

MS THESIS

**GEO-POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WAKHAN
CORRIDOR: MAPPING INTERESTS OF AFGHANISTAN,
PAKISTAN, AND CHINA**



RESEARCHER

Muhammad Ishaq

248-FSS/MSIR/S23

SUPERVISOR

Prof. Dr. Muhammad Khan

**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY, ISLAMABAD
(2025)**

DECLARATION

I **Muhammad Ishaq**, Registration No: 248-FSS/MSIR/S23 hereby state that my MS thesis titled

“Geo-Political Significance Of The Wakhan Corridor: Mapping Interests Of Afghanistan, Pakistan, And China”

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Name of Student: Muhammad Ishaq

Signature: _____

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to the pioneers of my family, especially to my beloved parents, **to** my beloved brothers. Whose endless love and unwavering support have been the foundation of my achievements.\

RESEARCHER

Muhammad Ishaq

248-FSS/MSIR/S23

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Researcher:

Muhammad Ishaq

248-FSS/MSIR/S23

ABSTRACT

The strategically significant Wakhan Corridor, in northeast Afghanistan, is connected to both China and Pakistan, and serves as a border with Tajikistan as well. This study will plot the geopolitical and financial interests of Afghanistan, Pakistan and China in the Wakhan Corridor, which is significant to regional security, trade, as well as to infrastructure development. For Afghanistan, the corridor is a lifeline, not only a source of economic integration but also an avenue to connect Afghanistan with Central Asia and to boost regional trade, which is crucial for its stability and development. For Pakistan, the corridor is a strategic asset that would provide improved access to the Central Asian region, strengthen trade corridors and facilitate security cooperation. China, propelled by its BRI, views the corridor as a vital component of its efforts to link itself more closely with South and Central Asia, making way for trade and infrastructure contacts that can further its sway over the area. This contribution will consider how these countries' conflicting and complementary interests condition the viability of the Wakhan Corridor as a forum for regional cooperation. It is an attempt to map the corridor's political, economic and security implications for Afghanistan, Pakistan and China. By analyzing these dynamics, the study seeks to produce fresh perspectives on the Wakhan Corridor as a source of conflict due to national interests and security concerns, as well as an opportunity for regional integration, peace, and development in South, Central, and East Asia.

Keywords: Wakhan corridor, Geo-political, Strategic, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Central Asia, China, CPEC, BRI.

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CHAPTER-1

1-INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The Wakhan Corridor, a small strip of strategically placed land in the northeast of Afghanistan, is hemmed in by the high Pamir and Karakoram mountain ranges. It is approximately 350 km long and 10–60 km wide (Shahi, 2022). Commonly referred to as the “Roof of the World,” this area is formed by meeting of the Karakoram, Hindukush and the Pamir mountain ranges and is also home of the famous Pamir Knot or the Bam-e-Duniya. Its remoteness has helped preserve its unique culture and slowed its development. The corridor has served as a physical and cultural link between Central and South Asia for ages. In order to provide a buffer zone for the expanding Russian and British empires, the Wakhan Corridor was built as a neutral region in the 19th century. Due to challenging terrain and poor accessibility, the corridor has remained largely undeveloped and closed off from much of the globe since that time (Smallwood & Shank, 2019).

In the modern age the Wakhan Corridor has become a disputed, albeit geopolitically important region. It is bordered by Tajikistan to the north, and Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan to the south and China in the east making it a gateway between South Asia and Central Asia. The corridor is also in the interests of Afghanistan, Pakistan and China, all of which find strategic sense in its materialization. The corridor represents a “historic opportunity” for Afghanistan to integrate economically and connect via trade, improving conditions for stability and post-conflict recovery (Yawar, 2024). Pakistan also sees the corridor as a way to enhance connectivity with Central Asia and strengthen relations in terms of initiatives such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Munir & Shafiq, 2018). The Wakhan Corridor, China sees it as a strategic expansion of BRI that will help spread its good-will and security control to the South Asia (Adam, 2021).

This study attempts to get a grasp of the complex geo-political dynamics relating to the Wahkan Corridor, its historical centrality, economic viability, and its strategic position in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China. Through a study of the interests, intentions and strategies of these three countries, this study is intended to add to the developing picture of the corridor as an engine for economic co-integration and potentially as a source of security and stability in South and Central Asia.

