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Artificial Intelligence, Autonomy and the Human Factor: Strategic Lessons from the 2025 India-Pakistan Crisis

Amber Afreen Abid, Sher Bano

Strategic Importance of Wakhan Corridor: Navigating Interests of Afghanistan, Pakistan and China

Dr Zahid

Impact of India's Strategic Autonomy on its Quad Membership

Azfar Bilal Qureshi, Rubia Shoukat

Climate Change and the Arctic Ocean: Exploring Geopolitical Shifts and Strategic Interests in the Region

Shereen Hashum

The Geopolitical Impact of Pakistan's Victory in the Four-Day War with India

Azhar Ali



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Strategic Importance of the Wakhan Corridor: Navigating Interests of Afghanistan, Pakistan and China

Dr Zahid¹

Abstract

The Wakhan Corridor is a narrow strip of land in northeastern Afghanistan. Historically, it served as a “buffer zone” established by the “Tsarist Russia” and the “British Empire” during the “Great Game” competition to avoid direct conflict between the two superpowers. The ancient “Silk Route” passed through this Corridor until the mid-15th century, as it was the primary trade route between the East and the West. As Western powers discovered new sea and land routes, the Corridor lost its significance. However, in recent years, with the rise of new economic projects such as CPEC, BRI, oil and gas pipelines and power transmission lines, the Corridor has regained the interest of regional powers, which are seeking its revival. This research is based on a qualitative approach, relying on secondary sources. Data was collected from research papers, newspapers and internet sources. This paper explores the interests of Afghanistan, Pakistan and China in the Wakhan Corridor and examines its potential as a connectivity link between Central and South Asia. The study emphasizes that investment in this Corridor will foster economic prosperity in the region. A key finding of the study is that this project is likely to strengthen regional connectivity and open new avenues for economic cooperation with significant implications for the broader geopolitical landscape.

Keywords: Wakhan Corridor, Silk Route, BRI, CPEC, Pakistan, China, Afghanistan, Connectivity

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Introduction

A particular geographic place or space does not choose to become a strategic location. Instead, its position in a “hostile geopolitical environment” or its location between various ambitious and aggressive geopolitical entities increases its geopolitical and geostrategic importance.² Considering this, Wakhan enjoys a significant strategic location in the region. Historically, this narrow strip of land has served as an important transit route between China, Tibet, Persia, Central Asia and South Asia. The ancient Silk Route passed through this narrow strip and remained the primary passage for travelers and merchandise for a long time. This famous route was not only crucial for trade and commerce but also played a great role in the exchange of ideas and cultures between the eastern and western regions of the world.³

Furthermore, in ancient times, this route was used by Chinese pilgrims to visit Buddhist centers in Gandhara and Taxila. It was a popular pilgrimage route during the 5th and 6th centuries. In the seventh century, the Chinese monk Huan Tsang traveled through this route in search of Buddhist teaching. Marco Polo and Portuguese travelers used this route to reach China.⁴ Therefore, this Corridor remained an essential trade path to connect China, India, Balkh and Bukhara until the decline of the Mughal Empire in India. However, with the development of new sea routes to China and India in the late 15th century, the ancient Silk Route lost its significance as a major trade route from Rome to China.⁵

The modern geopolitical importance of Wakhan emerged in the 19th century during the “Great Game” era.⁶ During this time, Wakhan emerged as a “buffer zone” between the Tsarist Russia and the British Empire to prevent Russian advance toward British India and to avoid direct conflict between the

² D. K. Shahi, “Geopolitical and Geostrategic Significance of Wakhan Corridor.” *International Journal of Research in Social Science* 12, no. 7 (2022), 115 - 123. https://www.ijmr.us/2022ijrss_july.php

³ A. Ahmad, “The Wakhan Corridor.” *The Nation*. June 16, 2023. <https://www.nation.com.pk/16-Jun-2023/the-wakhan-Corridor>

⁴ D. K. Shahi, 2022.

⁵ Mirwais Parsa, “The Bridge to Connect Asia.” *Fair Observer*. November 20, 2017. https://www.fairobserver.com/region/central_south_asia/wakhan-Corridor-china-pakistan-afghanistan-tajikistan-world-trade-news-81661/#

⁶ Global-Gazette, “The History of the Wakhan Corridor: A Geopolitical Flashpoint,” *Global Gazette*, January 4, 2025. <https://www.global-gazette.com/post/the-history-of-the-wakhan-Corridor-a-geopolitical-flashpoint/>.

two powers.⁷ Hence, the Corridor was formed in 1895 after negotiations between British military explorer Francis Younghusband and his Russian counterpart, Colonel Yanov.⁸ Both officers delineated the southern and northern borders of the Corridor and announced that neither China nor Afghanistan would interfere in the area. However, later Russia conceded this area as part of Afghanistan under a pre-established agreement.⁹

During the Cold War, this area remained strategically significant due to its geographical proximity to the Soviet Union and Pakistan, especially after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.¹⁰ Following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) recognized its significance as an alternative supply route. In 2009, the United States approached Chinese authorities with a proposal to open Wakhjir Pass as an alternative supply route for NATO forces operating in Afghanistan. However, China declined the proposal due to its strategic interests and security concerns.¹¹

Today, Wakhan's proximity to China, Pakistan and Central Asia makes it a crucial focal point for regional powers, particularly in the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).¹² The BRI project aims to connect the Wakhan Corridor to the USD 62 billion mega-infrastructure project, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), due to its proximity to the Karakoram Highway. The Karakoram Highway was developed by the Chinese government to facilitate regional connectivity through pipelines, power transmission lines,

⁷ T. Maqbool, "Strategic importance of the Wakhan border for Pakistan: A gateway to Central Asia and China," *The Friday Times*, January 8, 2025.
<https://thefridaytimes.com/08-Jan-2025/strategic-importance-of-the-wakhan-border-for-pakistan-a-gateway-to-central-asia-and-china/>.

