



**China – Afghanistan Trade & Strategic Importance of Wakhan Corridor:
An appraisal**

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Abstract:

At the confluence of four states — Pakistan, China, Tajikistan and Afghanistan—is the Wakhan route, a road which is located in the northeast of Badakhshan province of Afghanistan. As part of the old Silk Road, the corridor has much historical importance which has a long (220km) narrow (16-64km) area between from Pakistan to Tajikistan. Still, there is much promise for tourists and regional connections. The strip of Wakhan is extremely tranquil, with no issues with law and order. Wakhan can benefit from increased trade and businesses particularly for Central Asia republics. Therefore, the research investigates the potential to revitalize the corridor of Wakhan by building road infrastructures. The paper is theory base which is critically analyzed the data by studying the literature reviews, so based on this approach this paper may provide new insights about the importance of the Wakhan corridor. As an outcome, it finds out the Corridor's geostrategic in light of the evolving regional scenario as the most effective route for both countries. It also talks about the difficulties in carrying out this concept.

Keywords: Afghanistan, China, Central Asia, Wakhan corridor, regional connectivity, trade

INTRODUCTION

The China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) opens several doors for regional connectivity and business collaboration. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a centerpiece project of BRI, has started its second implementation stage. In the meantime, Nepal, China and India look into how they could work together to build the Trans-Himalayan Corridor and share the benefits of the mountains' resources like water, energy, and tourism. Similar to the Trans-Himalayan collaboration, the Trans-Wakhan corridor's operationalization presents opportunities and problems that need to be discussed.(Muhammadi et al., 2022). The corridor has geostrategic importance since it is located at the intersection of four nations: China, Tajikistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Wakhan Corridor is a constrained land area in Afghanistan's Badakhshan Province.

Tajikistan by over 260 km in the northeast and west, and China by 74 km. On the Silk Road, the Wakhan Corridor is a bridge connecting the countries with large mountain ranges. Great

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geopolitical games created the Wakhan Corridor as a buffer zone between Britain and Russia. (Munir & Shafiq, 2018). Ever since the days of colonialism, it has been a part of Afghanistan. The Wakhan Corridor, which connects China and Afghanistan and divides Tajikistan and Pakistan, is around 220 km by distance long and 16 to 64 km wide. Lower Wakhan is the region on the western side of the Panj River Valley; Upper Wakhan is the region on the eastern side of the Pamir River and the Wakhan valleys with their tributaries. As one goes east in Upper Wakhan, one can see three massive mountain ranges coming together at the Pamir Knot, also known as Roof of the world. (Hassan et al., 2023).

In order to outline their respective spheres of influence in Wakhan, Russia and Great Britain established the "Pamir Boundary Commission" in March 1895. By the contract, the commissions designated a region as a buffer zone, which afterward fell under the control of Abdur Rahman, the Afghan emir. The agreement states, "His Majesty King of Russia and Her British Majesty's engage to refrain from exercising any political impact and control—the latter to the north, the latter of the south—of the above line of delineation. The corridor of Wakhan is the quickest commercial route for China to enter Pakistan and Afghanistan to reach Central Asia. Pakistan's most crucial entry point into the Wakhan Corridor is the well-known Broghal Pass (Chitral). Wakhan had never experienced a law and order problem.

Compared to other parts of Afghanistan, this Region has even recently had a degree of tranquility. Almost 12,000 people live in small towns and encampments in these tranquil but environmentally difficult environs, cut off from the rest of the nation by the Hindu Kush. The locals of Wakhan are nomadic and raise cattle as a source of income. The historical record attests that this region's strategic significance has kept the neighboring nations following its trail. Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, and most recently, Pakistan, Russia, India, and China are some of these nations. Several tunnels in the Hindukush connect Pakistan's Chitral region to Wakhan, making it the nation's entryway to Central Asia. CPEC is giving this corridor much new attention, even though the government had ignored it before. Pakistan intensifies its efforts to thwart cross-border terrorism by controlling its borders and developing economic ties with Afghanistan. Economic ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan may help to reduce hostility between the two nations (Lambah, 2012).



