



Research Paper

Geostrategic Significance of Wakhan Corridor and India-Afghanistan Relations

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Abstract

Wakhan corridor was formed during the colonial period as a buffer zone between British empire in India and Russian empire. Afghanistan was a buffer state between British India and the Russian Empire, and Afghanistan's territory was stretched towards the east so that there would be no direct land contact between British India and Russia. This extended territory came to be known as the Wakhan Corridor. After the partition of India, it was the only place where India and Afghanistan shared a land border. Wakhan corridor was gateway to Afghanistan for India. However, the area in between is presently under illegal occupation by Pakistan. After the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan in 2021, the geopolitics of the region changed. India-Afghanistan relations have taken a new turn, and India seeks to increase its strategic engagement in Afghanistan. This paper seeks to explore the significance of the contiguous border with Afghanistan and the geostrategic significance of this narrow strip of land for bilateral relationships.

Keywords: Wakhan Corridor, India, Afghanistan, Geopolitics.

I. Introduction

India and Afghanistan share deep historical and cultural ties. Afghanistan forms part of the Indian subcontinent and has been part of Indian civilisational consciousness for ages. The partition of India in 1947 changed the geopolitics of the subcontinent. Pakistan was formed, and India and Afghanistan lost direct land contact. After independence, India signed a friendship treaty with Afghanistan on 4 January 1950 to preserve its relations with Afghanistan and shared cordial relations with Afghanistan until its invasion by the USSR in 1979. Both India and Afghanistan shared territorial disputes with Pakistan, which was common ground for engaging with each other. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan posed a strategic dilemma for India. On the one hand, India wanted to remain aside of it to ensure its non-alignment with either block. On the other hand, it opposed the invasion to generate strategic leverage in Afghanistan to deepen its strategic presence. India supported the Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan and continued to provide humanitarian assistance. (Zazai & Rahmani, 2024; Yousuf, 2023)

The first Taliban government was formed in Afghanistan in 1996, but India did not recognise it. It was a Pakistan-backed government and an India-supported anti-Taliban northern alliance. After the US invasion of Afghanistan, India supported the US-backed government in Afghanistan and continued its humanitarian assistance. The visit of Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh in 2011 was a significant moment in the bilateral relationship between the two countries. After the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 and the Taliban takeover, India withdrew all its missions from Afghanistan but continued to provide humanitarian assistance. In October 2025, Afghan foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi visited India, and India upgraded its mission to embassy status. There is renewed interest in developing the bilateral relationship to a deeper level. (Ganaie & Ganaie, 2022; Saxena, 2021)

Wakhan Corridor is a small strip of land measuring 350 km in length and 13-65 km in width acts as a connecting link between South and Central Asia. Politically, it forms part of the Badakhshan Province of Afghanistan. It shares borders with four countries: India, Pakistan, China, and Tajikistan. The terrain is rugged and sparsely populated. On the map, it looks like the extended arm of Afghanistan towards China. Geographically, it is part of the Pamir Mountain region.

Corridors have emerged as new battlegrounds in the global power landscape. These corridors shape and reshape the global power dynamics. Those who have power over connectivity control global power dynamics.

The means of geopolitical influence have shifted from military power to infrastructure. It helps a nation garner political leverage without military involvement. Historically Wakhan corridor has acted as bridge or barrier between civilisations, countries and empires. Historically, it was an important junction on the Silk Road trade route. Geographically, it is located between the Pamir, Hindukush, and Karakoram mountains. During the colonial period, it was the meeting point of the Russian, Chinese, and British empires. Presently, it is the meeting point of two geopolitical regions, Central Asia and South Asia, as well as three nuclear powers, India, China, and Pakistan. (Kreutzmann, 2023; Munir & Shafiq, 2018)

William C. Rowe, in "The Wakhan Corridor: Endgame of the Great Game", wrote that during their struggle for power between Russian and British in the 19th and 20th centuries, at the edge of Afghanistan, the Wakhan corridor became "the catalyst for the ending of a protracted war of nerves, territory, and diplomatic sleight of hands played out over Central Asia as the "Great Game." He further noted this largely inaccessible and extremely remote odd border "served European by ensuring that the British and Russian Empires did not touch at any point" (Rowe 2010, 54-55). Another writer noted that "The 'Great Game' which began in 1838 ended in 1895 in the Pamirs where the Wakhan salient became a lasting testimony to the avariciousness of the superpowers of the nineteenth century. Halford Mackinder observed, "In all the British Empire, there is but one land frontier on which warlike preparations must ever be ready. It is the north-west frontier of India."

