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Buffered Border Corridor: The Geo-Political and Strategic Significance of the Wakhan Corridor

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Abstract

The geo-political importance of the Wakhan corridor and its potential has been understood by many writers in different ways. It has its magnificence of its geographical location and a means of communication as well as a highway for trade. During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the Wakhan corridor remained a strategic post for its forces and had a pivotal position in the global conflict of the two superpowers in the early 1980's. It has strategic roads towards Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Sinkiang of China, and the northern belt of Pakistan. Pakistan as well as China both has larger geo-political and geostrategic interests in this region; along with the U.S. strategic clash with China, it seems that the Wakhan Corridor would serve as a testing ground for major land warfare in the coming years. This paper attempts to analyze the geopolitical and strategic significance of the Wakhan Corridor.

Key Words: Wakhan, Corridor, Geo-Political, Strategic, Importance

The Wakhan Corridor: Terrain/Topography

(a) Afghanistan's Wakhan district is a narrow strip of land of 350km between Pakistan, Tajikistan and touches the China border, consisting of two parts; the Afghan Pamir and the Wakhan Corridor, both combine called Wakhan region. The Wakhan Corridor or Wakhan Tract has been described by Olaf Caroe as "tongue of the Wakhan" (Caroe 1958, 384), is a narrow geopolitical entity and panhandle of the Alpine Valleys of high mountains that widen eastward from the Afghanistan's province of Badakhshan, originate Darya-e-Amu (river) to the Pamir Mountains. This inaccessible and remote region is bounded by high mountains,

which separates Tajikistan to the north, Pakistan to its south, and China to the east. In the eastern Hindu Kush ranges stretches into Chitral and mountains of Hunza, and in the southeastern Pamir Range ranges join the Karakorum ranges. The eastern frontier of the Wakhan corridor valley connected to China province of Sinkiang (Xijiang), through Wakhjir Pass, one of the main pass, which was the ancient trade routes from Fayzabad brought suppliers into China, Hunza, and Chitral.

The Wakhan River flows from the Wakhjir Pass into the Wakhan corridor. There are plentiful glaciers around the corridor and is of the world's

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least-known and most isolated wildernesses. It is not more than 350 km long (east-west) from Eshkashem to the east of Afghanistan, while it's only 300 km to the Vakhjir Pass. It is 65km widest in the middle that includes Nicholas Range, and 13 to 15 km width except 30 km at the north-flowing of the Ishtragh River. The corridor is 18 km wide at the western entrance. It covers a total area of about 8,936 square km, with an average height of 17,716

feet, preponderant is of 9,843 feet, while the Panj and Sarhad River Valleys are below (U.S. Department of State 1983, 7). It is situated within 71° 50' and 70° 50' degree east longitude and 36° 35' to 37° 30' degree north latitude ([Shahrani 2002, 3](#)). Due to its extreme isolation and altitude, the Wakhan Corridor has been described by a writer as "the most elevated, wildest, the most inaccessible, and the least populated" place in Afghanistan (Rowe 2010, 55).



Source: Northern Afghanistan and the Wakhan Corridor. Louisiana State University Cartography Laboratory [cited in [William C. Rowe, 54](#)].

(b) Northern boundary of the "corridor" with Tajikistan over the Darya-e-Amu, which is on the route known as the Panj, at least so far ahead, formed in which it entered the Wakhan River in the western part of the Pamir Knot. From this point, upstream is known as the Pamir as its origins and sources in Zor Kol lake, which claims to be the main source of Darya-e-Amu and Oxus Rivers. There are numerous criss-cross borders on Zor Kol Lake and in the eastern part of the northern border, where part of the Russian border was fenced in the late 20th century. These crossing points are closely guarded and closed, although those who possess visas and other papers can cross the bridge at Ishkeshem. In 2002, a new bridge was completed in 40 km downstream from Ishkeshem between Korokh in Tajikistan and Sheghnan in Afghanistan. The southern frontier with Pakistan is on a ridge and watershed mountains that make the eastern foothills of the Hindu Kush range until they meet in a tangle of high mountains and glaciers, where the Pamir and Karakoram ranges meet on the borders

of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China ([Conference Nov 30-Dec 2, 2007, 34](#)).