The Wakhan Corridor constitutes a strategic asset for the non-occupied parts of Afghanistan and can be a source of economic development and national balance. With Afghanistan's limited possibility of access to direct trade routes, the corridor provides a unique chance for direct connection with China, allowing the country to more fully participate in regional trade (Yousaf, 2019; Shahrani, 2002). Better connection along the corridor would allow Afghanistan to diversify its economy, to gain foreign investment, and to enhance infrastructure, an aspect that is vital for post-war rebuilding and long-term development of the nation (Blank, 2019). The Wakhan Corridor is strategically important for Pakistan, as it could open better roads for trade with Central Asia and help foster security cooperation with border states. The corridor is in line with Pakistan's aspiration to become a regional trade artery and is consistent with ventures such as CPEC (Munir & Shafiq, 2018). Corridor infrastructure development may lead to stronger trade relations across Pakistan with counterparts in Central Asia, the promotion of border security and counter-terrorism collaboration with Afghanistan and China (Hilali 2020, Amir, 2023). China's concern with the Wakhan Corridor is in part driven by its Belt and Road Initiative, which seeks to develop routes for trade with Europe, Asia, and more (Adam, 2021). The corridor provides China a direct, albeit relatively "unutilised", gateway to South Asia, and as such increases its strategic influence and economic growth and stabilisation in the region (Weaver 2020). In the case of China, promoting trade routes and infrastructure under CPEC not only serves its own economic agenda, but it also serves its security interest in the sense that the development enables opportunities to cooperation with Afghanistan and Pakistan in order to prevent any security threats (Stratfor, 2018; Malik, 2014). This project will undertake a thorough examination of the historical, political, economic and strategic significance of the Wakhan Corridor and demonstrate the extent to which it will remain an essential element of regional geopolitics as well as potential bridge for economic integration, security enhancement, and stability between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China.

1.2. Problem Statement

The Wakhan Corridor in Afghanistan, connecting the region with Pakistan and China, has become a potential area for regional connectivity and economic cooperation. Yet the corridor is also hemmed in by each country's conflicting strategic needs: Afghanistan sees it as a path to economic regeneration, Pakistan as a vital node in the chain of its security and trade ties, and China as an offshoot of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These differing considerations, coupled

with persisting security threats, infrastructure deficit, and scarce diplomatic coordination, make it impossible to have a coherent and sustainable strategy over the corridor. It does so by leaving this territory as underdeveloped, underused and, possibly, a source of regional tension rather than of regional cooperation that could be instrumental to securing a peaceful and pros filter region in countries involved.

In order to resolve these difficulties, our countries must develop a mechanism of cooperation that facilitates dialogue, synchronizes its strategies and benefits the common. A new triangle of cooperation could be created where joint infrastructure challenges are addressed, security coordination is strengthened, and economic links are promoted. Collective investment in sustainable infrastructure, such as roads, communication networks and trade facilities, would open up economic opportunities and mitigate isolation. Moreover, to ensure fair cooperation, neutral International organizations such as the United Nations or Asian Development Bank can also contribute with financing, technical support, and mediation. By such actions, Wakhan Corridor can turn from a hot spot into a center for regional stability and prosperity.

1.3. Significance of the Study

This research is important because it will be adding to academic discussion about regional geopolitics in South and Central Asia based on the ignored Wakhan Corridor. An appreciation of what the corridor signifies may help scholars and policymakers develop appreciation of its opportunities and challenges and their policy implications for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China in terms of economic cooperation, security, and regional linkages. Second, determining strategic cooperation or competition in the Wakhan Corridor can influence larger regional dynamics and the debate around the role of the Belt and Road Initiative to Central and South Asia.

1.4. Objective of the Study

- a. To discuss the Wakhan Corridor's geo-political significance for China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.
- b. To Develop the economic, political and security stakes of Afghanistan, Pakistan and China regarding Wakhan Corridor.
- c. To find out possible opportunities and challenges of the three regional countries in regard with the Wakhan Corridor.

1.5. Research Questions

- a. What is the geo-political significance of the Wakhan Corridor for regional state, China, Pakistan and Afghanistan?
- b. How to Map the political, Economic and security interest of regional state, Afghanistan, Pakistan and China with respect to Wakhan Corridor?
- c. What are the potential areas of cooperation and conflict among the three regional countries around Wakhan Corridor?

