

Geopolitical and Geostrategic Significance of Wakhan Corridor

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Abstract

A place or space does not choose to become a strategic location. It is a role thrust upon them by the geopolitical environment and more particularly hostile geopolitical environment in the international arena. A location in between ambitious and often aggressive geopolitical entities increase the geopolitical and geostrategic significance of a place or space.

The Wakhan Corridor is a narrow strip of land in Eastern Afghanistan. It is a natural valley situated between the Pamir Mountains and the Karakoram Mountains. The corridor itself is about 350 km long and 10 km and 60 km wide. It constitutes an extremely isolated territory of Afghanistan. Geopolitically the Wakhan Corridor is located between Tajikistan and the northernmost part of the Gilgit-Baltistan region of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK). Thus, it separates Tajikistan from India or Pakistan. It extends in the east up to Xinjiang Province of China. Depending on the geopolitical history, the Wakhan Corridor has acted as a bridge or barrier between civilizations, countries and empires.

The Wakhan Corridor has a great geopolitical and geostrategic location. It has great geopolitical (and geo-economic) potential for Afghanistan and China. Its significance with respect to the security interests of India has also been realized since long. The opening of the Wakhan Corridor would have wide-ranging geopolitical implications for India.

This research presents the geopolitical and geostrategic significance of the Wakhan Corridor in the present circumstances. As India has ill-defined frontiers in Kashmir and Ladakh region (it has disputed boundaries in Gilgit Baltistan and Aksai Chin) any change in the geopolitical configuration of the region will have a negative effect on the geopolitical relations of the countries of the region. The dominance over the Roof of the World would shape the future geopolitics of the region.

Any understanding of the present and possible future of the Wakhan Corridor requires an in-depth analysis of its geography and history. Therefore, this research attempts to present an analysis of the geographical configuration of the area. Besides, it also presents the historical events that have affected its geopolitical and geostrategic significance.

Keywords: Wakhan Corridor, China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Geopolitics,

Introduction

A place or space does not choose to become a strategic location. It is a role thrust upon them by the geopolitical environment and more particularly hostile geopolitical environment in the international arena. A location in between ambitious and often aggressive geopolitical entities increase the geopolitical and geostrategic significance of a place or space.

Wakhan Corridor is a distinct geopolitical entity. It has long been understood as a significant strategic location. Located at the Roof of the World, it has great geopolitical and geostrategic significance.

Although, a narrow strip of land, Wakhan has a special geographical position. It is located at the place where the frontiers of India, China, (erstwhile Russia) Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan meet.

Geopolitically the territory of Wakhan Corridor is located between Tajikistan and the northernmost part of the Gilgit-Baltistan region of Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir (POK) thus it separates Tajikistan from India or Pakistan. It extends in the east up to Xinjiang Province of China. Depending on the geopolitical history, the Wakhan Corridor has acted as a bridge or barrier between civilizations, countries and empires.

In its historical past, the Wakhan Corridor has been the most important junction of the silk route trade. It has long been used by Europeans and Chinese to reach the Indian plains and the Indian ocean (**Yaser Malik, 2014**). It also served communications through the Arabian sea coasts. As a whole, it has remained an important area for its economic and cultural reasons.

The Wakhan Corridor also has a great geopolitical and geostrategic location. This strip of land was created as a buffer between the territories of British India and Tsarist Russia in the 19th century. Its geopolitical and geostrategic value was also exploited by the UK and the former USSR as a barrier between the two in the Great Games of Central Asia (**Yaser Malik, 2014**). It was further utilized by USSR during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Its significance was also realized during the NATO invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Wakhan Corridor also has great geopolitical and geoeconomic potential for China.

Any understanding of the present and possible future of the Wakhan Corridor requires an in-depth analysis of its geography and history. Therefore, this research attempts to present an analysis of the geographical configuration of the area. Besides, it also presents the historical events that have affected its geopolitical and geostrategic significance.

Beginning with a brief introduction to the geography and history of Wakhan, this research presents the geopolitical and geostrategic importance of the Wakhan Corridor in the present circumstances. It also analyses the grand strategy of China. It then examines the prospects of the opening of the Wakhan Corridor and the geopolitical and geostrategic implications of the opening of the Wakhan Corridor for India.

