of 4,200 hectares.¹⁰⁰ Most of this occurred in the Khyber Agency and indicates that the pressures of poverty and the social and cultural capacity for opium production still exist.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, Pakistan is home to a large number of chronic heroin users,¹⁰² ensuring that it retains importance as a market in its own right.

Trafficking between Afghanistan and Pakistan already occurs in substantial volumes. The bulk of this flows over Afghanistan's southern

border into Baluchistan, from where multi-ton consignments cross into Iran.¹⁰³ On Afghanistan's eastern border, movement into Pakistan is not difficult. In Pakistan's NWFP and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) (see figure 3.6), the frontier with Afghanistan is extremely porous.¹⁰⁴ Neither national government exerts strong control over the border

areas and goods and people move freely between the two countries - smuggling opium or heroin into the north of Pakistan has traditionally

Figure 4.6: Pakistan's administrative divisions



¹⁰⁰ UNODC *World Drug Report 2004*.

¹⁰¹ Interview with senior ANF officer, September 17, 2004.

¹⁰² UNODC, *Drug Abuse in Pakistan - results from the year 2000 Assessment*, 2002.

¹⁰³ Presentation by Vladimir Fenopetov at Uppsala University, September 23, 2004; DEA *Pakistan Country Brief*.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with a senior ANF officer in their Islamabad office September 17, 2004; DEA *Pakistan Country Brief*.

been unchallenging, although it is facing new pressures because of an increased US and Pakistani military presence on either side of the border. The Iranian route is the preoccupation of Pakistani and international counter-narcotics agencies but Pakistan's ANF has also been active in the NWFP and FATA, targeting smuggling through Peshawar for local consumption and on the way to northern India.¹⁰⁵ According to the ANF, however, since 2001 counter-terrorist activities in these volatile areas have made it difficult for counter-narcotics forces.¹⁰⁶ Given the concurrent increase in Pakistani opium cultivation, such a complaint seems valid.

Aside from drugs coming to the Chinese border from further south, there are also many tracks that cross into the NWFP and the Northern Areas from Badakhshan. These are mountainous trails and most are only usable from May to October, although it is notable that at these times there are frequent tourist treks in the area.¹⁰⁷

However drugs reach the Northern Areas, the route into China is the Karakoram Highway (KKH), shown in figure 3.7 and 3.8 (next two pages) between Gilgit and Tashkurghan. Gilgit is a particularly poor district¹⁰⁸ and along Pakistani sections, the road is subject to landslides and blockages due to weather, but on the Chinese side it is in good condition. Both China and Pakistan consider the KKH an important link, for its symbolism¹⁰⁹ and for the trade link. It appears that traffickers do not currently use this route to transport significant quantities of drugs.

In comparison with other northward flows out of Afghanistan, the loads moving along the KKH are small. There have been reports of the interception of small loads¹¹⁰ but as a method for transporting drugs beyond the far south-west of China the KKH cannot compete with the relatively easy task of crossing the Tajik-Afghan border. Opiate

¹⁰⁵ DEA, *Pakistan Country Brief*.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with a senior ANF officer in their Islamabad office September 17, 2004.

¹⁰⁷ Information from various tour companies and guides; descriptions of tours from their websites; also useful were the many personal accounts of treks through the area posted on the Internet.

¹⁰⁸ H. Kreutzmann, "Development indicators for mountain regions", *Mountain Research and Development* 21:2, 2001.

¹⁰⁹ *China-Pakistan Joint Declaration*, signed in Islamabad November 4, 2003; "Pakistan to help China on counter-terrorism", *Daily Times*, Lahore, April 18, 2004;

¹¹⁰ Witnessed by a foreign academic who has travelled extensively in the area, interview October 18, 2004.