(c) Geographically, the Wakhan Corridor is divided into three main sections: The main Wakhan strip between Pamir Knot, Qala Panja, and Ishkeshem; the great Pamir or Big Pamir, called as Pamir-e-Kalan, consists of the highest mountains in the 'knot', which separated from the Tajik Pamirs through the deep valley of the Pamir River; and the Pami-e-Chord or Little Pamir, and in the southern and eastern block of mountains in the 'knot', which is determined by the upper valley and the upper reaches of the Wakhan River ([Bulbul 2012, 28-29](#)). Three mountains ranges, the Karakoram, the Hindukush, and Pamir, converge in Wakhan, commonly known as Pamir Knot, while open valley between these three mountains ranges is called as "Roof of the World" (Bam-e-Dunya), where the passes are 5000 to 6500 meters above sea level and which is home of the Kyrgyz nomads. [The term Pamirs refers to the high mountain area of Central Asia, covering parts of Tajikistan, China, and Afghanistan] (Curzon 2005, 1).



Source: United Nations Environment Programme, Food and Agriculture Organization, *Afghanistan Wakhan Mission Technical Report* (Geneva, July 2003), 20.

(d) The total population of the Wakhan / Pamir is estimated as 1335 households of 10590 to 12,000 inhabitants. Most of them are Wakhi farmers and shepherds who inhabited the main strip of Wakhan between Ishkeshem and Qala Panja, theron up the Wakhan Valley as far as Sarhad-e-Broghil. They include herding families who use Western Valley Big Pamir and Little Pamir. The figure also includes from 210 to 240 (depending on the source) holdings yurt (arched felt tent) apartment Kyrgyz shepherds or assumed a total population of about 1100 to 1300 of them, perhaps, more or less than 140 families in North East Valley of the Big Pamir and more or less 100 families living in the Small Pamir. The corridor includes Pamir Knot, known as an area of importance, both to the environment and biodiversity point of view as well as the human population of Wakhi farmers and pastoralists settled transhumance, the Kyrgyz yurt (UNEP 2003, 17).

The Geo-Political and Strategic Significance

The Wakhan Corridor was the political creation of the "Great Game", established as an imperial buffer-zone between Russia and Britain, through a number of agreements, i.e., Russian and Britain 1873, British India and Afghanistan 1983, which on the north side split Wakhan by making the Pamir and Panj rivers, the border between Russian Empire and Afghanistan, while on southern side the agreement of Durand Line marked the boundary between Afghanistan and the British India. The distribution of

the historic area of Wakhan has thus left a narrow strip of land as a buffer zone between the two empires, the Russian and Britain, and thus its independence status was terminated. Hermann Kreuzmann noted:

"Wakhan was no exception in Western High Asia, where many valleys were more or less identical; being principalities which had strong links to their mighty neighbours: the Amir of Afghanistan, the Emir of Bokhara (later replaced by Tsarist Russia/Soviet Union), the Chinese Emperor and British India. The competition between these major players affected diplomatic relations, taxation, conscription policies, local politics and economies, and finally resulted in the delineation of international boundaries and the termination of their independence" (Kreuzmann, 2003, 219).

In the 20th century, this buffer zone was known as the Wakhan Corridor (U.S. Department of State 1983, 7 and Chroshanbiyev, 2nd June 2011). The eastern end node of the Wakhan Corridor in the Pamir was one of the remotest and less accessible corners of Afghanistan. It is also interesting to note that the distance between Faizabad, the capital of the province of Badakhshan, and the eastern slant of the Wakhan Corridor on the Chinese border is almost same Faizabad to Islamabad, in crow fly (UNEP 2003, 9).

Geographic location is a matter of fate not of choice or preference. It is true that the Wakhan and Pamir region located between Afghanistan,

Tajikistan, China and Pakistan. It had a pivotal position in the global conflict of the two superpowers in the early 1980's. Though events in the modern age are moving fast and political strains shift from region to region and zone to zone, however, geostrategic implications and geographical factors remain unchanged. Beside a number of liabilities, the Wakhan region was once considered to be the most probable route for the Russian Cossacks intending to make inroads to India. In the late 19th century in the Indian office, Rawlinson and many others feared that "Pamir could form a springboard for an attack on India, and delineated the buffer corridor of Wakhan and Pamir region, between spheres of influence of the two rival powers in Central Asia" (Faizi 1992, 193). Even the two world wars cause major shifts in the global political scenario, but did not affect the strategic significance role of the Wakhan and Pamir region, so far power game in Central Asia and its shadow on South Asia is a concern (John 2005, xii) (Faizi 1992, 194).