Located on the roof of the world, it forms the strategic high ground in the Trans-Himalayan region. The strategic significance of the Wakhan Corridor emerged during the period of the "Great Game" between the Russian and British empires in the 19th century. The British Empire, in search of natural boundaries for their empire in India, reached up to the Hindukush mountains. The Russian Empire also extended its influence to this region. Two European giants were in direct confrontation with each other. The Britishers did not want a direct confrontation with the Russians; hence, they wanted a buffer zone in between. Afghanistan has emerged as a buffer zone. The Anglo-Russian boundary commission, known as the 'Pamir Boundary Commission, demarcated the boundary between Britain and Russia. The Amu Darya was the dividing line between the empires. To its north lay the Russian Empire and to the south the British Empire. The Afghan territory was extended towards the East so that there would be no contact between Russia and Britain. This extended arm came to be known as the Wakhan Corridor. It was symbolically ruled by the Emir of Afghanistan.

The independence of India and the subsequent partition changed the geopolitical situation. Gilgit-Baltistan was illegally occupied by Pakistan, and India lost direct geographical contact with the Wakhan Corridor. As a result, India lost its direct geographical contact with Afghanistan and Central Asia through Tajikistan. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the war in Afghanistan kept this corridor in hindsight. The emerging geopolitical situation in South Asia has transformed the Wakhan Corridor from a buffer zone to a strategic corridor. The Wakhan Corridor has emerged as a strategic pivot in South Asia because of the great power rivalries in the region. China's relentless push in the Himalayas is not only to gain strategic high ground but also to reshape regional politics, isolate India, and establish dominance in Eurasia. The geopolitical situation in the trans-Himalayan region is rapidly changing. In this changing scenario, the Wakhan Corridor has emerged as a geopolitical hinge in the region, with the potential to shape regional geopolitics. India faces certain challenges and opportunities in framing its policies regarding the region. (Shahi, 2022; Yawar, 2024)

Significance of Wakhan Corridor

Wakhan corridor is increasingly being viewed as potential geostrategic extension of China's BRI, forming a route dubbed the "New Eurasian Land Bridge" that links China through Afghanistan to Europe and Gulf region. The strategic significance of the Wakhan Corridor was renewed after the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. The US-led NATO forces asked China to allow the use of the Wakhan Corridor as an alternative supply route, but China declined the request. However, China currently prioritises security over economic activity. Wakhan corridor holds great significance for all the countries in the region. (Yawar, 2024; Stanikzai, 2024; Rahman et al., 2025)

India: The Wakhan Corridor holds great strategic significance for India. It provides a direct land link with Afghanistan and subsequently with Central Asia. In the emerging geopolitical situation, both Afghanistan and Central Asia hold great geopolitical significance for India. Afghanistan is emerging as a natural ally of India. According to Kautilya's 'Mandal Theory, it is the neighbour's neighbour, hence a natural ally. After the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the geopolitical situation in Afghanistan has changed, and it is politically

stabilising. India holds immense soft power in Afghanistan and is undergoing strategic engagement with Afghanistan. (Pant, 2010; Mohan, 2022; Yousuf, 2023)

Similarly, the Central Asian region holds great geopolitical and geo-strategic significance for India. The region forms an extended neighbourhood of India. According to Kautilya's 'Mandal Theory', Central Asian states are neighbours' neighbours, and hence, our natural allies. The region has rich sources of hydrocarbons and uranium which can fulfil our increasing energy requirements. The region can act as a market for Indian goods as well as a source of raw materials. The South Asian region, along with the adjoining regions of West Asia and Central Asia, is politically unstable. The peace in the region is fragile, and various implicit and explicit conflicts are ongoing among the nation-states. India is facing the biggest threat to its peace and security on its north-western front due to the presence of hostile neighbours. In such situation cordial relations with our extended neighbourhood of Central Asia becomes very crucial

