



## WAKHAN CORRIDOR: A GATEWAY TO STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES

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Present at the junction of famous ancient trade routes and contemporary geopolitical interest, Wakhan Corridor is long acknowledged as a “strategic linchpin” of Eurasia. The Corridor is a narrow strategic strip to the North-East of Badakhshan province of Afghanistan. The Afghan panhandle connects with Pakistan to its South, to its North lies Tajikistan, while it connects with the economic giant China in the East. The length of the Corridor comes to 300 km, while its width ranges from 16-70 km. The longest border it shares with Pakistan is 300 kilometres along the mountainous region of the Hindu Kush in the Chitral District.<sup>1</sup> The region is characterized by high snowy peaks, rigid and rocky terrains, deep valleys, glaciers, lakes, and hot springs. The famous river of Central Asia, the Oxus River or Amu-Darya, which empties into the Aral Sea, starts from this very place. This strategic strip is the meeting point of the world's four mountainous ranges, also known as Bam-E-Dunya in the Persian Language (Roof of the World), i.e., Hindu Kush and Karakoram to its South and South-East, and Kun-Lun and Tien Shen to its North and North-East.

### Historical Importance

Historically, Wakhan Corridor has remained a key link road in connecting China, Tibet, Persia, Central Asia, and Indian Subcontinent. The ancient Silk Route passed via this strategic strip and remained in use by merchants as well as travellers. The famous route was not only important for carrying merchandise but also played a key role in the diffusion of ideas and cultural exchange between the eastern and western parts of the region. Nazif Shahrani, in his work, explains that until the collapse of the Mughal Empire in India, Wakhan was one of the main routes for traders and merchants between India, China, and major cities like Samarqand and Bukhara in modern-day Central Asia.<sup>2</sup> In addition, in the past, there have been several military invasions and raids on Chitral via the Wakhan Corridor. Interestingly, the region has also served as a buffer zone or “no man's land”



between Czarist Russia and British India in the Great Game of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In 1895, under the Pamir Boundary Commission, the corridor was given the status of a buffer zone, and its administrative affairs were entrusted to Amir Abdur Rehman Khan of Afghanistan, for which he received an annual subsidy of 500 pounds from British India<sup>3</sup>. The Amir reluctantly accepted this offer, and the people of Wakhan and the Pamir region had to suffer in the best interests of their giant neighbours who had been termed as the “The Bear” and “The Wolf” by the Afghan Amir.

### Population

The population of the Wakhan Corridor is approximately 13,000 inhabitants; however, due to the complex physical characteristics and remoteness of the region, the figure may not be completely accurate<sup>4</sup>. The area of Wakhan is the abode of many tribes with a rich cultural heritage who speak different languages. The Wakhan is home to Wakhis, Sariqulis (Chinese Wakhi), and Kirgiz communities. The Wakhi and Sariquli follow the Ismaili sect, while the Kirgiz adhere to the Sunni sect of Islam. All these communities are living nomadic life due to harsh climatic conditions and share festivals and other cultural events together. The people of the region suffer from a lack of education, poverty, ill health, food insecurity, and opium addiction<sup>5</sup>. Due to the non-availability of roads and other infrastructures, the people of Wakhan are dependent on Yaks, Horses, and Donkeys for transportation.

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## Geostrategic Significance

The Wakhan Corridor has great strategic potential in contemporary times. The region not only offers a route for regional connectivity and trade but is also enriched with natural resources and is home to the world's largest water reserves. In addition, the panhandle is in a region where the Sino-Indian rifts on Aksai-Chin and Pakistan-India dispute over Siachen keep on simmering. Likewise, the wonder of the World, the Karakoram Highway (KKH), which connects Pakistan with China and Jammu & Kashmir territory, a cause of continuous tension between Pakistan and India, is also situated in the proximity of the Wakhan Corridor, which further increases its geo-strategic importance.