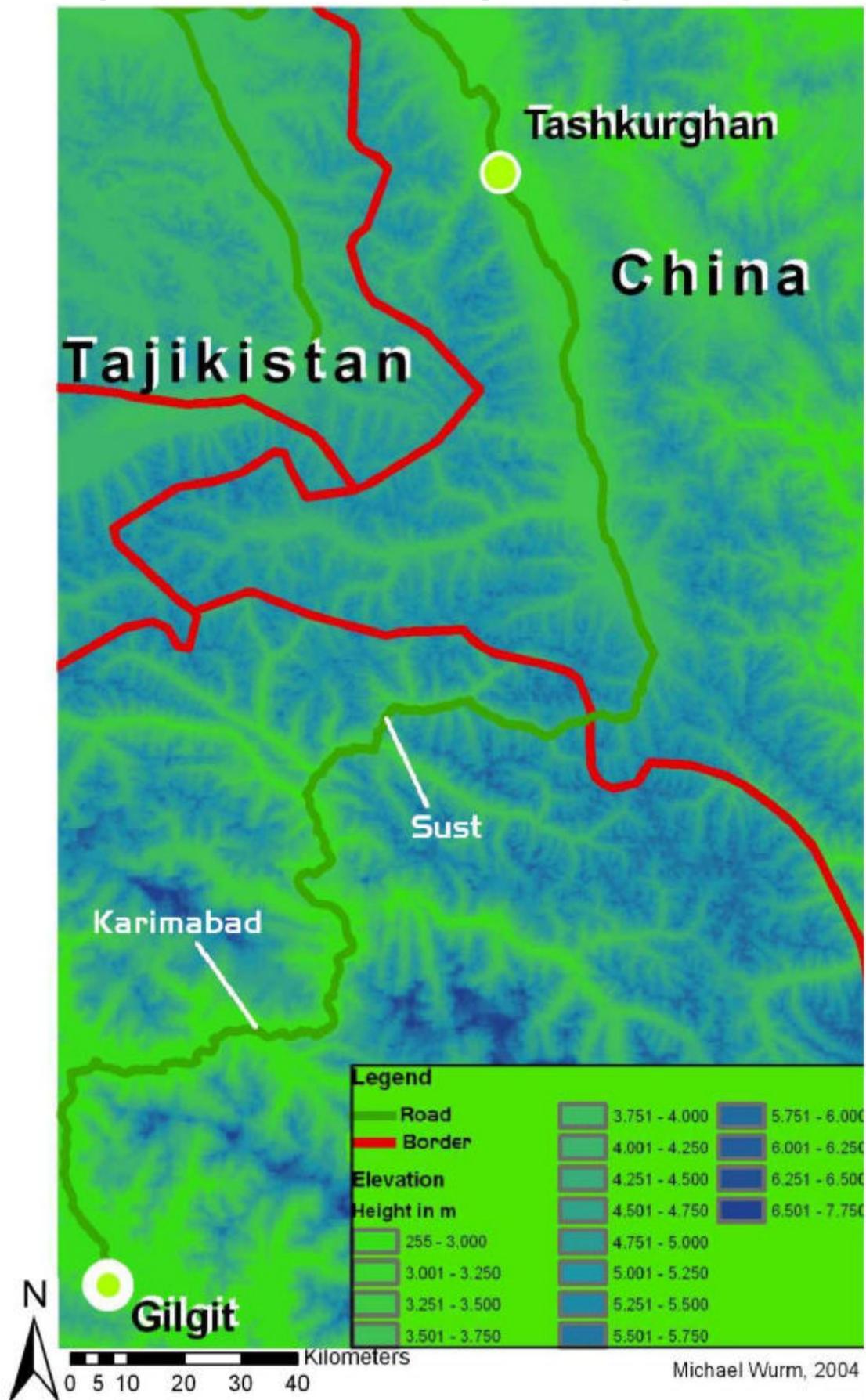
trafficking on the KKH is probably for local consumption in the Northern Areas and southern Xinjiang rather than for further transport within China or internationally. With regard to figure 3.1, the ethnic divide between Badakhshan and the Northern Areas suggests it is more likely that drugs would be brought up from Peshawar rather than along the trails from the Wakhan Corridor. Although residents of the Corridor do regularly cross to trade and work in Pakistan,¹¹¹ the ethnic difference between the Northern Areas and Xinjiang would seem to give a further advantage to trafficking directly north from Afghanistan.

¹¹¹ Kreutzmann, 2003.

Figure 4.7: The KKH between Gilgit and Tashkurghan



Figure 4.8: Elevation of the KKH between Gilgit and Tashkurghan



4.5. Diversion of Afghanistan's Northern Route

The volume of Afghan opiates moving through Central Asia has grown rapidly since the mid-1990s. As discussed in Section II, substantial heroin-producing capacity has moved into the north of Afghanistan and from there it crosses the Tajik, Uzbek and Turkmen borders. Figure 3.9 charts the changes in the use of Central Asian trafficking routes.¹¹²

Several influences on these figures are notable. Firstly, Turkmenistan is a transit country for drugs on both the northern routes

through Central Asia and the western routes through Iran and the Caspian Sea, so some of the drugs seized in that country are not destined to move through other Central Asian republics. Furthermore, Turkmenistan has ceased reporting seizures, although there is little reason to believe this reflects a real decline in trafficking there.¹¹³