Europeans and Chinese have historically exploited the Wakhan Corridor as a trading route to reach the Indian Ocean via the Arabian Sea, serving as a key Silk Road connecting point. The Great Game among Russia and Britain in 1838, the Chinese Communist Revolutions in 1949, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s, and more recently, the invasion of the US, NATO, and coalition forces in Afghanistan since 2001 are examples of external interventions and other events. Actually, none of these achievements created a climate that was favorable for regional connectedness. The challenging terrain, a lack of road infrastructure, and the high cost of creating completely new infrastructure were further factors. Due to shifting regional alignments, the corridor of Wakhan would take on a significant geostrategic importance for Afghanistan, Pakistan and China. (Munir & Shafiq, 2018). It may also oppose CPEC as it has in the past, notably in the frame of Kashmir and Jammu. Many people think India cannot ignore these opportunities for international connectivity for long. Ultimately, it will ask to join CPEC, a crucial project for the Region's economic development. India could be able to take advantage of Central Asia's energy resources in this way to advance its economy, especially after joining the SCO, which mandates that all of its members "work cooperatively as proactive participants within the SCO to achieve the shared goals of growth, tranquility, and security.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order reach China, Tibet, Persia, Central Asia, and the Indian Subcontinent, the Wakhan Corridor has continued to be a crucial link road. This vital section of the old Silk Road, which is still used by traders and tourists alike, passes through here (Ahmad & Jamil, 2023). The well-known route was crucial not just for transporting goods but also for the interchange of ideas and cultures between the eastern and western regions of the region (Shahrani, 2019). shows in his study that Wakhan was one of the primary commercial routes connecting India, China, and significant cities like Samarqand and Bukhara in contemporary Central Asia until the fall of the Mughal Empire in India. There have been a number of military incursions and raids on Chitral previously via the Wakhan Corridor. Interestingly, during the Great Game of the 19th century, the area also acted as a buffer zone or "no man's land" between Czarist Russia and British India. The Pamir Boundary Commission designated the corridor as a buffer zone in 1895, and Amir Abdur Rehman Khan of Afghanistan was given control of its administrative operations. In exchange, British India provided him with an annual payment of 500 pounds (British House of Commons, 1879). The people of Wakhan and the Pamir region were forced to suffer for the benefit of their enormous neighbors, who the Afghan Amir had referred to as "The Bear" and "The Wolf" because of their size, after the Amir grudgingly accepted this offer. Population The Wakhan Corridor is home to roughly 13,000 people, albeit this number may not be entirely accurate due to the remote location and complicated physical features of the area. Numerous tribes with a varied linguistic population and a strong cultural heritage may be found in the Wakhan region. The Wakhan is home to Wakhi, Sariquli (Chinese Wakhi), and Kirgiz communities. The Wakhi and Sariquli adhere to the Ismaili sect, whereas the Kirgiz are Sunni Muslims.

The Kirgiz subscribe to the Sunni branch of Islam, whereas the Wakhi and Sariquli follow the Ismaili sect. Due to the difficult climate, all of these cultures lead itinerant lifestyles and collaborate on festivals and other cultural activities. The region's residents struggle with opium addiction, food

insecurity, poverty, ill health, and a lack of education. The Wakhan population relies on Yaks, Horses, and Donkeys for transportation due to the lack of roads and other amenities (Iqbal, n.d.).