The Soviet occupation of the Wakhan salient in June 1981 proved that the strategic significance of this region has not been lost yet. The Soviets had "effectively annexed Afghanistan's northeastern panhandle, sealing off Afghanistan's only direct border link with China and dropping the Soviet border down to rest of Pakistan's northernmost frontier" (Ashraf 1986, 61). An analyst noted "Wakhan has acquired a potential for drastically influencing the strategic configuration in Asia. Formidable coalitions of historic, geographic, and contemporary political compulsion have once again made Wakhan and the adjoining territory the focal point of international competition" (Khan 1985, 4-5).

After Soviet withdrawal, the region went under the control of Afghan Askars guided by Soviet experts, poses the same threat to its southern neighbors. In order to "understand war, for want of peace", and to achieve the excellence of "breaking the enemy's resistance without firing a bullets," it is important to understand the region of Wakhan, as a military zone, for those interested to be the future actors in particularly in Central Asia, South Asia and generally in Asia.

The Wakhan region has strategic roads towards Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Sinkiang, and northern belt of Pakistan. In the South-Eastern corner, the famous Afghan panhandle makes a juncture where borders of Tajikistan, China, and Pakistan are in close proximity. On the east, on each direction, there are closer massive military activities, where there is Siachen and Kashmir, venues of Indo-Pak disputes for the last many decades, Aksai Chin, the Sino-India disputed territory, and the Sino-Pak land rout, the Karakorum Highway, are situated. Its Southern passes, to the south of Hindu Kush, it has its links with western, northern, and northeastern, as well as its southeastern and southern outlets (Faizi 1992, 194-195).

There are many strategic routes in the Wakhan region. First, road link Afghanistan to Wakhan, leads from Sarhad to Zebak is about 160 km, on the right bank of the Oxus River. This road was upgraded during the soviet occupation and is used for heavy vehicles. Second, the road is a mule track, leads from Shi Kharf to Shighnan is about 5km. Third, leads from Sarhad-e-Wakhan-to-Kyzyl Rabat in Pamir and Murghab. Fourth, it leads from Sarhad-e-Wakhan to Tashkurghan and Taghdumbash Pamir, where it enters Sinkiang. This route has many branches, and tracks, across Wakhjir and Mintaka passes wherein the east it link Yarkand and Kashghar. Fifth, the route is in the South East from Sarhad-e-Wakhan to Hunza and Gilgit, and also links the Afghan Tongue with the Pak-China trade road, the Karakorum Highway. Sixth, route links Sarhad-e-Wakhanwith Chitral and Gilgit in the South. There are also other routes that links Wakhan and Chitral (Ashraf 1986, 62) (Govt. of India Press Simla 1937, 12-16), (Faizi 1992, 195-197). The main passes of the Wakhan corridor to Kindukush are Broghil 3882m and Darwazaa 4288m to Chitral, Irshad Uween 4979m and Dilisang 5290m to Gojal and Khodarg Werth to Ishkoman.

The Wakhan region some of the loftiest mountains ranges of the world i.e., Hindu Kush, Karakoram, Tien Shan, and Kunlun meet in this area., crating the three Asian watersheds creates, the Tarim Basin (in the east), Indus channel (in the south) and Amu Darya (in the west). All these three drainage systems have its own unique importance

for the neighboring countries as well as important nourished centers of civilization in the course of history. Historically, the Wakhan corridor has its magnificence of two interrelated factors, its geographical location and a means of communication as well as a highway for trade. Shahrani wrote:

"This area was a highway for traders, political emissaries, invading armies, refugees, pilgrims, explorers, adventurers, missionaries, and travelers long before the Christian era, and served as such until a few decades ago. These wayfarers with many diverse goals have included individuals and groups from China, as well as from the West. The historic process in this region has involved the discovery of an ancient strategic passageway, its establishment, expansion over many centuries, and its recent abrupt closure" (Shahrani 2002, 19-20).

The Wakhan strip is of tremendous strategic significance for any power commanding the southern slopes of the Eastern Hindu Kush. According to George White (British-Indian Army Chief), "five thousand men could easily be concentrated on the bend of the upper Oxus, i.e., Wakhan Salient, a few miles from the passes leading to the south" (C.J. 1963, 172), (Faizi 1992, 198). Mr. Knight while commenting on the Wakhan and its passes wrote that "The valley of Chitral should be completely under our control, for it commands some of the lowest and easiest passes across the Hindu Kush and affords a road to India from Bokhara to Badakhshan" (H.C. 1981, 306), (Faizi 1992, 198). While elaborated, a writer says that "to argue that the natural difficulties presented by these desert mountain regions render any invasion on a formidable scale from this quarter impracticable, is not to the point". He added that a small number of soldiers can cross the Hindu Kush Mountains and that had been proved by the Russian and "here, (in Wakhan) a very small body indeed, could prove the nucleus for spreading mischief."