Figure 4.9: Seizures in Central Asia 1997-2002

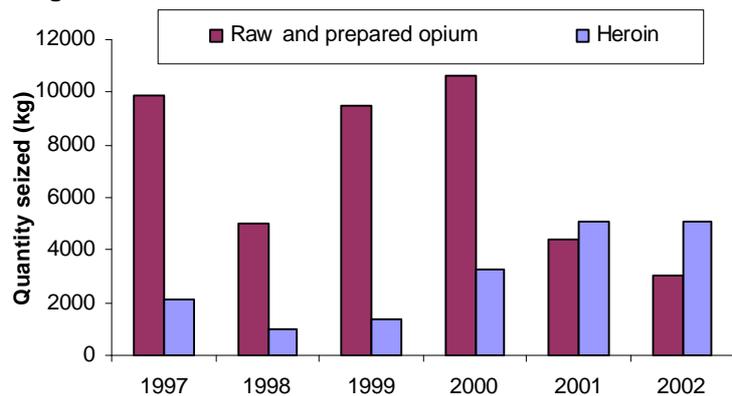
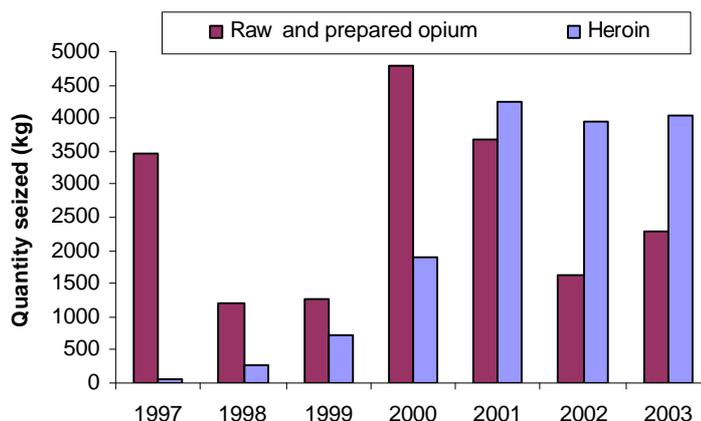


Figure 4.10: Seizures in Tajikistan 1997-2003



Secondly, interception of drugs in some countries, such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, has improved greatly during the period, so better enforcement accounts for some increase in seizures.

¹¹² UNODC seizures data.

¹¹³ Determining the drug situation in Turkmenistan and understanding how narcotics move through the country has proved very difficult, not least because officials in high positions seem to be directly involved – ICG, *Cracks in the Marble: Turkmenistan's Failing Dictatorship*, Asia Report No.44, January 17, 2003.

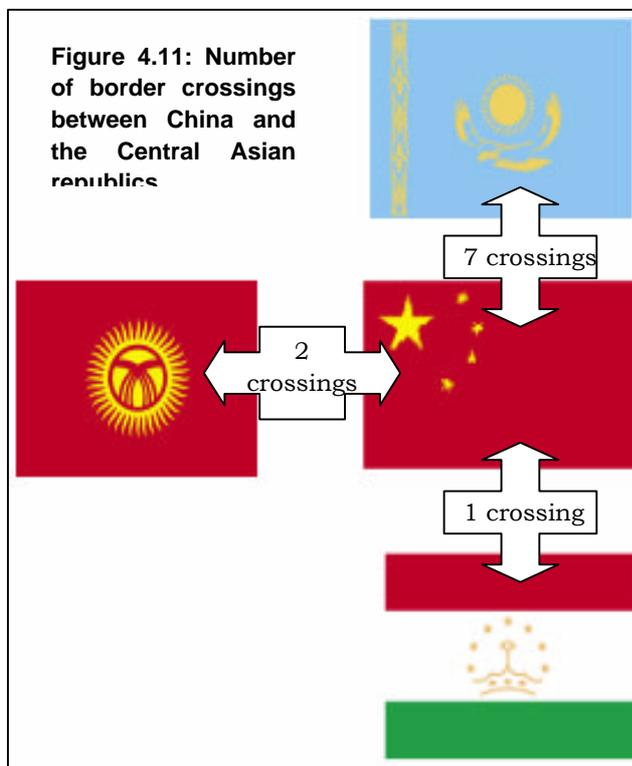
Thirdly, opium trafficking on northern routes is declining and heroin trafficking is increasing. In absolute weight there is now more heroin seized in Central Asia than opium, which means the increase in heroin equivalents is much greater than figure 3.9 might suggest. In 1995, heroin seizures were only 3% of all opiates seizures (converted to heroin equivalents). In 2001, they accounted for more than 90%.

Finally, a disproportionate share of seizures is occurring in Tajikistan. Sharing a 1,200 km border with Afghanistan, it has become the most popular first country of transit for northbound Afghan opiates. Figure 3.10 (previous page) charts seizures in Tajikistan¹¹⁴ and the rapid increase in opiates seizures in general and heroin in particular is clear. The popularity of Tajikistan for traffickers raises the risk to China as very large opiate flows occur close to Chinese borders.