WAKHAN CORRIDOR AND REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY

Wakhan Corridor's opening will increase Afghanistan's political power and assist in harmonizing its ties with significant powers and other regional nations. It will improve the Afghan government's access to these regions and assist it in developing infrastructures and raising the living standards of the area's disadvantaged residents. While the Region has historically been fairly calm, some violent organizations are now setting up shop there and could take advantage of the complaints of the underprivileged (Huasheng, 2016). Completing the route and constructing facilities would be beneficial for Afghanistan's political upcoming to ensure that this Region remains politically stable over the long term. Afghanistan has a strong strategic and geo-economic position in the Region since Central Asian states can access the ocean of India via Iran or Pakistan. China formerly governed and administered the Wakhan Corridor, a section of the ancient Silk Road in northern Afghanistan. The late-1990s Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and the early-2000s US invasion of Afghanistan inflicted havoc on the nation, and the ongoing plans to expand Afghanistan's trade links with other nations were ignored. Despite the withdrawal of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan, numerous analysts feel the situation has not changed. They contend that, despite being landlocked, Afghanistan played a significant role in the old Silk Road via the corridor of Wakhan, which linked China to Europe (Hong, 2013). However, today's Afghanistan has fallen prey to stand-ins for competing regional and international forces.

The scenario paints a bleak picture of Afghanistan's prosperity and progress. In addition to geography, Afghanistan is dealing with a wide range of internal difficulties because of its tough geography and social and cultural problems. "About eighty percent of Afghanistan is made up of difficult terrain with subpar infrastructure for communication. Along with its unique geography, the country's ethnic tribal culture, odd demographics, and the concerns of regional and international powers prohibited social growth from becoming a mere abstraction. There is no denying that Afghanistan is interested in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) launched by China and is taking steps to establish domestic initiatives that align with the regional connection, such as corridors of North-South, but in reality, many problems require care. The government of Afghanistan should strengthen its ability to effectively address problems with internal safety, like terrorists and mismanagement (Blah, 2018). The tribal split in Afghanistan, as noted by "Stability in Afghanistan," prevented any government from carrying out its policies. He contends that weak Afghan governments have always been ruled by ethnically split warlords who have fought constantly to exert power over one another. No government has ever been able to create and carry out diplomatic, trade, or defense policies under such conditions. Governments were unable to focus on improving society as a consequence. As a result, Afghanistan's social, educational, and communication infrastructure is poor, and its citizens rely primarily on Pakistan for access to food, healthcare, and trade facilities. Many predict that when US and NATO forces begin to withdraw, Afghanistan's dependence on China will grow. Afghanistan's economic growth would benefit from becoming a part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). By connecting Northern and East Asian nations with South and West Asian nations, it will reclaim its political and economic relevance and become an important global hub (Malik, 2015). With the opening of the Corridor of Wakhan,

Afghanistan's strategic importance will increase because it will provide a second or auxiliary route to the Indian Ocean in place of the Karakoram Highway through Pakistan. The strategic and collaborative relationship between Afghanistan and China will be further strengthened. Afghanistan might use this corridor as a negotiating chip with India and Pakistan. Additionally, it will raise Afghanistan's strategic importance in regional associations like the SAARC and SCO (Khan et al., 2020).

Economic Prospects of Wakhan Corridor

Financial importance Given that Iran, China, Russia, and Pakistan have a geostrategic interest in the corridor of Wakhan importance for Afghanistan, Pakistan and China to revive it now seems increasingly appropriate in light of the best time for intraregional trade. 207 A shift in regional pondering, i.e., pursuing geo-economics in addition to geography, is shown in the 2018 Margalla Papers' confluence of interests and India's aim to link with Central Asia. Afghanistan's inclusion in the Belt and Road Initiative of China will be facilitated by President of Afghanistan Mohammad Ashraf Ghani's proposal that Afghanistan serve as a multinational hub for the transit trade and Pakistan's plans to use Gwadar Port to connect with the Region. Twenty percent of all trade in this area in 1991 was conducted between the countries of Central Asian nations. Due to a division of "joint manufacturing processes," intraregional trades in Central Asia have fallen and are now only 3.5 percent. "An efficient approach to restoring the capacity for productivity for added value manufacturing in a region currently characterized by primary exports would be to revitalize trade between regions with the availability of Chinese inputs (Munir & Shafiq, 2018). The Wakhan Corridor would be connected to the \$62 billion mega-infrastructure project known as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) because of its proximity to the Karakoram Highway (KKH), which China developed "to transform the area into a strategic power nexus through pipelines, electricity lines, and railways." In addition to giving Afghanistan access to markets for the export of its energy and oil goods, it will also assist Afghanistan in obtaining power for the 43 percent of its population currently without access to it. Most significantly, Wakhan provides a different route that avoids Afghanistan's problematic regions.