The Wakhan Corridor can play a significant role as a gateway for regional integration and connectivity. The Corridor provides a shorter route for the landlocked Central Asian States to access the Indian Ocean through which they can gain easy access to the diverse consumer markets of South Asia as well as the Mediterranean region. Reliance only on the existing route, which involves crossing multiple states with various transit and custom regulations, only increases cost and adds to complexities. The use of Wakhan Corridor as an alternate route to the international market can play a pivotal role in the reduction of costs as well as the timely transportation of goods. Moreover, the route, if constructed, would be connected to the CPEC project and the KKH, which would provide a much cheaper and smooth trade route for Pakistan and other regional countries to access the rich mineral resources of Central Asian States. This will open the doors of opportunities for Central Asia as well as for Pakistan. It will strengthen Pakistan's position to join the China-Eurasian economic corridor, thus converting the buffer land into a land of regional integration, connectivity, and prosperity. Some efforts were made previously to make this corridor functional. According to a report, during the tenure of Burhan-Uddin-Rabbani (Afghan President 1992-96), a trilateral agreement was signed between Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan to functionalize the corridor by connecting Pakistan and Tajikistan via Dorah Pass. Though the agreement failed because of instability in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan have seemed to work on this by building infrastructures and independently approaching the

Afghan Panhandle.<sup>6</sup> The Mega Project of Lawari Tunnel, which was completed in 2017, can be viewed as a major development in this regard.

## Significance for Local Communities

The opening of this corridor will bring a positive change in the livelihood of the people of Wakhan Corridor and those living in the vicinity, such as Chitral. The inhabitants of this part of the world almost share a common culture, history, and traditions. Due to physical complexities and poor infrastructural development, most people depend on livestock for their bread and butter. Building infrastructure will have positive impacts on the people as it will ease access to local markets and getting access to education, which the people of this region are lacking. Interestingly, in the past, there was a proper mule track present between Chitral and Wakhan Corridor via Broghul Pass, which connects Afghanistan, Turkistan, India, Tibet, and Ladakh. The Borghul Pass served as a popular trade route that helped the local people to fulfil their necessities. According to a report, the merchandise then consisted of carpets and copper pottery brought from the north, while cloth, tea, and sugar were transported from the south. This route was also used in the transportation of Opium and Hashish. According to British Records, only in 1902, about 2000 kg of chars (Hashish) was imported to British India in October and November via Broghul Pass<sup>7</sup>. If today, the Broghil Pass becomes functional with proper infrastructure, it will undoubtedly play a significant role in uplifting the living standards of the people of Wakhan as well as Chitral.



## Wakhan and BRI

Furthermore, the giant project of the Belt and Road Initiative of China cannot be taken into isolation. China has been heavily investing in the development of the CPEC as part of its Belt & Road Initiative. China, with an ambition for economic prosperity and interdependence, stands as the largest foreign investor in Afghanistan. After it opened for foreign investors back in 2007, three Chinese state-owned mining companies invested in the Afghanistan mining sector and signed a contract with the Afghan Ministry of Mining and Petroleum. In addition, China is also investing in the exploration of hydrocarbon deposits of Afghanistan in the

Amu-Darya Basin in Sari Pul and Faryab Province of Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup> Seeing so much interest of the Chinese government, one can easily anticipate that China would go for building trade routes along the ancient Wakhjir pass, which was used previously by merchants and travellers. The development of the Wakhjir pass would provide shorter and easy access to Afghan Markets. Moreover, China is also concerned about the extremist elements in the Xinjiang region. By investing in infrastructural development, these serious concerns are likely to be reduced, and the region would be developed with massive Chinese investments.