⁸ Anees Hafiz, "Should Pakistan Claim The Wakhan Corridor?" *Defence Journal*, July 8, 2024,
<https://defencejournal.com/2024/05/10/should-pakistan-claim-the-wakhan-Corridor-the-historical-factual-and-terrain-analysis/>.

⁹ M. A. Hamid Gul, "Strategic Importance of Wakhan Corridor for Pakistan," *Pakistan Observer*, January 18, 2024,
<https://pakobserver.net/strategic-importance-of-wakhan-Corridor-for-pakistan/>.

¹⁰ D. K. Shahi, 2022.

¹¹ I. Amir, "Geostrategic Importance of the Wakhan Corridor: Gateway to Regional Connectivity," *Pakistan Horizon* 76, no. 4 (2023), 85 - 101,
<https://www.pakistan-horizon.piia.org.pk/index.php/pakistan-horizon/article/view/323>.

¹² Global-Gazette, 2025.

and railway networks.¹³ The objective of this paper is to highlight the strategic importance of the Wakhan Corridor and the interest of Afghanistan, Pakistan and China in the development of this Corridor, particularly in terms of its geopolitical and geo-economic importance. This research paper is based on a qualitative method. The data has been collected from secondary sources, including articles, newspapers and credible internet sources.

Geographical Position

The Wakhan Corridor is typically characterized by high altitudes, rugged terrain, towering mountain ranges, expansive glaciers and harsh climatic environment. The Corridor is a long narrow strip of land in Badakhshan province, northeast of Afghanistan that has served as an important connecting point between South Asia, Central Asia and China. For centuries, it has been a vital passage for traders and pilgrims. The Corridor extends from the Ishkashim district in the north to the south by creating boundaries between several geopolitical entities. The Wakhan Corridor extends approximately 350 km in length, with its width ranging from 16 to 64 km.¹⁴ It covers an area of 10,300 km². On the southern side, it shares a 300 km border with Pakistan, while in the north and northeast, 260 km with Tajikistan and in the west, 74 km with China.¹⁵ Additionally, the Corridor encompasses several major mountain ranges, including the Pamir, Hindu Kush and Karakoram. These three ranges converge at what is commonly known as the Pamir Knot, while the open valley between these three ranges is called “Roof of the World” or (Bam-e-Dunya). The mountain passes in this region range from 5,000m to 6,500m above sea level.¹⁶ These rugged mountain ranges not only define the area’s topography but also reinforce the Corridor’s strategic importance. It serves as a key connecting point between Afghanistan and China’s Xinjiang province, while

¹³ M. A. Sadat, M. Hassan, and M. Zeb, “China – Afghanistan Trade & Strategic Importance of Wakhan Corridor: An appraisal,” *Asian journal of International Peace and Security* (AJIPS) 7, no. 2 (2023), 96 - 104, <https://www.ajips.fairlips.org/index.php/ajips/article/view/2023-vol-07-issue-2-china-afghanistan-trade/>.

¹⁴ The Spine Times, “Wakhan Corridor: A Historical and Geographical Overview,” *The Spine Times*, January 9, 2025, <https://spinetimes.pk/wakhan-Corridor-a-historical-and-geographical-overview/>.

¹⁵ D. K. Shahi, 2022.

¹⁶ M. S. Ahmad, M. A., and M. S. Malik, “Buffered Border Corridor: The Geo-Political and Strategic Significance of the Wakhan Corridor,” *Buffered Border Corridor: The Geo-Political and Strategic Significance of the Wakhan Corridor* 6, no. 3 (2021), 27 - 34, [https://doi.org/10.31703/gpr.2021\(VI-III\).03/](https://doi.org/10.31703/gpr.2021(VI-III).03/).

separating Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region from northern Pakistan.¹⁷

The Corridor is divided into two regions: The Upper Wakhan and the Lower Wakhan. The upper Wakhan lies to the eastern side of the Pamir River, while the lower Wakhan is situated on the western side, covering the Panj River valley and Wakhan Valley.¹⁸ Geographically, this region is divided into three sections: the main Wakhan strip between Pamir Knot, Qala Panj and Ishkesham; the great Pamir, also known as Pamir-e-Kalan, consists of the highest mountains in the knot. This mountain divides the Tajik Pamir across the deep valley of the Pamir River. The last section is little Pamir, known as "Pamir Khord", located in the southern and eastern block of mountains, determined by the upper valley and upper ridge of the Wakhan Valley.¹⁹ To be precise, the Wakhan Corridor is spread between 71°50' to 74°50' degrees east longitude, 36°35' to 37°30' degrees north latitude. Access to this region is restricted by terrain.²⁰