India lacks direct land access to the Wakhan corridor because the territory in between is illegally occupied by Pakistan. India has attempted to overcome this limitation. India developed the Chabahar Port in Iran and participated in the INSTC to establish trade links with Central Asia. India has also invested in Afghanistan and holds significant soft power there. However, these efforts have not translated into sustained strategic access to Central Asia. India has tried to ensure its strategic presence in the region by building the Farkhor airbase in Tajikistan. It can be used to maintain oversight of Afghanistan and Wakhan. However, these efforts have proven insufficient to counterbalance China. Despite being proximate to the Wakhan Corridor, India remains excluded from shaping the connectivity dynamics unfolding in the region. The Wakhan Corridor has the potential to shape India's broader continental strategy. India risks long-term marginalisation in the increasingly interconnected Eurasian order if it remains excluded from the emerging geopolitical order in the region. (Mohan, 2022; Yousuf, 2023)

China: China holds great sway in the Wakhan corridor. It is a gateway for China's trade, infrastructure development, and regional connectivity. China controls the Wakhjir Pass, which provides direct access to the Wakhan Corridor. The corridor has been significant in China since ancient times. The ancient trade route connecting China with Europe passed through the corridor. Wakhan corridor provides China direct access to Afghanistan where it can emerge as dominant power. By establishing a direct trade route, China seeks to circumvent the more expensive indirect pathways through Pakistan or Uzbekistan, thereby consolidating its economic influence in Afghanistan. China's growing investment in Afghan infrastructure projects, including those in resource-rich areas such as the Amu Darya oil fields, further underscores its strategy of embedding economic initiatives that enhance regional security while serving its broader geopolitical interest. It can exploit Afghanistan's natural resources, which remain unexplored because of the prolonged conflict. Thus, the Wakhan Corridor project functions as both a diplomatic bridge and a strategic instrument for China, enabling it to manage regional threats while embedding itself economically and geopolitically in Afghanistan's future. The Wakhan Corridor holds substantial strategic potential, positioning itself as a critical link connecting China to Iran and onwards across Central and South Asia through Afghanistan. It can also provide an alternate route to China to reach the Indian Ocean, bypassing Pakistan. Recently, concerns have emerged in China due to targeted attacks on Chinese workers in Pakistan and the financial crisis in Pakistan. The corridor can help China establish trade routes connecting South and Central Asia. It can explore new markets and resources. Chinese involvement in the Wakhan Corridor can influence Afghanistan's foreign policy decision-making, changing the regional geopolitical dynamics. (Stanikzai, 2024; Wani, 2025; Rahman et al., 2025)

The corridor holds great strategic significance for China to contain India's influence in South Asia. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), connecting China and Pakistan and providing China access to the Indian Ocean, passes very close to the Wakhan Corridor and through Pakistan-occupied Indian territories of Gilgit Baltistan. It also provides China with a direct link to Afghanistan and forms a strategic arch in South Asia, including Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China, to contain India. This will harm India's geopolitical standing in the region. It will become an important element in the Chinese policy of encircling India, the String of Pearls' policy. (Noman, 2024; Shahi, 2022)

China has been investing heavily in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is rich in mineral resources which remain largely unexplored. China aims to exploit these resources. China has invested billions of dollars in sectors such as copper, lithium, oil, and other rare minerals. In this regard, Wakhan could emerge as a logistical backbone. China also wants to build an alternative route via Afghanistan to reduce its dependence on Pakistan due to political volatility. However, China is cautious in its approach because of the fear of the spread of extremism. The corridor

can facilitate the movement of drugs and extremists into the already fragile Xinxiang region of China. The spread of terrorism in China by terrorist groups such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and Islamic Movement of Khorasan Province (ISKP) poses a challenge to China. By building infrastructure, China aims to establish supply bases for troop movement and improve border infrastructure. (Stanikzai, 2024; Rahman et al., 2025)

Functioning as a contemporary extension of the ancient Silk Road, the corridor is poised to have far-reaching economic and security ramifications, likely reshaping the regional balance of power in South Asia. Its development could redefine trade routes, potentially offering more efficient access between the East and West, while bolstering China's influence across a corridor that traverses key geopolitical frontiers. As both a trade artery and a security buffer, the Wakhan Corridor embodies the intersection of historic ambitions and modern strategic interests, with the capacity to influence the economic and political landscapes of Central and South Asia for years to come.

