THE PAMIR KNOT

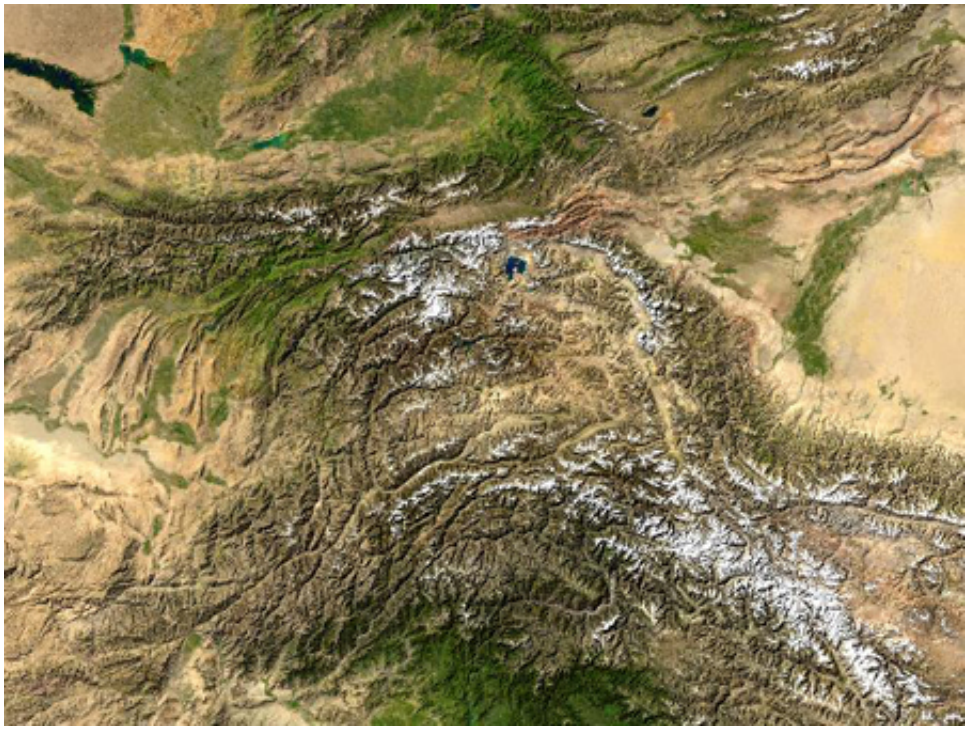
Kashgar, Chinese Turkestan. About 55 million years ago, the giant subcontinent of India, which had been drifting north for tens of millions of years after breaking off from the supercontinent of Gondwanaland, began crashing into the Eurasian land mass at a speed of 8 inches a year.

It hit not flat-on but at an angle, with the huge projecting tip of the northwest corner of India slamming into Asia first. As it bulldozed underneath Asia (a process called subduction), an Asian inland ocean called the Sea of Tethys (named after a Greek sea goddess) was tilted up and drained off, becoming the Tibetan Plateau.

The edge of Asia buckled like crinkled paper, creating the world's greatest mountain ranges, including the Himalayas. Mount Everest, now at 29,028 feet, was once the bottom of the Tethys Sea, and because India continues to drive under Asia at over a tenth of an inch a year, it will reach over 30,000 feet in a few hundred thousand years.

The Himalayas were but one mountain range buckled up by the India-Asia collision. From that projecting tip of the collision, enormous mountain ranges radiated out: the Tien Shan to the north, the Hindu Kush to the south, the Kun Lun to the northeast, and the Karakorum-Himalaya to the east.

The center of this radiation is a tortured jumble of gigantic mountains over 20,000 feet high amidst a plateau of over 14,000 feet known since ancient times as "The Roof of the World." The welter of mountain ranges comprising this jumble has been called since the days of Marco Polo (1254-1324) "The Pamir Knot." Polo crossed it in 1272. I finished crossing it yesterday (9/02).



As fascinating as the geology is, the people here are more interesting. The Pamir Knot is in the southeast corner of Tajikistan, a country there was a short history of in Why Should There Be An Afghanistan? (last July 1st).

As stated there, while the four other "Stans" of the former USSR (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan) are ethnically Turkic, Tajikistan is not. Tajiks are ethnically Persian and speak a Persian dialect called Dari. They are, however, not Shia Moslem like the Persians of Iran, but Sunni Moslem instead.

The border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan is the Amu Darya river, which the ancient Greeks called the Oxus. I just drove almost a thousand kilometers along this border, with most of the time Afghanistan just a few hundred or so feet away on the other side of the river. The people who live here and in the Pamir Knot are, I discovered, very different from other Tajiks.