Geomorphologically, the Corridor is divided into two distinct parts: The Wakhan Corridor and the Afghan Pamir. The Wakhan Corridor lies at an elevation higher than 2000m and the Afghan Pamir lies above 3500m. This challenging topography contributes to the region's remoteness, making it one of the most isolated areas within the Hindu Kush-Karakoram region. Access to this region is possible through Dawan, Jaman Shur on the north, Wakhjir on the east and Broghil, Darwazo, Kankhen, Ochili and Shahgologh on the south.²¹ Additionally, this narrow strip of land has numerous routes to connect with neighboring countries. The Northern route connects it with Tajikistan, passing along the Panj Rivers. The Southern route reaches China through Wakhjir Pass, but this route is closed for more than half of the year due to snowfall. The third is the Central route, connecting both the Northern and Southern routes in Wakhan and leading to China through Tegermansu mountain pass at an altitude of 4,827m.²² The fourth route links the Afghan Tongue with the Karakoram Highway, located in the southeast from Sarhad-e-Wakhan to Hunza and Gilgit

¹⁷ Anees Hafiz, 2024.

¹⁸ M. A. Sadat, M. Hassan, and M. Zeb, 2023.

¹⁹ M. S. Ahmad, M. A., and M. S. Malik, 2021.

²⁰ D. K. Shahi, 2022.

²¹ D. K. Shahi, 2022.

²² M. E. Yawar, "Investigating the Political, Economic, and Geopolitical Role of Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor in China's Belt and Road Initiative." *Law and Humanities Quarterly Reviews* 3, no. 1 (2024), 39 - 53, DOI: 10.31014/aior.1996.03.01.101.

regions of Pakistan. The fifth route is located in the south, connecting Sarhad-e-Wakhan to Gilgit and Chitral regions. Other roads also link Wakhan to Chitral.²³ Furthermore, the main passes of the Wakhan Corridor are Broghli (3882m), Darwazaa to Chitral (4288m), Irshad Uween (4979m) and Dilisan (5290m) to Gojal and Khodarg Werth to Ishkuman.²⁴ The region is known for its snowy peaks, deep valleys, glaciers, lakes, rugged and rocky terrains and hot springs.

The Oxus River (Amu Darya), one of Central Asia's major rivers that ultimately flows into the Aral Sea, originates in the highlands of this region.²⁵ The two main tributaries of this river are the Panj and Pamir Rivers, which originate from the heights of Pamir and Hindukush. The joining of these two rivers forms the Amu River.²⁶

Socio-Cultural Diversity of the Wakhan Corridor

The Wakhan Corridor is a unique region with diverse customs, rituals and various ethnic groups living in this area.²⁷ Wakhan has a population of 17000 people, consisting of Wakhis and Kyrgyz,²⁸ who have been living in this region for centuries. The Kyrgyz and Wakhis are followers of the Ismaili sect of Islam and their language is Wakhi. The Wakhis live in the border areas of Tajikistan, China and Pakistan at altitudes of 2000m to 3000m. The Kyrgyz live in the eastern part of the Wakhan Corridor, which includes mountains and snow-covered lakes.²⁹

The common religion, language, climate and environment have fostered similar cultures among the Wakhis and Kyrgyz.³⁰ Despite these

²³ T. U. Hassan, A. Khan, and M. Ismail, "Geo-Strategic Significance of Wakhan Corridor for Pakistan," *Global International Relations Review* 6, no. 2 (2023), 8 - 17, [http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/girr.2023\(VI-II\).02/](http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/girr.2023(VI-II).02/).

²⁴ M. S. Ahmad, M. A., and M. S. Malik, 2021.

²⁵ A. Ahmad, 2023.

²⁶ Inam U. Haque, "The Geopolitics of Wakhan," *The Express Tribune*, January 16, 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2522367/the-geopolitics-of-wakhan/>.

²⁷ I. Amir, "Geostrategic Importance of the Wakhan Corridor: Gateway to Regional Connectivity," *Pakistan Horizon* 76, no. 4 (2023), 85 - 101, <https://www.pakistan-horizon.piia.org.pk/index.php/pakistan-horizon/article/view/323/>.

²⁸ Inam U. Haque, 2025.

²⁹ M. E. Yawar, "Investigating the Political, Economic, and Geopolitical Role of Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor in China's Belt and Road Initiative," *Law and Humanities Quarterly Reviews* 3, no. 1 (2024), 39 - 53, DOI: 10.31014/aior.1996.03.01.101/.

³⁰ H. Y. Malik, "Geo-political Significance of the Wakhan Corridor for China," *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 7, no. 2 (2014), 307 - 323, DOI 10.1007/s40647-014-0017-z/.

commonalities, sometimes territorial disputes, historical grievances and competing interests among these groups lead to tension and conflict.³¹ Owing to the extremely rugged terrain, harsh climatic conditions and geographic isolation, the people of Wakhan face significant challenges, including limited access to education, food insecurity, widespread poverty, inadequate healthcare and a high prevalence of opium addiction.³² The absence of education and development standards has kept them behind the world.³³

Currently, the livelihood of the Wakhan people primarily depends on livestock husbandry and, to some extent, agriculture.³⁴ The people of Wakhan live in tents and follow a nomadic lifestyle. In the summer season, they move to higher elevations, while in winter, they go downhill to their pastures to avoid the extreme cold and facilitate grazing for their animals.³⁵ Festivities in Wakhan include the celebration of Nowruz (Persian New Year), Eid ul-Fitr and Eid ul-Adha, along with the observance of local traditions and cultural practices.