For the U.S., China's expanding footprint along the Wakhan Corridor is a growing point of concern, as it threatens to reduce U.S. influence in Eurasia, particularly in areas related to counterterrorism and regional diplomatic leverage. Washington remains closely attuned to China's evolving role in Afghanistan, apprehensive that deepening Beijing-Kabul relations could disrupt U.S. strategic interests in the region. This shifting dynamic underscores the broader geopolitical contest over influence in Central and South Asia, where China's calculated moves may challenge the United's longstanding objectives in both regional security and diplomatic outreach. The unique geography of the Wakhan Corridor offers China a strategic opportunity to establish an efficient trade and energy route into Central Asia, potentially shortening the pipeline distances and bolstering its energy security. If successfully developed, this initiative would solidify China's position as a dominant economic and military power in the region. The corridor serves as a critical junction where China's economic ambitions converge with its security priorities, creating a dual-purpose pathway that addresses both its energy needs and regional stability concerns. Consequently, the Wakhan Corridor could serve as the foundation for a robust Chinese presence that is likely to influence the regional order for the foreseeable future, shaping economic relations and security dynamics across Central and South Asia. (Lambert, 2021; Foster, 2019)

Afghanistan: The Wakhan Corridor is currently under Afghanistan. It has the greatest influence on the corridor. The corridor is of great significance to Afghanistan. It can attract Afghanistan's investment to build the infrastructure which it has been desperately seeking after decades of war and destruction. Afghanistan can emerge as an economic transit point in the regional trade infrastructure. The corridor, by virtue of its location, can attract handsome investments. China is willing to invest in and build infrastructure in Afghanistan and expand the BRI there. Afghanistan can emerge as a balancing power in the region and can hold great leverage in the regional security structure and stability. It will enhance Afghanistan's strategic independence and emerge as a regional transit hub. (Kreutzmann, 2023; Munir & Shafiq, 2018)

Tajikistan: Tajikistan, by virtue of its border sharing with the Wakhan corridor, can emerge as a gateway to Central Asia for India, Pakistan, and China. Central Asia is rapidly emerging as a centre of global geopolitics. The region is rich in energy resources. All powers want access to the region. Likewise, India and China want connectivity to Central Asia. Tajikistan will also benefit immensely from this arrangement. Through Tajikistan and subsequently through the Wakhan corridor, the entire landlocked Central Asian region can access the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. India and China are emerging as the largest energy markets, and Central Asia has huge energy reserves. Tajikistan can emerge as a significant transit point for energy connectivity in the region. (Amir, 2023; Shahi, 2022)

Pakistan: The Wakhan Corridor acts as a gateway to Central Asia for Pakistan. For the landlocked Central Asian states, a transit route through the Wakhan Corridor would facilitate trade and reach the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. Pakistan can emerge as the main geo-economic middleman in the region. However, it also presents challenges to Pakistan. Once developed, if integrated with the CPEC, Pakistan will lose its status as a transit route for China in the region. Additionally, attacks on Chinese investments and workers in Pakistan have caused irritation in China, which is seeking an alternative. (Munir & Shafiq, 2018; Hussain, 2017)

Challenges of Wakhan Corridor

There are certain challenges in reopening the Wakhan Corridor. First, the hard geographical terrain makes it difficult to build any infrastructure. This would require huge investments and international cooperation. Alternate

routes, such as the Karakoram Highway, already exist, and there is minimal bilateral trade between China and Afghanistan which does not justify large-scale investment in high-risk border infrastructure. China which has potential, is reluctant because of security concerns. The corridor has been used by terrorists to spread extremism in the Xinjiang province of China. Any action there would be opposed by India because Pakistan illegally occupies the territory, and any changes have direct security implications for India. Afghanistan still lacks a stable government, and any foreign entity is hesitant to invest there. Developing corridors requires cooperation at the regional level. However, South Asia remains the least integrated region, and inter-state tensions in the region further complicate the situation. (Stanikzai, 2024; Lambert, 2021; Foster, 2019)

India-Afghanistan Relations

Afghanistan's strategic location is of great geostrategic significance to India. In 1996, India withdrew its mission from Afghanistan after the rise of the Taliban. India perceives the Taliban as a threat to regional peace and security, and Taliban fighters have fought against India in Kashmir. The Air India flight IC814 was hijacked in 1999 and taken to Kandahar, Pakistan. The Taliban's tacit support for terrorists sponsored by Pakistan implied a close relationship between the two. After the 2001 takeover of Afghanistan by the USA, India's policy in Afghanistan was guided more or less by American interests. India focused on building soft power in Afghanistan and carried out many infrastructure projects and humanitarian missions there. India has invested \$3 billion in Afghanistan in developmental aid over the past two decades. India constructed the 218 km Zarang-Delaram highway, providing Afghanistan an alternate route to the Chabahar port in Iran and reducing its reliance on Pakistan. India also constructed the Salma Dam, also known as the Afghan-India Friendship Dam, and a 220Kv transmission line from Pul-e-Khumri to North Kabul. India also constructed a new parliament building in Afghanistan. (Pant, 2010; Yadav & Barwa, 2011)