Afghan opiates already enter China and most estimates hold the view that they circulate in Xinjiang and are a small diversion of the quantities destined for Russia and Europe (as discussed above, supporting data is fragmentary). Figure 3.10, combined with the continuing large harvests in

Afghanistan, suggest that a ready supply of opiates is nearby for any expansion of this diversion.

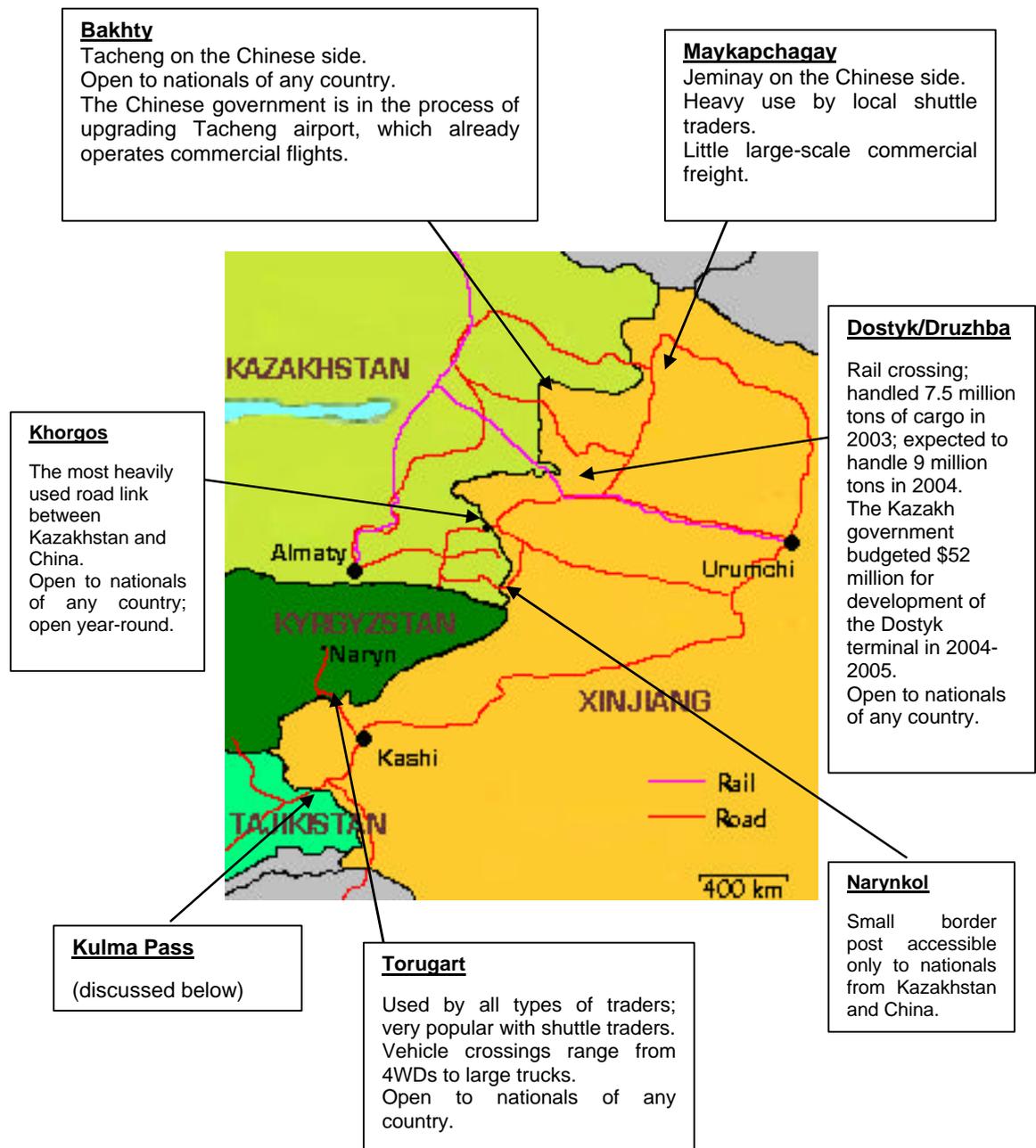
Figure 3.11 summarises official border crossings between China and the Central Asian republics.¹¹⁵ The use of these varies greatly, from local traders to large-scale commercial operations. At all official border crossings China provides some degree of control on incoming traffic but conditions at many checkpoints on the



¹¹⁴ UNODC seizures data.

¹¹⁵ International Organization for Migration – www.iom.org.

Central Asian countries' side are such that they provide no deterrent to trafficking. Moreover, there are many points at which border crossings are possible via unguarded tracks and roads. A detailed assessment of each of these routes is beyond the scope of this paper but figure 3.12 (next page) shows selected official crossings on relevant rail and road networks in order to illustrate the directions of current legal traffic flows into Xinjiang. The important point is that large volumes of traffic and goods now move into Xinjiang from Central Asia.