Afghanistan's Interest

The Wakhan Corridor is often described as the “head” of Afghanistan due to its distinctive shape and location. In ancient times, this region held a significant position as a trade route between the East and West. However, in the modern era, it has lost its importance due to modern developments, rugged terrain and lack of infrastructure.³⁶ But in recent years, the discovery of hydrocarbons in Central Asia and the emergence of new economic projects like CPEC, BRI and other ventures, including gas and oil pipelines and electric transmission lines like CASA-1000, have highlighted the geopolitical and

³¹ T. U. Hassan, A. Khan, and M. Ismail. “Geo-Strategic Significance of Wakhan Corridor for Pakistan,” *Global International Relations Review* 6, no. 2 (2023), 8 - 17, [http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/girr.2023\(VI-II\).02/](http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/girr.2023(VI-II).02/).

³² S. K. Bazai, “Geostrategic significance of Wakhan Corridor: Opportunities and implications for region,” *Eurasia Review*. Last modified October 16, 2022, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/16102022-geostrategic-significance-of-wakhan-Corridor-opportunities-and-implications-for-region-oped/>

³³ H. Y. Malik, 2014.

³⁴ Mirwais Parsa, “The Bridge to Connect Asia,” *Fair Observer*, November 20, 2017, https://www.fairobserver.com/region/central_south_asia/wakhan-Corridor-china-pakistan-afghanistan-tajikistan-world-trade-news-81661/#.

³⁵ H. Y. Malik, 2014.

³⁶ Mushtaq A. Mahindro, “What is the Significance of the Wakhan Corridor, and How Has Its Historical Development Shaped Its role over time” *Medium*, January 8, 2025. <https://medium.com/@mushtaqahmadmahindro/what-is-the-significance-of-the-wakhan-Corridor-and-how-has-its-historical-development-shaped-its-72f3dbca0660/>.

geo-economic importance of this Corridor.³⁷ With the rise of these projects, the Wakhan Corridor has once again attracted the attention of neighboring countries. It appears that the Corridor is regaining its historical significance after centuries of neglect. The revival of Wakhan is expected to increase Afghanistan's political and economic significance as a transit hub.

Afghanistan has served as a link between East and West due to its strategic location as a transit point for commercial exchanges in ancient times. Its geographical position offers a unique opportunity to transform the country into a commercial and economic Corridor. The Wakhan Corridor, in particular, holds significant potential to connect regional countries including Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and the Central Asian states.³⁸ This Corridor holds strategic significance for Afghanistan, as it could facilitate strong relations with neighboring countries and enhance its global trade through the Indian Ocean. Moreover, its proximity with the "resource-abundant" Central Asian states and Pakistan, offers opportunities for trade partnership, resource exchange and cross-border commerce.³⁹

Establishing communication and commercial infrastructure in Wakhan will contribute to the economic development of Afghanistan, particularly benefiting the Northern provinces.⁴⁰ By developing this Corridor, Afghanistan can transport its products to China easily and affordably, while simultaneously reaping economic and commercial benefits in return.⁴¹ It would enhance Afghanistan's political leverage and help the country to balance its relations with regional powers. In addition, the development of infrastructure in Wakhan would improve the government's access to the region, promote economic growth and uplift the living standard of local people.⁴²

³⁷ M. E. Yawar, "Investigating the Political, Economic, and Geopolitical Role of Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor in China's Belt and Road Initiative," *Law and Humanities Quarterly Reviews* 3, no. 1 (2024), 39 - 53, DOI: 10.31014/aior.1996.03.01.101/.

³⁸ "Importance of Wakhan Corridor for Afghanistan," *Hurriyat Radio*, <https://hurriyat.net/analysis/125/analysis/Importance%20of%20Wakhan%20Corridor%20for%20Afghanistan>.

³⁹ I. Amir, "Geostrategic Importance of the Wakhan Corridor: Gateway to Regional Connectivity," *Pakistan Horizon* 76, no. 4 (2023), 85 - 101, <https://www.pakistan-horizon.piia.org.pk/index.php/pakistan-horizon/article/view/323/>.

⁴⁰ "Will the Taliban hand over the Wakhan Corridor to Pakistan?" *Harici*, January 14, 2025, <https://harici.com.tr/en/will-the-taliban-hand-over-the-wakhan-Corridor-to-pakistan/>

⁴¹ "Importance of Wakhan Corridor for Afghanistan," *Hurriyat Radio*, <https://hurriyat.net/analysis/125/analysis/Importance%20of%20Wakhan%20Corridor%20for%20Afghanistan>.

⁴² S. K. Bazai, "Geostrategic significance of Wakhan Corridor: Opportunities and implications for region," *Eurasia Review*, Last modified October 16, 2022, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/16102022-geostrategic-significance-of-wakhan-Corridor-opportunities-and-implications-for-region-oped/>.