1.6. Delimitations of the Study

The present research is limited to the Wakhan Corridor and its immediate geo-political and economic considerations for Afghanistan, Pakistan and China. It has focused on the interests of these three countries in the region without in-depth forays into other regional or international players except where they impinge directly on the corridor.

1.7. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.7.1 Review of Relevant Literature

Shahi (2022) analyses the geopolitical and geostrategic significance of the Wakhan Corridor, focusing on its centrality in the regional security and economic development. Placing the corridor at the crossroads of Afghanistan, Pakistan and China, Shahi brings to fore the possibility of cooperation and collaboration, but does not shy away from acknowledging the different interests of these three countries. Afghanistan for its part, sees the corridor as a pathway toward economic integration, while Pakistan converges on it's as a strategic bridge for security and trade, and China positions the project within its sweeping arrangement of the Belt and Road Initiative. Despite this potential, Shahi finds that the absence of a comprehensive strategy as well as conflicting interests among these states have hampered the regionalization of the corridor as a regional good. It gives a groundwork introduction of the region and its strategic value, but does not go in depth of the mechanics how these local actors act together.

Smallwood and Shank (2019) direct attention to ecological and conservation issues in the Wakhan Corridor, notably in respect of the Wakhan National Park. Their research indicates that, having once been a buffer zone, the area is emerging as an important site for conservation and ecotourism. While the article is mainly about the environmental aspects of the corridor, it does allude, albeit obliquely, to how the region could help contribute to the development of

Afghanistan's tourism and sustainable development strategies. In framing the corridor as a scene of natural capital, Smallwood and Shank raise the idea of what intersection environmental and economic goals might have in the region. Even so, the research does not relate directly to the geopolitical consequences and how environmental issues might be woven into the larger regional strategy of the three countries Afghanistan, Pakistan and China.

Weaver (2020) offers a sociopolitical commentary on the Wakhan Corridor where local realities meet the international geopolitics head on. Weaver challenges the understanding of outside powers that the region is first and foremost a question of state security and economic development, and does not account for the interests and perspectives of local communities, such as the Wakhi and the Kyrgyz. This research underscores the risk of marginalization of these groups in the larger geopolitics discussion and enables more inclusion of all relevant policies based on local concerns.

Can (2024) adopts an ethnographic method, through a study of the Pamir Kyrgyz, an autochthonous group living in the Wakhan Corridor. Can studies their way of life, their present socio-economic situations and the difficulties that can't be got round due to local geopolitics and border policies. The report emphasises the effect of geopolitics on local people and emphasizes the need to bring these people into national and international policy debates. Although Can pays much-needed attention to the local population, the study would have been even stronger if Can had approached an analysis of that population's vita from the big-picture context of the geopolitical machinations of the region's key players Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China.

In her book, Fahmida Ashraf analyses the geopolitical significance of the Wakhan Corridor as a crucial trans-land route linking Afghanistan, Pakistan and China. She draws attention to the corridor as a tool in creating economic and strategic partnerships between the three nations and explores the security challenges created by the line and its rugged environment and proximity to Central Asia. The author points out how the strategic location of this region may become an important artery for the flows of trade and energy and the process of regional integration. She also discusses the utility of the corridor in face of the political instabilities in Afghanistan, with consequences for the large plans of Pakistan and China to improve connectivity of the 'belt and road countries' through the Belt and Road Initiative (Ashraf, 1989).

Nazif Shahrani's in his study traces the ethno-genesis of the Kirghiz and the Wakhi of the Wakhan and what he describes as the Kirghiz holy land of Chaprot. Shahrani looks at how these societies have made do in the region's physical isolation, unyielding environment, and politics that have closed their borders. He explores how the imperatives of history and politics have worked to develop the strategies of survival, social organization, and relationship with the Afghan state among the Vng and their Pashtun cousins. He also paints a grim picture of the economic viability, cultural continuity, and political desolation characterizing these communities and argues that the strategic location of the Corridor does not only shape regional politics but also the destinies of its indigenous (Shahrani, 2002).

Yawar, (2024) explores the strategic significance of the Wakhan Corridor for China's ambitious flagship of the BRI. He says this thin strip of land is an important corridor which has a potential to join China's western region Xinjiang with South and Central Asia to expand its trade and security space. He wonders how Afghanistan's political situation affects the viability of BRI projects through the Wakhan Corridor, noting in particular security issues, governance obstacles, and the role of regional powers such as Pakistan. He stresses that the corridor could be an economic "feed for economic development and cross-border cooperation" but adds that its realization is contingent on Afghanistan's stability and working out interests with other regional countries.