In general, the regions in Central Asia with which Xinjiang has direct links are depressed or stagnant economically.¹¹⁶ As is plainly evident in the drug flows to Russia and Europe, for many people in Central Asia involvement in trafficking is very attractive and the pressures on some potential couriers are difficult to overstate.¹¹⁷ Many of the rural communities close to the Chinese border in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are extremely poor and the incentive to work as a courier is great, despite most viewing it as a necessary evil. Just as significantly, China's neighbours have a relatively youthful population for whom the lack of economic and social progress is frustrating and who perceive few opportunities for legal self-advancement.¹¹⁸

4.6. Of Special Concern: the Border with Tajikistan

Figure 3.13, 3.14 and 3.15 (below) shows most of the Tajik-Chinese border (borders are shown in red and road in green; not all roads are mapped). It is 414km long and much of it is above 5000m. There is one official border crossing – the Kulma Pass, at 4362m (China's checkpoint is the Karasu Port). Recently, transport ministers from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) members met in Dushanbe for discussions that included prospects for upgrading the Kulma Pass, as part of a link from Uzbekistan to Xinjiang.¹¹⁹ The current volume of traffic is not great (see box, next page). One foreign aid worker reported that inspections at the Karasu Port were cursory, which would seem to confirm the report of a customs officer in Urumchi that drug detection is not a priority at the crossing.¹²⁰

The rest of the frontier is not well-guarded.¹²¹ Although high, there are many points at which a border crossing is possible because the terrain is

¹¹⁶ S. Akbarzadeh, "Keeping Central Asia stable", *Third World Quarterly* 25:4, 2004; Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, *National Poverty Reduction Strategy 2003-2005*, 2002; ICG, *Tajikistan: A roadmap for development*, Asia Report No.51, April 24, 2003; Kreutzmann, 2001.

¹¹⁷ In Tajikistan, for example, where national food shortages can be severe (ICG, *Tajikistan: A roadmap for development*), a run as a courier might be construed as a quest for survival.

¹¹⁸ ICG, *Youth in Central Asia: Losing the new generation*, Asia Report No.66, October 31, 2003.

¹¹⁹ "SCO transport ministers to discuss transport corridors in Dushanbe", *ITAR-TASS* November 2, 2004.

¹²⁰ Correspondence with the author.

¹²¹ One European cartographer/trekker who is a regular visitor to the region described a border fence maintained by the Chinese along the southern section of the Tajik-Chinese border, contrasting this with a deteriorating barrier north of the Kulma Pass. A member of UNODC who visited the region and a foreign aid

relatively flat. The elevation map in figure 3.14 (below) gives an idea of where flatter crossings would be possible. To the south of Murghab, from the Tokhtamish-Shaymak area, the walk across can be done in a day, which dramatically lowers the climactic and altitude risks to smugglers.¹²² The regularity of Chinese patrols is unclear. One foreign visitor described a system of informants the military maintains in the border villages¹²³ but others report few problems in moving around.¹²⁴