China's BRI project further underscores the significance of this Corridor.⁴³ By joining BRI, Afghanistan can serve as a regional hub and enter into a new era of economic and political cooperation at the regional level. The development of the Wakhan Corridor represents a crucial step toward Afghanistan's economic and political growth.⁴⁴ Afghanistan stands to benefit significantly from becoming part of BRI, as this project would connect to both North-East Asian and South-West Asian nations. By integrating into this project, Afghanistan could achieve political and economic relevance and establish itself as a key global transit hub. Opening the Wakhan Corridor would increase Afghanistan's strategic importance by offering an alternative route to the Indian Ocean through Pakistan,⁴⁵ a development that holds particular significance for China. Therefore, China is investing in infrastructure projects in Wakhan region. The three key ranges, Tegermansu, the Big Pamir or Pamir Kalan and Wakhjir valley, have been identified as potential sites for development. The development of these ranges would provide Afghanistan with new economic prospects.⁴⁶

The opening of this Corridor would significantly enhance Afghanistan's geopolitical importance, positioning it as a supplementary route for regional connectivity. By integrating with the Karakoram Highway, it would provide direct and shortest access to the Arabian Sea.⁴⁷ Afghanistan could benefit substantially from this Corridor by generating revenue through taxation and creating thousands of direct and indirect job opportunities. Trade cannot flourish without security, therefore, realizing the full benefits of this Corridor is contingent upon stability in Afghanistan.

⁴³ A. Ahmad, "The Wakhan Corridor," *The Nation*, Last modified June 16, 2023, <https://www.nation.com.pk/16-Jun-2023/the-wakhan-corridor/>.

⁴⁴ "Importance of Wakhan Corridor for Afghanistan," *Hurriyat Radio*, <https://hurriyat.net/analysis/125/analysis/Importance%20of%20Wakhan%20Corridor%20for%20Afghanistan>.

⁴⁵ M. A. Sadat, M. Hassan, and M. Zeb. "China – Afghanistan Trade & Strategic Importance of Wakhan Corridor: An appraisal," *Asian journal of International Peace and Security* (AJIPS) 7, no. 2 (2023), 96 - 104, <https://www.ajips.fairlips.org/index.php/ajips/article/view/2023-vol-07-issue-2-china-afghanistan-trade/>.

⁴⁶ M. A. Sadat, M. Hassan, and M. Zeb. "China – Afghanistan Trade & Strategic Importance of Wakhan Corridor: An appraisal," *Asian journal of International Peace and Security* (AJIPS) 7, no. 2 (2023), 96 - 104, <https://www.ajips.fairlips.org/index.php/ajips/article/view/2023-vol-07-issue-2-china-afghanistan-trade/>.

⁴⁷ D. K. Shahi, "Geopolitical and Geostrategic Significance of Wakhan Corridor," *International Journal of Research in Social Science* 12, no. 7 (2022), 115 - 123, https://www.ijmra.us/2022ijrss_july.php.

China's Interest

China has started efforts to revitalize the ancient Silk Road as part of the BRI project. The initiative includes two major components: (i) Silk Road Economic Belt and (ii) Maritime Silk Road. This plan aims to connect the continents of Asia, Europe and Africa and integrate China with the rest of the world through land, sea and air. This project contains an estimated USD 5 trillion investment in infrastructure building across 65 countries.⁴⁸

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

A major BRI project in South Asia is CPEC, with an investment of USD 62 billion.⁴⁹ This project connects the city of Kashgar in China's Xinjiang province to Pakistan's Gwadar port. An important part of CPEC is the reconstruction and upgrading of the Karakoram Highway, which links Kashgar to Abbottabad. This highway was opened in 1986 as a trade and transit route between China and Pakistan. The construction of this highway significantly reduced the travel distance. Notably, it has shortened the distance between China and the Middle-East from 15,900 km via the Malacca Strait to 3,700 km through the Khunjerab pass.⁵⁰

Importantly, the Karakoram Highway runs close to the Wakhan Corridor, a crucial component of BRI. Strategically positioned at the crossroads of Central Asia and South Asia, this Corridor provides China access to new economic markets, natural resources and energy reserves in Central Asia.⁵¹ The construction of roads in this Corridor would integrate Afghanistan's road network with the Karakoram Highway.⁵² Additionally, the Corridor could provide a direct link between China's Xinjiang province and Central Asian countries. Moreover, the Corridor may facilitate easier trade and energy supply networks between China and its partners. It can potentially deepen China's

⁴⁸ Parsa Mirwais, 2017.

⁴⁹ S. Rasool, "Geo-economic dimension of the china Pakistan economic Corridor and its regional implications," *Journal of Pakistan - China Studies* 1, no. 1 (2020), 1 - 22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55733/jpcs.v1i1.28/>.

⁵⁰ Parsa Mirwais, 2017.

⁵¹ H. Sarbiland, and I. U. Stanikzai. "China-Afghanistan Relations and the Wakhan Corridor: Assessing Economic Interests, Infrastructural Development, and Geopolitical Implications," *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice* 30, no. 6 (2024), 3515 - 3520, <https://doi.org/10.53555/kuey.v30i6.5097/>.

⁵² M. Chouhan, "Geo-political significance of Wakhan Corridor," *CeSCube*, April 6, 2021, <https://www.cescube.com/vp-geo-political-significance-of-wakhan-Corridor/>.

economic and strategic position in the region. This underscores the Wakhan's role as a vital link in the broader regional geopolitical and economic landscape.⁵³

The Karakoram Highway has the potential to connect CPEC with the Wakhan Corridor to expand the infrastructure projects between South Asia and Central Asia. Investing in this project would provide China with a shorter trade route to Central Asia and beyond.⁵⁴ The Wakhan Corridor is particularly significant as it is the only transit passage in the region that is close to China, West-Asia, the Persian Gulf, Caspian Sea and Europe.⁵⁵ More importantly, 60% of China's trade with the Western and Middle Eastern countries passes through the Strait of Malacca, a vital maritime checkpoint under the strategic influence of United States of America, China's main global competitor.⁵⁶ Considering this geopolitical challenge, the opening of the Wakhan Corridor and its connection with Central Asia could provide an alternative route for oil and gas pipelines, ensuring a more secure energy supply for China.⁵⁷