In their article Munir and Shafiq (2021) examine the corridor's significance as a geostrategic asset that binds the interests of Afghanistan, China and Pakistan. It can serve as a "gateway," they posit, for forging trade and connectivity links, and thrust China and Pakistan into the heart of Central Asian connectivity as well. They also consider the reciprocal advantages for these countries in the areas of security cooperation, economic integration and the possibility for further developing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) across this territory. But Munir and Shafiq are also assessing the security threats and fallouts of the tangle of politics that clog infrastructure development and both agree the full potential may be real if there is peace in Afghanistan and common policies among these neighbors.

Within his research Irfan Amir identifies the Corridor as a critical connectivity bridge throughout South and Central Asia. He writes about how the Wakhan Corridor is strategically placed to provide future trade and transit options, which would link Afghanistan with China and Pakistan, fostering regional cooperation and economic integration. The writer underlines the

strategic importance of the corridor within the framework of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and discusses how it can make possible cross-border trade and energy flow. But Amir also makes clear that police and political instability in Afghanistan represent serious obstacles to this type of connectivity. He argues that those benefits will be realized and the opium threat will reduce – only if the corridor is opened, regional relations improve, and Afghanistan gains a modest degree of stability (Amir, 2023).

Shahi (2022) in the research paper analyzed the Wakhan Corridor, which is serving as a strategic bridge between Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and Central Asia. He underscores the corridor's value as a strategic trade and military logistics route, notably in the context of China's regional Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and wider regional security considerations. He also analyzes how the corridor could provide China a safe land route to Central Asia and the Middle East, which would diminish dependence on marine routes. His more nuanced take on the corridor also deals with the intricate geopolitics of the region and how the corridor's utility is underlined by regional security concerns, most notably in Afghanistan.

Tehzeeb ul Hassan investigate the corridor's significance from Pakistan's standpoint and how it is expected to accelerate Pakistan connections to Central Asia. They emphasize how the corridor could offer Pakistan an overland route to energy-rich areas, in keeping with Pakistan's strategic objective of regional economic integration. They also consider the corridor's role in "the development of new trading routes outside the worn paths of the seas," and the regeneration of land routes as alternatives to "volatile maritime highways." Further, the article underscores the significance of Pak-China collaboration in the shape of BRI and how Wakhan could be a vital link in the overall venture (Hassan, 2023).

Further as to the strategic significance of the Wakhan Corridor as a crucial economic and geopolitical 'bridgehead' Yaser Malik (2014) has delved more into depth in his writings. The corridor, he says, provides China with a vital land route to spread its influence in Central Asia and even beyond an alternative to its freight traversing the seas. He explains how the Wakhan Corridor would augment China's links with Afghanistan and Pakistan, both involved in the BRI, as well as to the energy sources and markets in Central Asia. The author also explores the security-risk associated with such connectivity, arguing that security in Afghanistan is critical to the success of China's regional efforts of integration.

The literature underscores the unique geopolitical value of the Wakhan Corridor but also makes clear its underdeveloped status in scholarship. Lack of a detailed understanding of its role, especially in China's Belt and Road Initiative, is yet to be accomplished. This highlights the importance of investigating the effects on regional trade, cooperation and security in more depth.

1.7.2. Research Gap

While there is a growing concern of Wakhan Corridor as a strategic area, the current research focuses more on the historical, geographical and cultural importance of the area. Although these researches are significant, they are not that comprehensive enough about the geo-political and geo-economics driving forces in the case of the competition of Afghanistan and Pakistan and China with the Central Asian States in the context of the recent global and regional changes.

1.8. Theoretical Framework

This research has used two different theoretical perspective; the Neo-Realism and Neo-Liberalism. Both the theories are also applicable to the present studies whereas on one hand they complement each other and on the other side, there is convergence. The anarchic nature of the international system with surviving and security-seeking states as the main units, is focused on by Neorealism presented by Kenneth Waltz. Based on this theory, states act based on their relative power, and approach balancing against dangers and furthering their influence. Here, the Wakhan Corridor has an important geostrategic value for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China. Neorealist theory is centered on power competition and control of this land and each state attempts to maximize its power and interests, which commonly is met with rivaling territory and security threats.