The significance of the Wakhan Corridor with respect to the security interests of India has long been realized. As India has ill-defined frontiers in Kashmir and Ladakh region (it has disputed boundaries in Gilgit Baltistan and Aksai Chin) any change in the geopolitical configuration of the region will have a negative effect on the geopolitical relations of the countries of the region. The opening of the Wakhan Corridor would have wide-ranging geopolitical implications for India. Besides, the dominance over the Roof of the World would shape the future geopolitics of the region.

Wakhan: A Geographical Overview

The Wakhan Corridor is a natural valley situated between the Pamir mountains and the Karakoram mountains. On the political map of Afghanistan, the Wakhan region is a small territory of the Badakhshan province. It is located between the Tajik Pamir region (Gorno-Badakhshan) of Tajikistan and the northern areas of India or Pakistan (the Gilgit-

Baltistan region of POK). China is situated in the east of this region. This geospatial location gives a great geopolitical significance to the Wakhan Corridor. Its location with particular reference to the northern borders of India increases its geopolitical sensitivities. Geographically, the Wakhan Corridor constitutes the north-eastern territory of Afghanistan. Three mountain ranges, Karakoram, Hindukush and Pamir converge in Wakhan (**Ahmed and Malik, 2021**). It is the area of Roof of the World (the area where the mountains join to form the Pamir Knot. It is usually named as Bam-e-Duniya) (**Munir and Shafiq, 2018**). To be precise the Wakhan Corridor is spread between $71^{\circ} 50'$ to $74^{\circ} 50'$ degrees east longitude and $36^{\circ} 35'$ to $37^{\circ} 30'$ degrees north latitude (**Nazif Shahrani, 2002**). It is little more than 350 km long (east to west) and between 10 km and 60 km broad (north to south), covering a total area of about 10300 sq. Kms (**Fahmida Ashraf, 1986**). In the south, it shares a 300 km border with Pakistan (or the areas of POK), in its north and northeast, it has over 260 km border with Tajikistan and in the west direction it has a 74 km border with China (**Munir and Shafiq, 2018**).

Fig.1 Geographical Location of Wakhan Corridor



Wakhan is the headwater region of Amu Darya (Panj or Pamir River). Geomorphologically, it has two distinct parts – the Wakhan Corridor and the Afghan Pamir. All parts of Wakhan lie at elevations higher than 2000m and the Afghan Pamir lies above 3500m. The difficult topography renders remoteness to this region. Therefore, it is an extremely isolated (or the least accessible) area of the Hindukush-Karakoram region. It is accessible through Dawan and Jaman Shur on the north, Wakhjir on the east and Broghil, Darwazo, Kankheen, Ochili and Shahgologh on the south (**Fahmida Ashraf, 1986**).

This narrow strip of land provides the three routes - the Northern Route connects it with Tajikistan passing along the Panj Rivers, the Southern Route reaches China via Wakhjir Pass, the third is the Central Route linking both the Northern and Southern routes and further leads to China (**Ahmed and Malik, 2021**).

Wakhan has both harsh terrain and harsh climate. The land was (and it is still) populated by the Kirghiz and the Wakhi people. They have lived here since centuries. Traditionally, pastoral nomads of Kirghiz and Wakhi origin used the areas around the Pamirs as summer pasture for their animals. Some of these people were also dependent on trade across the

countries' boundaries. Few more Kirghiz from the surrounding areas came and settled in this region after the Russian and then the Chinese revolution. Still, it is a very thinly populated region. Unfortunately, it is the least developed region, socially and economically.

The inhabitants of the Pamir and the surrounding areas encompassing the Gorno-Badakhshan Region of Tajikistan, Wakhan region in Badakhshan province of Afghanistan, Kashgar in Xinjiang Region of China, Hunza and Chitral in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa of Pakistan share a common history, culture and religion (**Mirwais Parsa, 2017**). The people of Wakhan also have had a close cultural relationship with the Turkic people of the surrounding regions. Thus, it is a region of geographical and cultural contiguity.