The construction of alternative land-based trade routes in western regions of China is a strategic requirement for its commercial and economic security.⁵⁸ Investment in Wakhan not only offers China an alternate transit route but also facilitates its access to Afghanistan's natural resources, like lithium, copper and rare earth minerals, which are important for China's industrial and technological development.⁵⁹ Geological surveys estimate that Afghanistan holds mineral resources worth USD 1 trillion. Therefore, China has already invested in the Mes Aynak copper mine, the world's second-largest copper deposit and in the hydrocarbon reserves of the Amu Darya Basin in Sar-e-Pol and Faryab provinces.⁶⁰

⁵³ T. Maqbool, "Strategic importance of the Wakhan border for Pakistan: A gateway to Central Asia and China," *The Friday Times*, January 8, 2025, <https://thefridaytimes.com/08-Jan-2025/strategic-importance-of-the-wakhan-border-for-pakistan-a-gateway-to-central-asia-and-china/>.

⁵⁴ I. Amir, "Geostrategic Importance of the Wakhan Corridor: Gateway to Regional Connectivity," *Pakistan Horizon* 76, no. 4 (2023), 85 - 101, <https://www.pakistan-horizon.piia.org.pk/index.php/pakistan-horizon/article/view/323/>.

⁵⁵ M. E. Yawar, 2024.

⁵⁶ M. E. Yawar, 2024.

⁵⁷ M. Chouhan, "Geo-political significance of Wakhan Corridor." CeSCube. April 6, 2021. <https://www.cescube.com/vp-geo-political-significance-of-wakhan-Corridor/>.

⁵⁸ M. E. Yawar, 2024.

⁵⁹ H. Sarbiland, and I. U. Stanikzai. "China-Afghanistan Relations and the Wakhan Corridor: Assessing Economic Interests, Infrastructural Development, and Geopolitical Implications." *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice* 30, no. 6 (2024), 3515 - 3520. <https://doi.org/10.53555/kuey.v30i6.5097/>.

⁶⁰ Mirwais Parsa, 2017.

Afghanistan's recent inclusion in CPEC highlights the growing geopolitical importance of the Wakhan Corridor. In May 2025, China, Pakistan and Afghanistan agreed in Beijing to formally extend the CPEC into Afghanistan's territory and to hold the next trilateral meeting in Kabul, a move reflecting Beijing's strategy to integrate Afghanistan into BRI frameworks and promote regional connectivity.⁶¹ This offers Afghanistan unprecedented access to Pakistan's ports and regional trade networks, while simultaneously providing China with overland alternatives to traditional maritime routes vulnerable to strategic competition.⁶²

Beyond its economic benefits, the construction of road through the Wakhan Corridor would significantly strengthen China's strategic foothold in the region.⁶³ For China, the project could serve three key strategic objectives. First, it would expand trade networks with Central Asian countries to the north. Second, it would improve connectivity with Pakistan's Gwadar Port to the south, a cornerstone of the CPEC. Third, it would provide China with direct access to Afghanistan.⁶⁴

Pakistan's Interest

The Wakhan Corridor offers the shortest and most efficient trade route for Pakistan to enhance economic and commercial relations with Central Asian states. It also provides easy access at the lowest cost via Pakistan's northern highland and Chitral region.⁶⁵ The Corridor could facilitate trade in minerals, textiles, agricultural products, manufactured goods, oil, gas and electric transmission lines.⁶⁶ At the same time, the Wakhan Corridor could function as a crucial transit route for Central Asian states to have direct access to the

⁶¹ "China, Pakistan, Taliban Agree To Extend CPEC Into Afghanistan," *Afghanistan International*, May 21, 2025.

⁶² XU Weiwei, "Experts Commend CPEC Expansion to Afghanistan," *China Daily*, June 4, 2025.

⁶³ Shahana Naseer, "Why Wakhan Corridor is Significant for China?" *Matrix Mag.* January 17, 2025. <https://matrixmag.com/why-wakhan-corridor-is-significant-for-china/>.

⁶⁴ "The new road to conflict: Geopolitics of the Wakhan Corridor." *Harvard International Review*, December 8, 2019. <https://hir.harvard.edu/wakhanCorridor/>.

⁶⁵ S. K. Bazai, "Geostrategic significance of Wakhan Corridor: Opportunities and implications for region" *Eurasia Review*, October 16, 2022, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/16102022-geostrategic-significance-of-wakhan-corridor-opportunities-and-implications-for-region-oped/>.