### Challenges

The Wakhan Corridor is a hidden gem which has great potential to be a turning point in regional development and economic prosperity. Nonetheless, there are many challenges associated with it. Firstly, the terrain is very complicated and requires a huge investment. Secondly, India remains the biggest challenge. India always opposes the CPEC project. India considers that the opening of the Wakhan Corridor will unite Afghanistan with Pakistan and China. India's concern might be that the opening of the Wakhjir Pass, along with the already-opened Khunjarab Pass, will afford China superiority by increasing its geostrategic dominance in the region. India is constantly busy in feeding propaganda to malign the soft image of Pakistan and China among the common Afghan Population. Former Indian Army Chief Vijay Singh termed the role of China in the region as "an outflanking move". He further added that "India risks' losing the influence it has on Afghanistan because of Pakistan-China nexus that is getting stronger and is seen in evidence here"<sup>9</sup>. India has been actively involved in sponsoring terrorism in Pakistan by

using Afghan soil. Kulbushan Jadav was one of the serving Indian Naval commanders who were involved in terrorist activities across Pakistan. Furthermore, RAW is also actively involved in terrorist activities inside Pakistan, especially in the tribal areas. India understands the importance of the strategic strip. It has renovated its Airbase (Farkhor Airbase) in Tajikistan to keep a watchful eye on the moves of Pakistan and China in the region. This base could be used by the Indians to provide support to the Indian RAW agents operating in Afghanistan.

### Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the Afghan Panhandle holds great significance due to its historical importance as part of the ancient silk route and its cultural, economic, and environmental characteristics. It shows its pivotal role in the intermingling of different cultures and the exchange of new ideas. Moreover, being home to one of the world's largest water reserves, the strip boasts remarkable biodiversity and plays a key role in the preservation of precious flora and fauna of the ecosystem.

Furthermore, China's BRI project underscores the geostrategic significance of the corridor. As a key artery connecting China with the Central Asian States and Afghanistan, the Wakhan Corridor can act as a bridge of smoother connectivity and strengthen regional trade. Economic activities need to be strengthened, and many more initiatives should be undertaken focusing on regional integration and economic cooperation to make the Wakhan Corridor a gateway of regional connectivity.

To get the maximum benefits from this hidden gem, all the countries, including Pakistan, China, Afghanistan, and Central Asian States, must pledge to build cooperation and invest in infrastructural development with proper frameworks. Whenever the route is operational, it will certainly boost trade and transform the whole region. Corridors like Wakhan, if developed in the best interest of the region, would not only increase economic cooperation but also reinforce the relations and facilitate smooth trade and transit with lower costs.

### References

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<sup>2</sup> Nazif Shahrani, *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan: Adaptation to Closed Frontiers and War* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012): 156-158

<sup>3</sup> Zulfikar Khalid, *Pakistan in the Pamir Knot: Geostrategic Imperatives* (Lahore: Vanguard Books, 1987), page 57.

<sup>4</sup> "The Wakhan Corridor, Afghanistan." Responsiblevacation.com. Accessed April 27, 2023. <https://www.responsiblevacation.com/vacations/afghanistan/travel-guide/the-wakhan-corridor>.

<sup>5</sup> Sher K. Bazai, "Geostrategic Significance of Wakhan Corridor: Opportunities and Implications For Region – OpEd," *Eurasia Review*, last modified October 16, 2022, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/16102022-geostrategic-significance-of-wakhan-corridor-opportunities-and-implications-for-region-oped/>. Accessed April 28, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> "Tajikistan Completes Its Link-road to Gwadar: Pakistan Building Gilgit to Durrah Pass." *The Gilgit Baltistan Tribune*. March 3, 2013. Accessed April 29, 2023. <https://gbtribune.blogspot.com/2013/03/tajikistan-completes-its-link-road-to.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Inayatullah Faizi, "The geo-political significance of the southern passes of the Wakhan corridor." PhD diss., University of Peshawar, 1992.

<sup>8</sup> Tiffany P. Ng, "China's role in shaping the future of Afghanistan." *Carnegie Endowment Policy Outlook* (2010): 1-13.

<sup>9</sup> Dutta, Sujan, "Singh Sees China's Afghan Tunnel." *Telegraph India* | Latest News, Top Stories, Opinion, News Analysis and Comments. Last modified June 5, 2012. <https://www.telegraphindia.com/odisha/singh-sees-china-s-afghan-tunnel/cid/414504>.