Among themselves, the inhabitants of the Pamirs call themselves "Macedonians." Most have fair skin with red, light brown, or even blonde hair, and blue or green eyes. They consider themselves the descendants of the Alexander the Great's Greeks and those of the *Greco-Bactrian Kingdom* we learned about in The Doormat of Empires (last June 24th). Here's a young Pamirian girl:

They speak an "Avestan" language which is that of the ancient scriptures of Zoroastrianism, the religion of all Central Asia until it was replaced by the sword of Arab Islam in the 6th-7th centuries. Here is an anatomically correct statue of Ahura-Mazda, the god of Zoroastrianism, from about 500 AD (picture taken in the Dushanbe Museum):

The kind of Islam practiced by Pamirians is permeated with elements of Zoroastrianism, such as the worship of fire. Here is the entrance to the burial shrine of an Islamic saint in the Wakhan, next to which is an altar for sacred ceremonial fires:

That kind of Islam in the Pamirs is called *Ismailism*. Ever hear of the Aga Khan? That's the title of the spiritual leader of the Ismailis (*iss-my-lees*), who believe in a mystical, peaceful form of Islam that is the antithesis of hate, violence, and Sharia imperialism that infuses mainstream Sunni or Shia Islam.

There are no mosques in the Pamirs, because Ismailis have no mosques. They pray privately - men and women together. Ismaili men are extremely respectful of women. The thought of treating women as an inferior form of humanity as does mainstream Islam is as disgusting to Ismaili men as it is to us. No Ismaili man would even think of demanding his wife wear a veil or cover her face in public.

The Ismaili Pamirians are among the most friendly and hospitable people I have ever met around the world. They always have a smile for you, a stranger, and the smile is genuine. At any opportunity, they will invite you into their home for a cup of tea and bowl of yogurt. You are not an infidel to them, but a fellow human being and their guest.

Up in these lost mountains on the roof of the world, there is a form of Islam that should be a model for Moslems all over the world, a moral contrast to the medieval evil of Wahhabi Islam of the

Saudis, the Deobandi Islam of the Taliban, or the Khomeini Islam of the Mullahs of Iran.

There are Ismaili Moslems in dozens of countries all over the earth - but the greatest concentration of them is here in the Pamirs. It is geopolitically ironic. The present border of Tajikistan and Pakistan separated by a finger of Afghanistan reaching all the way to China - the *Wakhan Corridor* - was drawn in 1895 to keep the expanding Russian Empire from physically touching British India. (See map of Tajikistan above - note how the Corridor ends with a border with China.)

I just drove through the Wakhan, which is in places only a few miles wide. Here is a picture of three countries: Tajikistan in the foreground, Afghanistan on the other side of the Amu Darya, the snow clad Hindu Kush mountains of Pakistan in the distance.

It was a strategic valley to the Bactrian Greeks, who built this castle-fortress overlooking it over two thousand years ago:

If you look down the Wakhan, you can see way in the distance on the Afghan side a small dot that looks like a building (center of the picture on the edge of the river). There is nothing around it.

Turns out, it's a secret CIA interrogation prison for captured Taliban. Here it is up close from the Tajik side of the river:

At this moment, tens of thousands of American soldiers, my son among them, are in Afghanistan risking their lives to rid that land of Stone Age Moslems practicing an evil form of Islam, who if not defeated will provide a haven for Al Qaeda terrorists planning more 9-11s for us.

Yet they are also risking their lives to keep one of the most depraved and corrupt governments on earth in power, a government up to its eyeballs in heroin smuggling.

Thus it is grandly ironic that the Pamir Knot is the place to unravel our soldiers' conundrum.

More than ever, after traveling through the Wakhan and the Pamir Knot, and meeting the people who live here, I am convinced that the solution to Afghanistan is the one provided in Why Should There Be An Afghanistan? That is, to break the country apart and parcel out the pieces to its neighbors (except Iran).

The key to this *Dissolution Solution* is Tajikistan. While the rest of the country is Sunni, the Ismailism of the Pamirs has had a distinctly moderating influence. Tajiks view themselves as the heirs to the *Somonid Empire* discussed in The Doormat of Empires. Their currency, the *somoni*, is named after the empire's founder. They are a proud people, yet they abhor Islamic radicalism.

Iran and Saudi Arabia are doing their best to counter this - financing radical movements like Jamoat Tabliq and a huge mosque in Dushanbe. Yet you never see a woman with a veil or burqa in the capital - or the villages. The women dress in bold bright colors - their favorite seems to be Ferrari red.

The time is now to offer Tajikistan the opportunity to become Greater Tajikistan by absorbing northern Afghanistan (save for the Uzbek region in the northwest) which is ethnically Tajik. This would give them the money and influence to effectively fight off the Iranians and Saudis. The influence of Ismailism would also expand thereby.

The Aga Khan visits the Pamirs three or four times a year. At the main Pamir town of Khorog on the Amu Darya, he delivers a sermon with huge loudspeakers as Afghan Ismailis assemble by the many thousands on a gravel flood plain across the river to hear him.

But why doesn't he just cross the foot bridge nearby into Afghanistan and talk to his Afghan followers directly? Because the Karzai government won't allow it. Karzai is afraid that the Aga Khan might provoke the Afghan Ismaili Tajiks into rebelling against him and demanding to merge their lands with Tajikistan.

The time is now to solve Afghanistan by ending its political existence as a nation-state. The people to begin the process with are the Tajiks. The place to start unraveling the problem of Afghanistan so our troops can come home with Afghanistan no longer a threat because it no longer exists is the Pamir Knot.