⁶⁶ Qamar Bashir, "Wakhan Might Turn Things Upside Down." *DAWN*, May 19, 2024. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1834396/>.

international markets through Gwadar Port. Gwadar holds strategic significance due to its location at the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz, a key maritime chokepoint.⁶⁷

Geographically, Wakhan connects Pakistan's Hunza and Chitral regions, with vital crossing points including Broghil, Irshad and Dilisang passes. Among these passes, Broghil pass is the most significant doorway connecting Pakistan to the Wakhan Corridor.⁶⁸ Gupsi and Yasin serve as important joining points, connecting the Wakhan Corridor with Pakistan's Ghizar and Hunza districts in Gilgit Baltistan.⁶⁹ Indeed, this Corridor serves as a bridge between Pakistan and Central Asia, significantly reducing the distance between the two regions to just 13 km.⁷⁰ The opening of the Wakhan Corridor would offer Pakistan another trading route with Afghanistan. Pakistan could exploit the Wakhan Corridor as a more efficient and economical route for importing oil and gas from Central Asia and Russia.⁷¹

A train link from Tajikistan through the Wakhan Corridor could connect to the planned Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan railway line. Pakistan views the Wakhan Corridor not only as a strategic access point to Central Asia but also as a potential source of significant employment opportunities for Pakistani citizens. In addition to facilitating trade expansion through Gwadar port, the Corridor would also enhance Pakistan's economic ties with China and Central Asian countries. However, the importance of Wakhan for Pakistan extends beyond trade. The Corridor carries political significance, especially in the context of Pakistan's policy focus on enhancing relations with Central Asian states.

Pakistan's National Security Policy 2022-2026

Pakistan's National Security Policy (NSP) 2022-2026 recognizes Afghanistan's potential as a strategic gateway for enhanced economic connectivity with the Central Asian Republics (CARs). Central to this is the "Vision Central Asia," emphasizing five core pillars: political relations, trade

⁶⁷ Qamar Bashir, 2024.

⁶⁸ D. K. Shahi, 2022

⁶⁹ Anees Hafiz, 2024.

⁷⁰ "Will the Taliban hand over the Wakhan Corridor to Pakistan?" *Harici*, January 14, 2025. <https://harici.com.tr/en/will-the-taliban-hand-over-the-wakhan-corridor-to-pakistan/>.

⁷¹ M. Ismail, and R. S. Fitriani. "Future Impact on Pakistan Economy in the 21st Century Shifting of Global Power." *Proceeding of The International Conference on Economics and Business* 1, no. 2 (2022), 167 - 181. DOI: 10.55606/iceb.v1i2.121/.

and investment, energy and connectivity, security and defense and people-to-people contacts.⁷² The NSP marks a deliberate strategic pivot to geo-economics, prioritizing the expansion of trade and economic linkages with CARs through robust connectivity. Afghanistan plays a pivotal role in advancing Pakistan's "Vision Central Asia" initiative. In alignment with Islamabad's geo-economic priorities, the Wakhan Corridor would further facilitate trade expansion and energy projects in the region.

Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a pivotal multilateral organization that plays a significant role in shaping the geopolitical and economic landscape of Central and South Asia, directly impacting the relevance of the Wakhan Corridor. Since its establishment in 2001, the SCO has prioritized regional stability, security cooperation and economic integration among its member states, which include China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Belarus. The organization's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) has notably enhanced intelligence sharing and operational coordination, thereby strengthening collective efforts against terrorism, extremism and separatism. The SCO's commitment to fostering mutual trust, expanding multilateral dialogue and promoting good neighborliness has provided a crucial platform for addressing common security concerns, which is essential for the stability required to operationalize strategic routes like the Wakhan Corridor.⁷³

Beyond security, the SCO is increasingly focused on economic cooperation and connectivity, which aligns closely with the objectives of major initiatives such as the BRI and the CPEC. The Wakhan Corridor holds the potential to become a vital trade and transit route connecting Central Asia with South Asia.⁷⁴ The SCO's agenda to deepen trade ties, expand infrastructure and

⁷² "Joint Communiqué on Official Visit of President of the Republic of Tajikistan, H.E. Emomali Rahmon to Islamic Republic of Pakistan – Ministry of Foreign Affairs." n.d. Accessed June 12, 2023.
<https://mofa.gov.pk/joint-communiqué-on-official-visit-of-president-of-the-republic-of-tajikistan-h-e-emomali-rahmon-to-islamic-republic-of-pakistan/>.

⁷³ Gulnar Shaimergenova, "Guest Opinion: SCO Plays Pivotal Role in Promoting Regional Stability, Development," *Xinhua*, July 6, 2024,
<https://english.news.cn/20240706/3d3b581ef9234bf4bd0a252baa53de44/c.html>.

⁷⁴ Qamar Bashir, "Wakhan Corridor: Vital for CPEC and BRI," *Pakistan Today*, April 25, 2024,
<https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2024/04/25/wakhan-Corridor-vital-for-cpec-and-bri/>

harmonize regulations among its members directly supports the development of such Corridors, facilitating access to new markets and resources. By synergizing the BRI and CPEC with the SCO's broader regional vision, the organization is positioned to inject new momentum into cross-border economic collaboration, permanently transforming the region's connectivity and economic prospects. In this context, the SCO's role is not only to ensure a secure environment for such projects but also to provide the institutional framework for sustainable and inclusive regional development.

Economic Cooperation Organization

The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), originally established as the Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD) in 1964 by Pakistan, Iran and Türkiye, was transformed in 1985 into a broader economic bloc. Its expansion in 1992 to include Afghanistan, five Central Asian republics and Azerbaijan significantly enhanced the organization's strategic capacity for regional integration.⁷⁵ Today, the ECO spans approximately eight million square kilometers, nearly double the size of the European Union and encompasses around 500 million people. Its objectives focus on facilitating trade, infrastructure development and energy cooperation across Eurasia, positioning it as a potential framework for linking landlocked Central Asian states with global markets through Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Türkiye.⁷⁶ In this context, the Wakhan Corridor can play a significant role in further enhancing trade and economic cooperation among ECO members.