Historically the Wakhan corridor has been an important transit route of the ancient Silk Road. It provided one of the difficult connections between China and India. In the historical past, the passes across the Pamir led Chinese pilgrims to the Buddhist centres in Gandhara and Taxila. It was the most popular pilgrim route during the fourth and fifth centuries. In 7th century, Huan Tsang, the Grand Old Monk of China, who went in search of Buddhist teachings, had travelled through this route. The same route was used by Persian merchants travelling along the silk road. Until the collapse of the Mughal Empire, Wakhan was one of the main routes for traders and merchants, traversing between India, China and cities of Afghanistan and Central Asia (**Nazif Shahrani, 2002**). Even in the recent past, Marco Polo passed through this route and the Portuguese took this route to reach China (**Ahmed and Malik, 2021**). Change in the political map of Indian subcontinent in 1947 and the closure of the border of Afghanistan towards China in 1949 decreased the value of this ancient trade route. Today it is only an isolated finger of territory within sealed borders.

Geopolitical History of Wakhan Corridor

Geopolitics has always played an important role in international relations (**Saini and Dar, 2013**). Up till the second half of the nineteenth century, Afghanistan was increasingly open to the outside world. Although it was a landlocked country, it was situated at the crossroads of civilizations. At the same time, it was also situated at the crossroads of trade. The Wakhan Corridor was one of the main transit routes to its northern neighbours (i.e., landlocked states of Russia). Therefore, there was increasing interest among the Russians in these outlying regions. During that time any conflict between the Chinese and the Afghans could have turned to a disadvantage for the Russians. It would have confirmed eviction of Russian from the Hindukush region. This fear was the reason for the Russian expedition to the Pamirs.

Russian expedition to the Pamirs lasted several years as the Afghans were supported by the Britishers. It turned into a rivalry between the Russian and British empires. One of the keys to stopping British-Russian rivalry was the control over the region that constituted Afghan Turkistan or establishing a buffer state between the British and Russian empires (Chahryar Adle, 2005).

During the period of the Great Games, both empires were competing for their dominance over the territory across the Hindukush. The present boundaries of Afghanistan are a result of nineteenth-century British and Russian intervention. The Great Games led to the political isolation of Afghanistan.

Although the Wakhan Corridor has remained a vital portion of Afghanistan, it also served an important role in the conflict between the great empires of that period. Since 1838 it acted as a barrier between Russia and British India. In 1872 the two imperial states had agreed that the Amu Darya would be the frontier between Afghanistan and Russia. In 1873 both the empires also agreed that Badakhshan and Wakhan would remain in Afghanistan. By this agreement, the boundary between Russia and Afghanistan was demarcated along the Panj or the Pamir Rivers. (Chahryar Adle, 2005).

In 1885, the Anglo-Russian Boundary Commission began to demarcate the north-western border of Afghanistan. The next boundary was fixed in the northeast, in 1891, with Britain and Russia agreeing that all the territory north of the Amu Darya was Russian and all south of it to Afghanistan, thus leaving the Wakhan in Afghanistan so that the two empires did not touch at any point. The final boundary dispute with Russia was settled by the Pamir agreement of 1895.

The borders agreed upon by the Anglo-Russian boundary commission were based on the strategic need to separate the borders of British and Russian territories, hence the narrow strip of land along the Wakhan became a buffer area (**Mackerras and Clarke, 2009**). It was reconfirmed by the Anglo-Russian treaty of 1895, and the boundaries of Afghanistan were politically drawn (**NazifMohibShahrani, 1979**). In 1907 Russia recognized Afghanistan as being outside its sphere of influence and, for many decades, desisted from a continuation of its expansion in Central Asia. (Chahryar Adle, 2005). Due to the previous agreements Wakhan formed a political buffer between Russian Turkistan, British India and China.

The boundary between Afghanistan and China was formally demarcated in 1963 through the 'Boundary Treaty' of China and Afghanistan. This treaty settled the territorial dispute over the Wakhan Corridor on the border between the Badakhshan region in Afghanistan and the Xinjiang Region in China (**Saud and Ahmad, 2018**). Since then, the political geography of the region has not changed significantly.

Continuity and change

In recent years the Wakhan Corridor acquired renewed significance during the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979. Russia even constituted a military post in the region. The corridor remained in milieu until the US invasion of Afghanistan. It acquired further prominence in the following decade through the American War against Terror in 2001 (**Yaser Malik, 2014**). The events of the recent past have enhanced the strategic value of the Wakhan Corridor. In 2009 the US requested China to open Wakhjir Pass (at the end of the Wakhan Corridor) as an alternate supply route for NATO troops operating in Afghanistan, but China declined it due to its strategic interests.