4.13: The Tajik-Chinese border in eastern Tajikistan



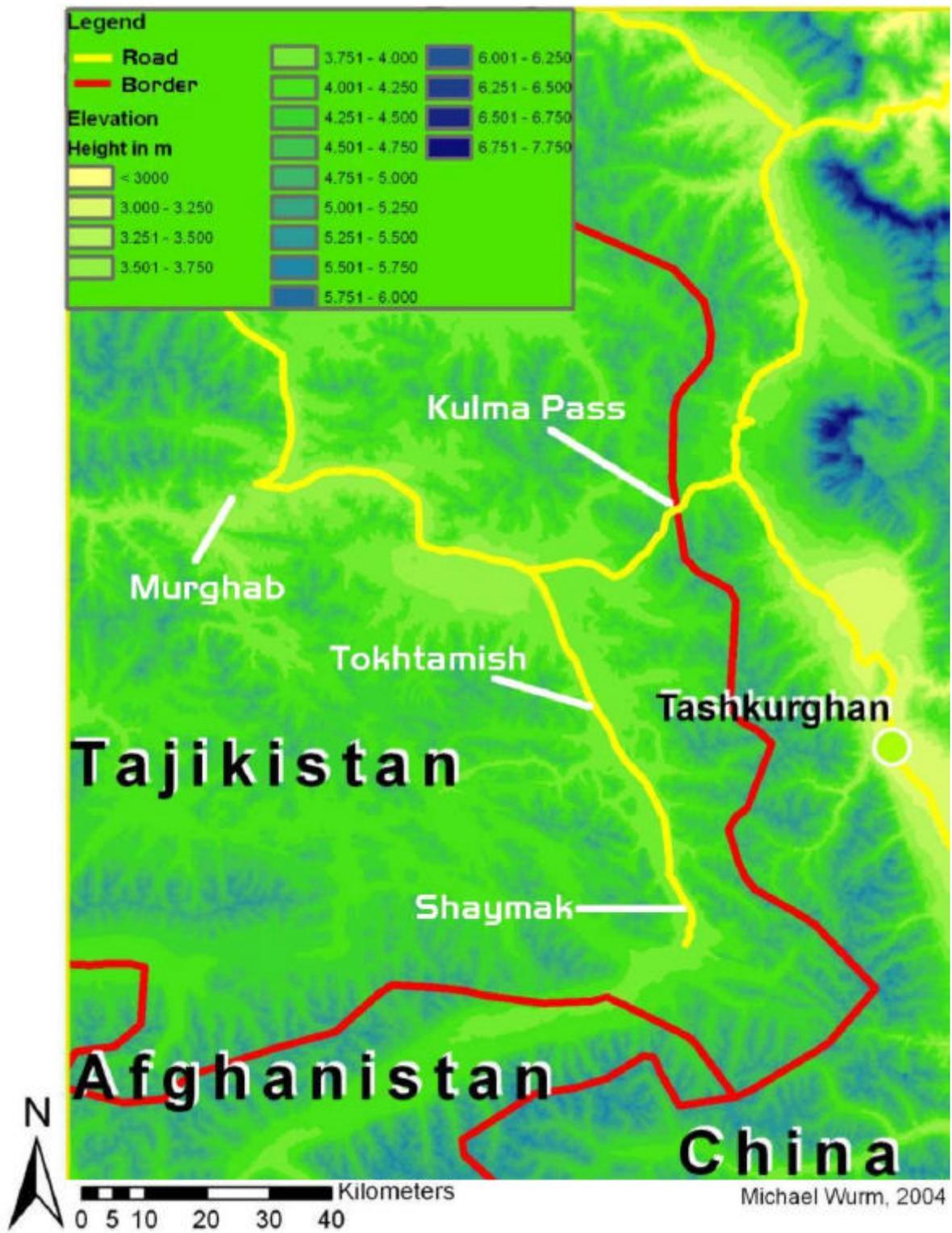
worker on the Tajik side claimed there was no fence at all. Suffice to say that if there is a fence in sections it is evidently not much of one.

¹²² Interview with a Tajik academic, September 28, 2004; UNODC staff visit to the region, 2004.

¹²³ Interview with a foreign academic who specialises in the region and is a regular visitor, October 18, 2004.

¹²⁴ UNODC staff visit to the region, 2004; correspondence with a foreign aid worker on the Tajik side.