Additionally, it will lessen Afghanistan's reliance on Pakistan. Afghanistan's trade imbalance, now estimated at 37.4% of GDP, is accounted for by the country's one-third trade with Pakistan. In Afghanistan, China has economic and strategic interests. China is working to build and improve the infrastructure in areas around the corridor of Wakhan by these interests. (ALI, 2020). Afghanistan would have access to new economic prospects due to these infrastructure improvements. Teggermansu, The Big Pamir and the Wakhjir Valley are at least three potential ensured ranges that could be developed, and the entire corridor is crucial for maintaining biodiversity (Khursheed et al., 2019).

Importance from the Security Perspective

Wakhan Corridor has been used by certain insurgent organizations, including Jund-ul-Allah, Tahrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, Harakat Al-Mujahedeen, and the Islamic Movement of the Turkestan (IMT). Nearly all Central Asian nations may soon find this corridor a major nuisance because of the practically open and porous Tajik border that runs beside it. One of Afghanistan's safest provinces was Badakhshan, which occupies a spot in the northeast. When the US engaged a year after the

departure of alliance forces, it was the sole Region that was completely under the control of anti-Taliban factions. However, insurgents began to gain ground in locations where the province crosses borders with Pakistan, China, and Tajikistan. The Taliban's presence in that crucial area poses a danger to the Afghan government and other nations in the vicinity (Ghufran, 2009). The Warduj and Baharak districts of Badakhshan province are where the terrorist organizations have tactically and economically positioned themselves. Regarding the reasons for their being there, there are many claims. Given the present issues in the area caused by ISIS, their presence could be more perilous.

Geostrategic Importance of Wakhan Corridor for Afghanistan and China

Corridor of Wakhan will increase the security of current and upcoming energy pipelines and other commercial projects. In Taxkorgan, Tajikistan, near the Uygur autonomous region of Xinjiang, China and Tajikistan intend to build a free trade zone. China is Tajikistan's third-biggest trading partner, with two-way trade exceeding \$ 2 billion in 2012, a 15-fold increase from a decade earlier. Beijing is willing to provide Dushanbe with a credit line of \$1 billion. Tajikistan has received US \$ 600 million for the construction of a manufacturing facility for cement in its southern Region. More funding was added to the 900 million dollar amount to construct additional roads, passageways, and energy lines (Munir & Shafiq, 2018). Tajikistan is renting 600 acres of agricultural land to a Chinese company in its southern Region. Any trade conducted over the Wakhjir and Tegermansu Passes will boost China's economy and elevate its standing in the Region (Hassan, W., Hussain, N., & Hussain, 2023). Undoubtedly, China became the first foreign country to sign an oil research contract with Afghanistan in many years, making it possible for the latter to receive US \$ 7.00 billion over the ensuing 25 years. Afghanistan's geo-economics needs, and China's significant investment in Afghanistan demonstrate both countries' determination to further solidify their connections, particularly in terms of financial collaboration. Numerous Chinese businesses are currently working on various developments and economic and initiatives in Afghanistan. China is likely to soon will be the country investing the most in Afghanistan's abundant energy and mineral wealth (Aminjonov et al., 2019).