Contrastingly, Neoliberalism, as expounded by the likes of Keohane and Nye, focuses on the opportunities for collaboration in the international system rather than the inevitable anarchy. Although states are still the most important ones, international institutions, economic interdependence, and diplomacy can promote cooperation to serve the interests of both sides in the world of globalism, neo-liberalists think. In the case of Wakhan Corridor, the hypothesis would make the argument that countries in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China can work together to improve the regional integration, to establish trade and to improve infrastructure, despite the security challenges and rivalries. Both theories recognize that power and security are core state motivations, but they are different in their expressions of these motivations. Neorealism is

concerned with the reasons why states are motivated to compete for relative gains, while neoliberalism emphasizes how common economic and security interests within the international system can initiate cooperation. Combined, they indicate that there may be competition, but that the strategic location of the Wakhan Corridor also has the potential to foster both cooperation (via joint economic and infrastructure initiatives) and competition (strategic advantage), leading toward an equilibrium that benefits from both cooperation and competition. Neorealism advocated by Kenneth Waltz emphasizes the anarchic system of international relations and the relentless pursuit of power and security by the States. When viewed from the perspective of the Wakhan Corridor it opens a window on to the geopolitical pursuits of Afghanistan, its neighbor to the east, to the north and its eastern neighbor.

For Afghanistan, the Wakhan Corridor represents not only a geographical bridge but also a strategic resource. Surrounded by China, Pakistan, and Tajikistan, this narrow corridor serves as Afghanistan's gateway to Central and East Asia. In realist terms, Afghanistan equates its national interest in holding this region to prevent external powers from using it as a base to undermine Afghan sovereignty. Further, with Afghanistan being susceptible to threats from within and from outside, the occupation of the Wakhan Corridor is a marker of its quest for territorial integrity and a shield against foreign invasion.

Pakistan defines the Wakhan Corridor in terms of security and strategic depth. It's also a possible gateway to reaching out to Central Asia, due to its close proximity with that region. Yet the Pakistan's objections stem from what it sees as the corridor being exploited by adversarial powers or non-state actors who could endanger its western flank. For Pakistan, continuing to have influence in the Wakhan serves its overall strategic imperative, especially the need to counter India's hold in Afghanistan. China's interest in Wakhan Corridor is complex, with security, economic, and geopolitical considerations at play. The corridor connects Xinjiang province with Afghanistan, and is both an opportunity and a challenge. For Beijing, this region is vital to control to quell Uighur separatist activity and stop extremism spreading into its borders. Moreover, the corridor is a cornerstone of China's "Belt and Road" vision symbolizing its efforts to advance regional connectivity and influence.

Neoliberalism provides a counter-lens that looks to the opportunities of Afghanistan's, Pakistan's and China's cooperation over the Wakhan Corridor. Even in an anarchic international

environment, states can elicit mutual gain through diplomacy, economic ties, and regional organizations. Then again, Afghanistan can use the Wakhan Corridor to facilitate regional connectivity. By working closely with China and Pakistan, it can ensure investment in infrastructure, trade and development. Projects would be able to stabilize the area and provide work for the poor population, lessening the incentives for violence.

It is a chance for Pakistan to gain access to not only the landlocked Central Asia, but also an opportunity to strengthen its strategic partnership with China. Pakistan could boost regional integration by cooperating on initiatives such as CPEC. Furthermore working with Afghanistan in the field of border management and trade may somewhat ease the security tensions and enhance the bilateral relationship. While China's neoliberal would invest in infrastructure and regional stability with the Wakhan Corridor. This is an important area for China's BRI aspirations, being a potential gateway to not only Afghanistan but also to Central Asia. By encouraging trade and development, China aims to protect its own economic and security interests and promote stability in its own backyard.

Consequently the Wakhan Corridor demonstrates the alignment of neorealist and neoliberal characteristics within the international environment. Neorealism accentuates the power struggle and the strategic ambitions of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China. On the other hand, neoliberalism demonstrates the possibility of cooperation by engagement of economic interdependence and regional undertakings. The corridor's geopolitical significance calls for a nuanced approach, with the mutual advantages of trade and infrastructure tying off the security dilemmas. Competition is going to happen, but the common interest in regional stability offers an opportunity for cooperation that could turn the Wakhan Corridor into an integration bridge rather than a battleground of rivalries.