Figure .14: Elevation of the Tajik-Chinese border in eastern Tajikistan



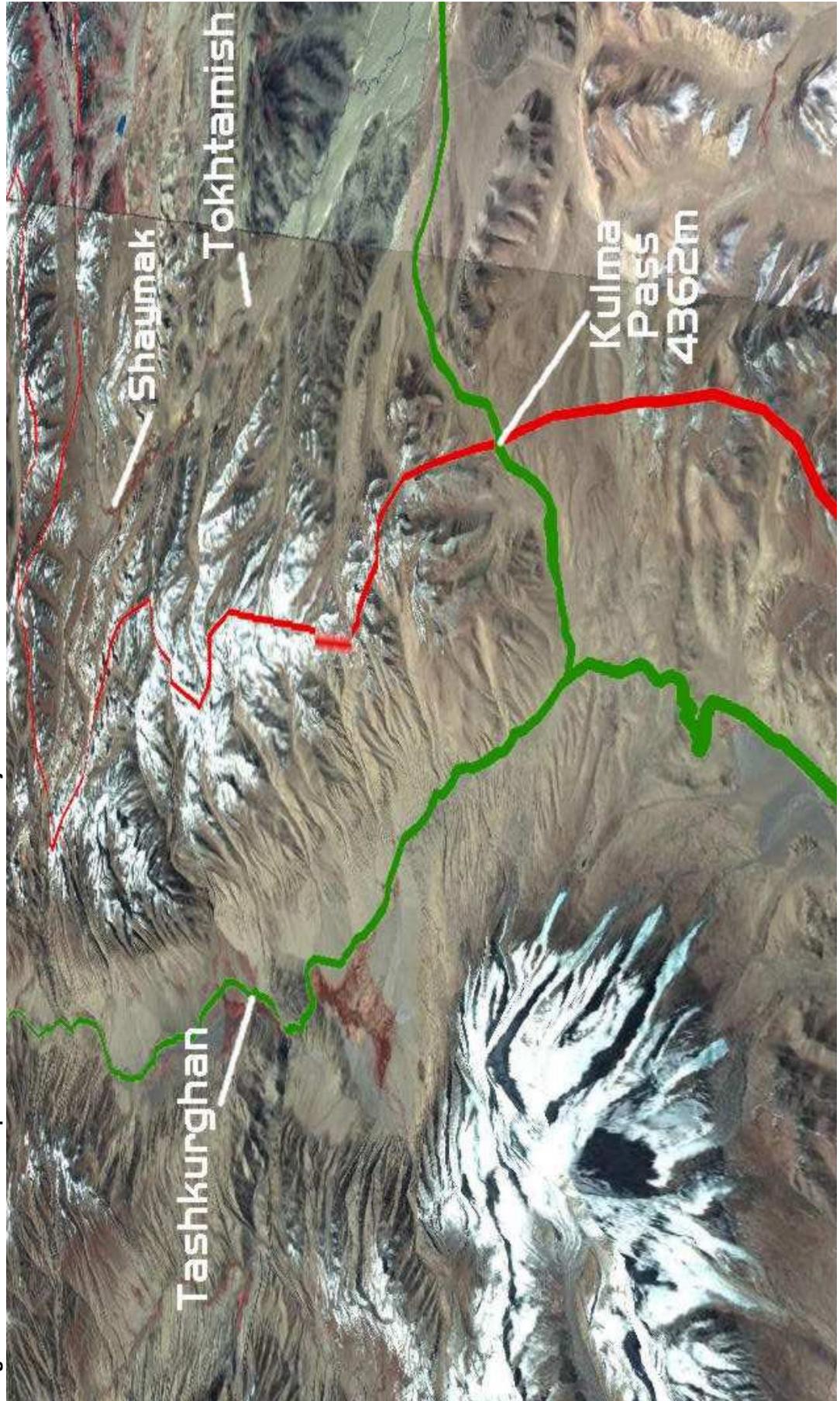


Figure 4.15: North to south aspect view of the Kulma Pass and the Tajik-Chinese border

The Tajik Gorno-Badakhshan border region is underdeveloped (see box¹²⁵). In the south, serviceable roads come within 13km of the border at Shaymak, opposite Tashkurghan. Traffickers are unlikely to have difficulty with police in this corner of Tajikistan and inspections along the Shaymak-Murghab road are very rare.¹²⁶

To supply such crossings, the most likely diversion of current flows would come from Khorog and the Osh-Khorog highway. Moving drugs between Khorog and south-eastern Tajikistan would pose little problem in terms of law enforcement detection. An even safer route, however, is that from the Wakhan Corridor directly into the Shaymak area. This has the virtue of avoiding a crossing of the Wakhjir Pass and instead travelling through the Little Pamir, shown in figures 3.4 and 3.5 above, which is still at a high altitude (see figure 3.2) but is an easier trek. Furthermore, this part of the border has not received much attention from Russian border guards and is one of the first sections on the Tajik-Afghan frontier to

Profile of a border region: Gorno-Badakhshan
Autonomous Oblast

Tajikistan's direct road link with China crosses into Xinjiang from the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast. It is a very poor region and for at least three months a year the roads to Dushanbe are closed. Economic opportunities are extremely limited, even in the capital city of Khorog. Most licit income in rural areas comes from trade with Kyrgyzstan via the Osh-Khorog highway, which is open all year round.

It is difficult to establish the prevalence of drug use in the region. Opium use was common in Soviet times, primarily for medicinal purposes. Today, a majority of the population are devoutly Muslim but residents of Khorog acknowledge that heroin is widely available and its use has spread. In other parts of the oblast the picture is less clear but it does not appear to be difficult to obtain opiates in rural areas. According to one Tajik academic, drug use in the oblast was growing rapidly until a few years ago, since when it seems to have stabilized.

The Kulma Pass was officially opened on May 25th 2004. A bus trip between Khorog and Kashgar takes around twenty hours in good weather and the road is currently in a poor condition. Figures for traffic volume are sparse, but the Tajik Ministry of Transport and Roads reported that in three months of operation, a total of 17 trucks, 10 buses, 240 tons of goods and 172 people have (officially) used the pass. Local Tajiks are enthusiastic about the opportunity to trade across the border, but a lack of passports among residents on both sides prevents people from crossing, at least officially.

¹²⁵ ICG, *Tajikistan: A roadmap for development*; A. Blua, "Tajikistan: Traders look to China for brighter future", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Europe*, August 20, 2004; K. Arman, "US geopolitical position takes hit in Tajikistan", *Eurasia Insight*, July 13, 2004.

¹²⁶ Correspondence with a foreign aid worker near the border; interview with a cartographer/trekker who has visited the area regularly October 4, 2004.

come under the control of the Tajik military during the current transfer of control.