Both India and Afghanistan need each other in the region. Pakistan has historically been a dominant actor in Afghanistan, and China has recently expanded its footprint in Afghanistan. Afghanistan needs a regional balancer, and India fits this role well. Both countries face similar challenges, such as radicalism and terrorism, and both can cooperate with each other to face and solve them. India can help Afghanistan to develop economically as well; India can act as a huge market for Afghan products and provide economic and technical assistance to Afghanistan. (Yousuf, 2023; Zazai & Rahmani, 2024)

However, India faces a complex situation in Afghanistan. The Taliban has deep historical relations with Pakistan and seeks closer ties with China, both of which are rivals of India in the region. If India fails to develop a strategic relationship, it risks losing investments it has made over the decades. Earlier, India had to deal only with Pakistan in Afghanistan, but now China has also entered the race, and strategic competition in Afghanistan has become more intense. China's engagement with Afghanistan is not only strategic but also security-centric. Afghanistan remains a significant part of Central Asia and South Asia and forms a strategic borderland between the two regions. China's presence in the region is India's most significant geostrategic challenge. (Noman, 2024; Stanikzai, 2024)

Pakistan Factor in India-Afghanistan Relationship

Afghanistan and Pakistan share a complex relationship. Pakistan and Afghanistan share a long-disputed land border. There is a natural convergence of interests between India and Afghanistan because both are neighbours of Pakistan and share similar issues. India has the Kashmir issue, and Afghanistan has the Pashtunistan issue. India and Pakistan are engaged in Afghanistan in a zero-sum dynamic; the benefit for one side is a loss for the other. One benefit comes at the cost of the other. Afghanistan cannot be viewed separately from Pakistan. Any policy regarding Afghanistan must consider the Pakistan angle. Pakistan's policy is to block India in Afghanistan whenever and wherever possible; it even refused to allow transit routes to India when India wanted to transport food aid to Afghanistan. Because of this rivalry, Afghanistan has also suffered, and peace cannot be established in the region. India and Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan are highly diverse and often antagonistic. Pakistan has always viewed India's engagement in Pakistan with suspicion and as intended to destabilise Pakistan from within. Afghanistan-Pakistan relations have been tumultuous since the beginning. Afghanistan refuses to recognise the Durand Line and supports the formation of greater Pashtunistan. Pakistan considers Afghanistan as its strategic backyard and strives to establish and maintain its strategic dominance there. Pakistan holds the conviction that India can use Afghanistan to encircle Pakistan and support ethnic revolt in the north-west frontier province. (Yadav & Barwa, 2011; Wani, 2022; Yousuf, 2023)

II. Conclusion

Afghanistan has been called the land of great games," and it is an important geopolitical theatre of the new great game' emerging in the region. After the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, the geopolitical situation underwent a tectonic shift. China is increasing its engagement in Afghanistan, and China is the biggest challenge for India in Afghanistan, rather than Pakistan. Afghanistan is India's gateway to Central Asia which

holds great strategic significance for India. The region is rich in energy sources and can help India fulfil its increasing energy requirements. After the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, India has been slow to increase its strategic presence in the country. India has built considerable soft power over the decades, but soft power alone is not enough. India must adopt a pragmatic approach in Afghanistan and increase its strategic presence there. Afghanistan is also significant for India's security. It forms part of the 'golden crescent' known for drug production and trafficking, and India has been facing serious challenges of drug trafficking. It is closely integrated with terrorism which is the greatest threat to India's internal security. Afghanistan forms India's strategic backyard, and India cannot afford to remain absent from it.

The strategic significance of the Wakhan Corridor has increased with the changing geopolitical situation in the region. The corridor has the potential to shape regional geopolitics. Owing to the rugged terrain, infrastructure development is slow, but China has the potential and resources to undertake it anytime. For India, this is both an opportunity and a challenge. It can prove to be a gateway for India, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. At the same time, it can be used by China and Pakistan to encircle India in the region. India has to remain deeply engaged in the geopolitics of the region to ensure that it does not become another tool in the hands of rivals to limit India in the region.

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