These assumptions of the 19th century look more realistic in this modern period, whereas a small troop with modern weapons and communication system can easily deliver the services. During its occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, the Soviet Union successfully tested their military version of MI-12, MI-24, Gunships, missile

(Forg-2 and 3), and Cub-Air-Crafts, etc., in the Wakhan area. Along with, airfield and landing strips have also been provided at Kyzyl Rabat some 140 km, from Pakistan Boarder. Approximately twenty to forty thousand troops supported with air cover, mortars, and missiles, remained for eight years in the Wakhan area. In its occupation of the Wakhan, the Soviet improved roads condition and also widened a strategic road between Sarhad-e-Wakhan and Ishkanshim (Ashraf 1986, 62). Difficult trails were replaced by jeep-able road, and the single Jeeb road in the region, from Ishkashim to Qala Panja was widened, as well as trial between Qala Panja and Great Pamir was extended to Russian territory of Kyzyl Rabat. Similar Zebak-Durah link, Qala Panja-Bozai route, and Wakhjir-Barghil links were upgraded (Khan 1985, 9-10).

Currently, the Wakhan region is of great importance both from its eastern and southern neighbors. Pakistan as well as China both has larger geo-political and geostrategic interests in the Wakhan region. "Sino-Indian conflict in Aksai-Chin is an outcome of their disagreement on the delineation of the common border on Taghdumbash Pamir, and Karakoram Belt including Shahidullah sector, directly linked with Sokhta Rabat, Wakhan" (Lall 1988, 106-107) (Faizi 1992, 201). The Russian-Indian designs in the region look similar; both have common views on matters relating to Pakistan and China. Inayatullha Faizi wrote:

"The Soviet-Afghan ties are not less than a threat for those having command over the southern and southeastern borders of the Hindu Kush as well as the power eats of Pamir will be no exception. The Indo-Afghan friendship in the context of power politics in Asia is somewhat identical with the Inthe do Soviet and Soviet-Afghan ties, thus making a "Gang of Three". The gang, combined with global perspective of hegemonistic motives and superpowers "game" in the region, has its guns pointed towards Pakistan, and the southern passes of the Wakhan Corridor are located in the venue, where they would converge their ways" (Faizi 1992, 203).

According to Professor Chris Bellamy, apart from the Middle East, other regions where large-scale conventional land operations are likely to

occur are the China northern border, a boarder at the Wakhan region, and the south-west, south-eastern regions of Asia, and the South Asia centering on Himalayan, and are going to serve as a testing ground for major land warfare, in the coming years ([Bellamy 1987, 42, 171](#)).

The potential of the Wakhan region has been understood by writers in different ways. Many know the Indian troops and their capability of using tanks in the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict, in the highest altitude in the Dee Iseng and Izu Shing. Her troops still engaged in the Siachen expeditions ([Lall 1988, 106-107](#)). The Soviet troops had been committed in Afghanistan and in Siberia in the 1980s, the high altitude warfare regions of the world ([Faizi 1992, 203](#)). Similarly, the U.S. invasion in Afghanistan, its growing influences in the region, there are growing chances of heavy military activities in the Pamir and Wakhan region. The U.S. has its eyes on the geostrategic location of Wakhan, while Pakistan and China have their strategic and economic interest in the region, i.e., a safe route for trade to Central Asia, etc.

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 one important purpose in the geo-political (and occasionally violent) struggle between 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. In these approximately 57 years, as many as six independent states and many smaller dependencies and principalities lost their identity forever" ([Khan 1985, 21](#)). However, the demise of the USSR and the emergences of the newly independent states of Central Asia with its tremendous oil and gas natural resources have the potential to attract many

powers of the world, where the idea of a new great game, is in its transitional phase. However, the landlocked nature of these CARs (Central Asian Republics) and the political instability in the region are issues of great concern for many countries.