Challenges

Historically, Wakhan's natural isolation has kept this area away from direct conflict. Nevertheless, its position along the Durand Line and its geographic proximity with China and Tajikistan renders it a significant area in the region. The Corridor offers access to trade routes, energy resources and economic cooperation with Central Asia, South Asia and China. As a result, Wakhan remains an important component in the geopolitical landscape of the region.⁷⁷ Despite its strategic significance, the opening of the Corridor faces several critical challenges.

⁷⁵ "History – Economic Cooperation Organization." n.d. Accessed February 28, 2024. <https://eco.int/history/>.

⁷⁶ Ameer Khan, Osama Ameer, and Khan, "Reviving Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) for Regional Connectivity" 3, no. 1: 2022, accessed January 3, 2024, <https://journals.pakistanreview.com/index.php/JGPSS/article/download/137/93/>.

⁷⁷ T. Maqbool, 2025.

Geographical Complexity

Geographically, the region experiences extremely low temperatures, remains snow-covered for over six months in a year and is characterized by rugged mountainous terrain. Given these geographical conditions, the construction of infrastructure such as roads and tunnels presents significant technical and financial challenges. Nevertheless, comparable projects have been successfully completed in similar or even more geologically complex environments. A notable example is the Karakoram Highway, constructed through the formidable Karakoram mountains. The Pamir Mountains, where the Wakhan Corridor is located, exhibit similarly challenging topography.⁷⁸ Given these considerations, the construction of roads and tunnels in the Wakhan Corridor is feasible with the technological capabilities of China. From this perspective, geography does not constitute the primary obstacle to the development and opening of the Corridor. Instead, the principal challenges stem from terrorism originating in Afghanistan, political instability in the country and the prevalence of drug trafficking across the region.

Threat of Terrorism

Decades of conflict and instability in Afghanistan, as well as destruction caused by foreign forces, have created an environment conducive to the presence and operation of various terrorist organizations. The terrorist groups often exploit the country's ungoverned spaces and porous borders, particularly around the Wakhan Corridor, to establish bases and stage activities targeting neighboring regions, including Pakistan, Central Asia and China.⁷⁹ The use of Afghanistan's territory as a launchpad for cross-border terrorism has raised serious security concerns among regional states. China and Central Asian countries, in particular, view the security situation as a major obstacle to regional connectivity.⁸⁰ Due to persistent terrorist threats, China has long been reluctant to open or develop the Wakhan Corridor, keeping its border with Afghanistan effectively sealed for decades.⁸¹ In the light of these concerns, terrorism in Afghanistan continues to pose a significant threat to the security and stability of Pakistan, Central Asia and China. As long as the region remains insecure, the operationalization of the Wakhan Corridor will remain uncertain. Therefore, security and political stability in Afghanistan are essential

⁷⁸ Mirwais Parsa, 2017.

⁷⁹ I. Amir, 2023

⁸⁰ M. A. Sadat, M. Hassan, and M. Zeb, 2023.

⁸¹ D. K. Shahi, 2022.

prerequisites for the Corridor's development and opening.

Drug Trafficking

Afghanistan is the world's leading producer of opium. And one of the transit routes for this drug is Wakhan Corridor, which links Afghanistan to neighboring countries of China, Tajikistan and Pakistan. This connectivity not only contributes to the increase in the regional drug trade but also provides considerable funding for terrorist groups in Afghanistan. In 2020 alone, the volume of opium sold through this Corridor was 8.3 thousand tons, with an estimated value of USD 350 million.⁸² Due to lack of infrastructure in Wakhan, China has remained shielded from drug trafficking originating in Afghanistan. The construction of roads and other means in Wakhan could facilitate drug trafficking, turning the Corridor into a direct transit route for drug trafficking. Drug trafficking remains a key concern for regional countries to develop the Corridor. The continued drug trafficking poses a significant threat to the stability and security of Wakhan and its neighboring countries. Therefore, it is necessary to take serious steps to prevent drug trafficking in this region.⁸³ However, this problem is not insurmountable and can be tackled by close cooperation among the anti-narcotics forces of Pakistan, China, Tajikistan and Afghanistan through concerted efforts.

Conclusion

The Wakhan Corridor holds significant geo-economic and geostrategic importance for China, Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, its development has consistently faced challenges due to geopolitical issues, including the 19th-century "Great Game" between Russia and the British, the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan (1979-1989), the Afghanistan Civil War (1992-2001), NATO intervention (2001-2021) and the current instability in Afghanistan.

Building roads and tunnels across Wakhan will enhance trade activities in the region. This Corridor will provide a shorter route to access Central Asia and, vice versa, will enable Central Asian countries to more easily reach Pakistan's Gwadar and Karachi ports. It will also ease China's access to Afghanistan and strengthen the link between CPEC and the broader region, which is a key component of BRI. In a recent development, Afghanistan has been included in the CPEC. Its inclusion is expected to accelerate investment

⁸² I. Amir, 2023.

and construction activities along the Corridor. The operationalization of this Corridor will not only enhance regional connectivity but also open new paths for economic cooperation and infrastructure development. In this context, it will provide researchers with a valuable opportunity to study the broader potential geopolitical impact of the Corridor at both regional and global levels.

The connectivity is expected to foster peace, security, political stability and shared prosperity for all the countries in the region. In particular, it holds the potential to lift the people of Afghanistan out of poverty and diminish the impact of current humanitarian crisis.