North of the Kulma Pass, trekking routes lead from the nearby Osh-Khorog highway to various passes along the Chinese border.¹²⁷ There is a greater police presence here compared with the south-east, although regular visitors have noted a shift towards more law enforcement at the Kyrgyz border and a reduction in the number and thoroughness of vehicle inspections along the highway.¹²⁸ Note that figure 3.13 (above) shows a second road crossing the border further north from the Kulma Pass. The state of this road is unclear – many maps plot it but one foreign visitor with extensive experience of the area denies its existence.¹²⁹ It is likely this road is a 4WD track, of which there seem to be several criss-crossing the border at several points.¹³⁰

On the Tajik side, border defence is in a state of flux. Until 2003, the Tajik-Chinese border was guarded by the Russian 201st Motorized Infantry Division. It has since become Tajikistan's responsibility but troop effectiveness is limited by a lack of equipment and training. One soldier at the Kulma Pass reported that there had even been complaints about a lack of food, although conditions there appear to have improved somewhat recently.¹³¹ In general, however, the Tajik military is still under-funded and under-equipped.¹³² It is unclear how well Tajikistan has replaced Russian patrols along northern border sections but reports from regular visitors and a local aid worker suggest that the adjustments have weakened security.

In terms of cross-border community/ethnic links, it is significant that the ethnic Tajiks on the Chinese side speak a language quite distinct from

¹²⁷ Satellite imagery and data; cartography by Markus Hauser; interview with a cartographer/trekker who has visited the area regularly, October 4, 2004.

¹²⁸ Correspondence with a foreign hiker who has driven the highway many times; interview with a cartographer/trekker who has visited the area regularly, October 4, 2004.

¹²⁹ Interview with a cartographer/trekker who has visited the area regularly, October 4, 2004.

¹³⁰ UNODC staff visit to the region, 2004.

¹³¹ Interview with a Tajik academic, a relative of the soldier, September 28, 2004.

¹³² Amongst other problems, Tajikistan's conscription system remains quite dysfunctional, although the government recently moved to address some abuses, such as military officers purchasing conscripts rounded up by police in order to reach recruitment targets – G. Amirshoeva, "Tajik army abuses tackled", Institute for War & Peace Reporting, available at www.iwpr.net.

that on Tajikistan's side (although both are often referred to as 'Tajik').¹³³ However, there is some interaction between the two sides, particularly in the Tokhtamish/Shaymak region. As examples, many members of the extended family of an imam at the Tokhtamish mosque live across the border in Tashkurghan¹³⁴ and there are cross-border marriages.¹³⁵ As discussed above, familial and ethnic connections assist trafficking and therefore make it more feasible across this section of the border (as well as various sections of the Kyrgyz-Chinese and Kazakh-Chinese borders – see figure 3.1 above). Although such links are far from necessary for drug smuggling they do suggest a closeness of communities that would inhibit surveillance and interdiction.

4.7. A note on Air Links

Air travel out of Xinjiang has increased substantially over the last decade but as a proportion of total traffic it is still quite low. By the end of 2005, China plans to have seven airports in the province: it is upgrading Urumchi, Hotan and Hami and is building new airports at Korla, Karamay, Narat and Turpan.¹³⁶ Urumchi airport is growing quickly and connects with Central Asian capitals. Still, Central Asia's air links are underdeveloped – 90% of transit traffic is via railway and road¹³⁷ – and 88% of Xinjiang's (registered) foreign trade by volume was transported by rail in 2003.¹³⁸

With less legitimate air traffic it is more difficult to conceal illicit cargo. Despite this, trafficking occurs via Central Asia's air links, although arrest reports suggest that most of the small-scale smuggling by this method is bound for Russia. It seems that traffickers do not currently use

¹³³ Gladney, 2003.

¹³⁴ Interview with a cartographer/trekker who has visited the area regularly, October 4, 2004.

¹³⁵ Reporting from a UNODC staff visit to the region, 2004.

¹³⁶ "Xinjiang region set to build six feeder airports", www.china.org.cn; Civil Aviation Administration of China.

¹³⁷ L. Guseva, "Transit potential of the Central Asian region's transport complex; conditions and prospects of development", paper presented to a CIMERA conference, *Economic Integration of the Central Asian Countries: Chances and Obstacles*, Dushanbe October 25, 2002.

¹³⁸ *China and Euro-Asian Transport Linkages*, presentation by China's Ministry of Communications to the UNECE 1st Expert Group Meeting on Developing Euro-Asian Transport Linkages 2002-2006, Almaty, March 11, 2004.

air transport to move significant narcotics loads into Xinjiang. The feasibility of trafficking into China by air will likely move in close step with that of trafficking by land and will depend greatly on the corruptibility of law enforcement.