Pakistan being the member of two important regional organizations ECO (Economic Cooperation Organization) and SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation), can play an important role in the opening of CARs natural resources to many countries. Coming to the new geopolitical and international realities, Pakistan cannot ignore CARs. It has three most important interests in the Afghanistan via CARs, i.e., first, a strategic depth; second, bilateral opportunities; and third regional grouping in the south from the Arabian Sea to the Black Sea, being at the crossroads of Central and South Asia and having links with these two regions, it has great importance in the whole scenario ([Wasi 2002, 15-20](#)). While commenting on the strategic importance of Wakhan Corridor, a stated, "thanks to the wedge driven between Pakistan and Tajikistan in the shape of the Wakhan strip by the British imperialist map makers who wanted to insulate the British Indian Empire from Czarist Russia (1895)" ([Ali 1993, 64-66](#)). The increased interests of Pakistan and China in the CARs also attracted India to these countries. India is much interested in opening its trade relations with the CARs, but not a single country of Central Asian states share a boarder with India. Tajikistan is near to India, an Indian writes noted:

"Tajikistan is separated from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir by the Wakhan corridor. There are no overland trade routes between India and Central Asia. If they ever come into existence, they will pass through Afghanistan and India's access to them will then hinge on its relations with Afghanistan and Pakistan" ([Singh 1995, 77-78](#)).

In 1996, a joint project of the Japanese-Korean company was initiated to construct and lay a gas pipeline emerging from Turkmenistan to Pakistan and to India and Gawadar seaport to the far eastern. However, due to the uncertain condition in Afghanistan, Indo-Pak relations, and the Kashmir issue, the Indian other options, did not materialize this project. A writer noted: "An aborted project to export oil and natural gas from Central Asia to South

Asia via Afghanistan, or a trans-Afghan pipeline, is being revived under the present geopolitical conditions." He further noted that along with this "another initiative to build sustainable transit routes for landlocked Central Asian republics to access the Indian Ocean is also underway. India is seen as a strategically important presence in both projects, but stability in Afghanistan and Indo-Pak relations might be the caveats in progress" ([Dhaka, 2004, 148](#)).

Conclusion

Although Wakhan corridor is mostly inaccessible, small in size, thinly populated, and underdeveloped, it has its own strategic significance since ancient times. For centuries it has served as a passage to traders, invaders, and adventurers, i.e., Alexander the Great, the Chinese political emissaries, the Muslims, the Turks, Mongols, Marco Polo, Russia, and British etc. The region remained Buddhist history, crossing warriors, caravans, and rich heritage. It was a buffer zone between the expansionist empires of British [India] and Russia and played an important role to stop any direct contact and direct military action between the two empires in the region ([Shahrani 2002, 19-30](#)) ([Khalid 1988, 19-28](#)). During the cold war, international borders remained closed and strictly controlled, and the region suffered substantially through exchange and trade with the neighbors. The collapse of the USSR was followed by the idea of exporting natural resources, gas, and oil, from CARs, through South Asian region and to the rest of the world. Where the U.S. oil company Unocal led this initiative. The U.S. and E.U., in this period of globalization, have consistently struggled for establishing monopoly over global resources and markets over east-Europe to the south CARs encompassing Afghanistan to Pakistan. Along with other routes, the most important one is the trans-Asiatic trade route, the Silk Road, of which a vital

branch flowed through Wakhan into the North Himalayas to the CARs ([Dhaka, 2004, 147](#)).

Pakistan does not share any boarder with the CARs. To Pakistan, Tajikistan is the nearest one, and but the small strip of only 45 km Wakhan Corridor separates these two countries. The major routes between Pakistan and Central Asia lie through Afghanistan, and amongst several routes, the shortest one that connects Pakistan with Tajikistan is from Chitral across the Wakhan corridor into Tajikistan. Pakistan has been pushed to approach CARs and especially Tajikistan for the need to establish a road link amongst the two countries across the Wakhan corridor. This 35 to 45 km road would be built between the Wakhan Corridor in Afghanistan and the Ishhamun valley in Pakistan.

Currently, Pakistan is extremely poor in energy resources as well as economic crises, and can benefit itself from the bilateral trade with the CARs, as well as to opens this region too to other countries, to get access to CARs through Pakistan. The cover the electricity shortage problem in Pakistan, a 700km possible electricity transmission route is under the discussion of some firms, between Pakistan and Tajikistan only through the 30km Wakhan corridor ([The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development 2008, 39](#)). Though the internal situation of Afghanistan are uncertain, to actively utilized other routes, but the Wakhan corridor remained mostly peaceful, and Pakistan can opens its trade routes to the CARs through Wakhan Corridor. From its geographical location, Pakistan assumes importance in the eyes of world powers, as it can provide the shortest transit land route and seaport facilities to the CARs, through Wakhan corridor, a narrow strip separate Chitral from Tajikistan to the north. The Wakhan corridor is expected to be the most important landscape for trades amongst the nations of the world.

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