Any change in the strategic value of the Wakhan Corridor will have a direct influence on the neighbouring countries of China, India, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Central Asian republics (**Yaser Malik, 2014**).

Geopolitical and Geostrategic Significance of Wakhan Corridor

Geographically the Wakhan Corridor is situated at a unique location. It is situated at the crossroads of four countries; China, India or Pakistan (POK), Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Due to its location, it has acquired great geoeconomic, geopolitical and geostrategic significance.

The Wakhan Corridor appears as a bridge among the nations across the great mountain ranges on the Silk Route. Wakhan is the shortest trade route for China to enter Afghanistan and for Pakistan to reach Central Asia. The Wakhjir Pass is one of the main passes of the ancient trade route. It connects the Sinkiang (Xinjiang) province of China to the Wakhan valley of Afghanistan. The opening of the borders of China and Afghanistan through the Wakhan Corridor will open the connectivity of China to Central Asia, Europe and Gulf countries. Wakhan Corridor is also connected to Hunza and Chitral of POK. From Pakistan, the Hindu Kush Mountains can be crossed through the Broghol, Isrhad and Dilisang Pass. BroghilPass, (Chitral) serves as the most important gateway for Pakistan to Wakhan Corridor (**Munir and Shafiq, 2018**). Pakistan can greatly benefit from the Wakhan Corridor as its northern highlands along Chitral provide an excellent trade route linking Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Central Asian States through Wakhan Corridor.

The geopolitical value of Afghanistan will be enhanced with the opening of the Wakhan corridor as it will emerge as an additional/subsidiary route to the neighbouring countries. In combination with the Karakoram Highway, it will also provide direct connectivity to the Indian Ocean. It will further strengthen the strategic and cooperative partnership between Afghanistan and China.

Long back the British viceroy Lord Curzon once said that 'Gilgit is one of the northern gates of India' (**Senge H. Sering, 2012**). Pakistan occupied territories of Kashmir (the northernmost part of the Gilgit-Baltistan region) are in the immediate neighbourhood of the Wakhan region. Control over these territories could have given a possible connection to India to the northern regions. It could offer the shortest trade route for India to reach Afghanistan and Central Asia. Then the Wakhan Corridor could also have provided a connection between India and Caspian Sea Region.

Chinese Geopolitics and Future of the Wakhan Corridor

Wakhan is one of the most inaccessible areas of Afghanistan. At present, there is only one road in the entire corridor that links it with Wakhjir Pass. Currently, that road is also in very bad shape. But its future prospects are quite bright as it would provide regional connectivity to China. The route is surrounded by Tajikistan in the north and Pakistan in the south. Both Pakistan and Tajikistan have close cooperation with China.

By controlling the Wakhan corridor China can enhance its position in the region. Besides getting economic benefits it can enhance its geopolitical and geostrategic advantages that it can use to reinforce its relations with Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

China has a continued diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan. It is accompanied by economic assistance and investment in infrastructure development in Afghanistan. In fact, when Afghan President Ashraf Ghani visited China in October 2014, he recommended to President Xi that China and Afghanistan should join hands in setting up a vehicle interface along their border on the Wakhan Corridor. The inclusion of Afghanistan in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China has added new expectations for Afghanistan. China is also planning to build a road with Afghanistan via the Wakhan Corridor. It will be parallel to the Karakorum Highway.

Although the larger part of the Wakhan Corridor is an inhospitable and mountainous region. (**R Muhammad Khan, 2015**). The corridor remains closed for at least five months a year due to the snow. However, the Borders of Wakhan lie close to the city of Kashgar.

The construction of the road would help connect the road network to Kashgar in Xinjiang. This path can have an important role in the future as an energy corridor. It may be used as an alternative route for gas and oil pipelines to transport energy products to China (**Akram Umarov, 2017**).

Through this corridor, China hopes to restore its previous position in the legendary Silk Road. In other words, it will be a new Eurasian Land Bridge to China (**R Muhammad Khan, 2015**). Reviving the old silk route and linking the Wakhan Corridor with the resource-rich Caspian Sea Region and region of Central Asia may establish easy transportation linkages to China.