Challenges for the Regional Connectivity

There are several obstacles or challenges to overcome when trying to revive the Wakhan Corridor. First, establishing road infrastructure would be extremely expensive due to the topography. Second, because of the terrorism concern, China hesitates to open or construct the Wakhan corridor. Third, India may be worried because this outflanking tactic of opening doors in the corridor of Wakhan will engage Afghanistan more with China. India has previously opposed CPEC. India is using disinformation to damage China's reputation among Afghans. China's involvement in the area has been characterized as an attacking strategy by the former commander of the Indian Army, Gen. V.K. Singh, who also stated that "India risks losing the influence it has in Afghanistan due to a China-Pakistan link that is getting more powerful and is seen in evidence here. India can employ terrorist groups like the IS to harm Chinese and Pakistani interests in and near Wakhan. In Afghanistan, the Indian intelligence agency RAW is particularly active. When the US launched the mother of all bombs on the cave complex in the Tora Bora mountain in Nangarhar province, at least thirteen Indian IS militants perished. Wakhan was important to India prior to (Kaushiki, 2013). In order to monitor China's and Pakistan's movements in the area, it spent 350 million rupees

renovating Farkhar Airbase in Tajikistan in 2007. So that its jet aircraft could land at the base, they enlarged the runway. India has also built three aircraft hangars at the Fakhor facility. (Munir & Shafiq, 2018). With this tactical expenditure, India now has a superior observation tower. However, due to pressure from Russia, India can no longer base its fighters and helicopters there. India aims to advance its objectives in Central Asia, quickly reaching Pakistan's northwest border and keeping an eye on China's western front. In terms of strategy, it offers the Indian Army operations in Siachen and Afghanistan substantial backing. From Tajikistan, which 48 Indian fighter jets pounded Taliban strongholds in northern Afghanistan. Pervez Musharraf, the previous president, was against India using the Farkhor airbase. He remarked, "India's Farkhor air base is a real concern, as Indian planes could use the air base to reach Pakistan quickly. Russia is wary of Indian initiatives, particularly given its propensity to side with the US, and has inquired about the geostrategic importance of the Wakhan Corridor for Afghanistan, China, and Pakistan. 213 2018 Margalla Papers India is not permitted to use Tajikistan's bases. To counter Indian activities in the Region, Pakistan and China can team up with Russia. (Haritashya et al., 2009).

CONCLUSION

For Afghanistan, China, and Pakistan, the Wakhan Corridor is extremely important from a geostrategic standpoint. Significant ramifications for regional and international participants in Afghanistan, particularly India and the US, will result from the opening of this corridor. Most nations today, including the US, would favor expanding this road through the Wakhjir Pass. India, however, might express its worries like it did in the case of CPEC. Pakistan must handle some consequences that come with its location at the intersection of the Caspian Sea, the oil-rich Strait of Hurmoz, and the energy-rich Central Asian States extremely pragmatically to serve the interests of the nearby powers. In order to profit, Pakistan needs to keep up its promise to expand relations with China, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan. The study has discussed the geostrategic importance of exploiting the Wakhan Highway for regional connectivity, suggesting that establishing this route will foster peace, stability, and economic growth in the area. Being a part of this route will also help Pakistan strengthen its diplomatic and financial connections.

Recommendations

Officials from China and Afghanistan are debating whether to construct cutting-edge train, road, and potentially oil pipeline connections along the Wakhan Corridor. Afghanistan's reliance on India will diminish with the corridor's opening, and so will Indian influence in Central Asian nations. Indian ambitions to isolate Pakistan will suffer a significant setback as a result. The integration of Pakistan with the Central Asian nations is crucial. Either bilateral or multinational efforts should be made to strengthen ties with Afghanistan.

The Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM) between Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and Tajikistan should be enhanced in order to combat terrorism because opening the Wakhan Corridor would require a tranquil environment devoid of militant organizations like the IS and its related groups.

Stopping the flow of terrorists across Afghanistan through efficient border management is a crucial step in the fight against terrorism. The forces of Pakistan and Afghanistan should continue their

existing cooperation to combat extremist groups in and around the Wakhan corridor. This cooperation is already being used to combat the Islamic State.

Afghanistan should increase its influence in the Wakhan corridor and use it as a pressure technique to persuade the Pakistan government and its security forces to stop cross-border terrorist incursions into Afghanistan if Pakistan continues to support terrorists room while disregarding Afghanistan's interests.

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