Trade routes through the Wakhan Corridor would enhance the economic interests of all the regional countries especially China, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Tajikistan and the other countries of the Central Asian Region can also make use of the Wakhan Corridor. It may add to the regional geo-economics. Connectivity along the Wakhan Corridor may also enhance the importance of the Karakoram Highway and the Gwadar Port in Pakistan. Thus, it would enhance the geopolitical and geostrategic value of this region. (**Ahmed and Malik, 2021**).

Wakhan Corridor is getting much-renewed attention in recent times. In fact, China has constructed a road on the other side of the Wakhan Corridor that ends 10 km short of its border with Afghanistan. The CPEC has also added value to the connectivity of Afghanistan through the Wakhan Corridor.

Security Concerns of China

Even though Afghanistan has asked China to open Wakhan Corridor, China is still considering whether to officially open the Wakhan or not, because it serves not only as a business route but as a pathway for human trafficking and drug flow as well. In fact, the foremost interest of China in not opening up to the Wakhan Corridor is to prevent the spread of terrorism, particularly the terrorist movement through the Wakhan corridor. The security concern of China also relates to the separatist movement in its Xinjiang region. The Uyghur Islamic fundamentalism is being propped up through this area.

China remains concerned about transnational linkages between Afghans and Uyghurs. The possible support to separatists of Xinjiang from Islamic groups active in Afghanistan is a major concern for China. It was enough for Beijing to keep the Afghanistan-China border closed for decades.

Future Geopolitics and Possible Scenarios

China enjoys dominance over the Wakhan Corridor, as it can regulate communication through Wakhjir Pass. Besides, it is trying to gain strategic advantages in this region. In recent years, China has paid special attention to Badakhshan Province. China is extending support for the creation of a special Afghan mountain brigade in Badakhshan. It also plans to expand its military presence by stationing Chinese troops there (**Vinay Kaura, 2021**). A developed road infrastructure through this mountainous corridor will not only allow China to increase trade with Central Asia but also the easy movement of troops. Chinese decision to construct a road through Wakhjir Pass may complicate the geopolitical situation of the region.

The connectivity across the Wakhan Corridor would improve the geopolitical manoeuvrability of China. Anything that adds value to the Karakoram Highway and the Gwadar Port would also add to the geopolitical manoeuvrability of Pakistan. Control over this region would enhance the strategic and economic dimensions of China and Pakistan. At the same time, it will put India at a strategic disadvantage. The increased commerce through the Wakhan Corridor to the port of Gwadar would certainly be beneficial for Pakistan (**Vinay Kaura, 2021**)

India is worried about the opening of the Wakhjir pass, as well as the already-opened Khunjarab pass. It would give China the high ground in the region, reinforcing its geopolitical and economic dominance.

Any geopolitical manoeuvring of China and Pakistan around the border areas of Jammu and Kashmir is a point of concern for India. Any activity by China and Pakistan in the region of the Wakhan Corridor would prove to isolate India. It would, in fact, outflank India geopolitically (**Kendrick Foster, 2019**). It would have a similar effect as the String of Pearls strategy of China. India is rightfully concerned about its encirclement. Besides, there are other factors to worry about. China has recently established a military base in Tajikistan. It indicates its willingness to extend its military superiority in an area (**Kendrick Foster, 2019**).

The Chinese base is located in Tajikistan, 12 km from the strategic Wakhan Corridor, which lies just north of Pakistan and Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. The second base of China has been spotted near the Wakhan Corridor. It is located at Kyzylrabort in Tajikistan. These bases are of great strategic significance, not just to China but also to South Asian countries.

Conclusion

Any geopolitical manoeuvring of China and Pakistan around the border areas of Jammu and Kashmir is a point of concern for India. Any activity by China and Pakistan in the region of the Wakhan Corridor would prove to isolate India. It would have a similar effect as the String of Pearls. India is rightfully concerned about its encirclement. Besides, there are other factors to worry about. China has recently established a military base in Tajikistan. It indicates its willingness to extend its military superiority in an area.

India has always reiterated its claim on POK. It has strong reservations about the route of CPEC which passes via the region of Gilgit-Baltistan. Besides the increasing footprints of China in the Northern Borderland of India is a matter of concern for India. Over activism of China and Pakistan in the region of Gilgit-Baltistan and Chinese manoeuvring in the Northern Borderland of India will eventually have geopolitical repercussions on the entire region.

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