1.9. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1.9.1 Research Design

This study has used the qualitative research design to investigate the political and strategic importance of the Wakhan Corridor. This content analysis is appropriate for this study since complex multi-faceted issues pertaining to the corridor and Afghan, Pakistani and Chinese interests need to be understood. It caters for a more in-depth examination of the driving forces of regional cooperation, trade and security, representing the multiple and subjective considerations

of indispensable actors. By emphasizing qualitative data, this article seeks to generate a comprehensive understanding of the strategic importance of the Wakhan Corridor in a wider geopolitical context.

1.9.2. Data Collection Procedure

The study utilized both primary and secondary sources for the primary source the researcher has taken policy documents, statistical reports and official reports. And the secondary source the researcher has obtained the data from internet such as research articles, reports, newspaper, research paper and books.

1.9.3 Data Analysis

The analysis had performed based on content analysis. This process has entailed coding of the data to derive major themes, patterns and interrelationships. Using thematic analysis, the paper has discussed how the geopolitical and geostrategic aspects of the Wakhan Corridor, influenced by regional cooperation, security threats, and economic prospects, interact and mutually constitutive of each other.

1.9.4. Ethical Considerations

The work has followed strict ethical principles at all stages. All respondents will be informed about the objectives of the study, their right to confidentiality and that their participation is voluntary. Interviewees provide informed consent prior to the commencement of any data collection. In addition, referencing of all the secondary sources has been ensured as this is the integral for avoiding any pitfalls concerning plagiarism or academic flaws.

1.10. Organization of the Study

- **Chapter-1: Introduction.** This Chapter contains introduction of Wakhan Corridor and the importance of Wakhan Corridor to regional state, Afghanistan, Pakistan and China. This chapter also include aims and objectives, questions of study, literature review, theoretical perspective and research methodology.
- **Chapter2: Mapping the geo-political significance of Wakhan Corridor.** Chapter deals with the geostrategic importance of the Wakhan Corridor and its importance from the perspective of three of the regional states: namely Afghanistan, Pakistan and China.

- **Chapter3: Political, Security and Economic interests of Regional States.** This chapter summaries that nexus, focusing the economic, political and security interests of three crucial countries namely Afghanistan, Pakistan and China, vis-à-vis the Corridor.
- **Chapter4 Areas of Cooperation for Regional States.** This chapter aims to examine possible cooperation or contest among the three regional states of Wakhan Corridor.
- **Chapter5: Major Findings and Conclusion.** This chapter contains the major finding of the study, policy recommendations and conclusion.

CHAPTER-2

2. MAPPING THE GEO-POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WAKHAN CORRIDOR

2.1. Introduction

The Wakhan Corridor, a narrow strip of land stretching approximately 350 kilometers in northeastern Afghanistan, is one of the most geographically isolated and politically sensitive regions in South-Central Asia. Flanked by the towering Pamir and Hindu Kush mountain ranges, this corridor connects Afghanistan to China and forms a crucial geopolitical junction between Central Asia, South Asia, and East Asia. The corridor lies within Afghanistan's Badakhshan province and is sparsely populated by the Wakhi and Kyrgyz ethnic minorities. Though remote and underdeveloped, the corridor's strategic position lends it significant importance in the regional geopolitical landscape (Bazai, 2022).

The Wakhan Corridor is flanked by Tajikistan to the north, by Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan to the south, and by China's Xinjiang province to the east by geographical location. It is 10 to 60 kilometers wide at its narrowest point, and it is generally mountainous and impassable, with few facilities or none at all. Yet for all its harshness the corridor has also historically been a conduit for ancient trade routes and a buffer zone between mighty empires. The corridor was specially created in the 19th century during the British-Russian confrontation known as the "Great Game" to act as a neutral buffer between British India and Tsarist Russia, which ensured that its strategic significance would linger into the modern era (Shahi, 2022).

In the current global and regional milieu, the renewed importance of the Wakhan Corridor pertains to its potential role in regional connectivity, trade and security. The evolving politics of Afghanistan, especially post withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces and the takeover of the Taliban, have also renewed the focus on this corridor amid the country's neighbours. China, for its part, sees the corridor as a possible connection between its western Xinjiang province and Afghanistan, which would encourage the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to push further south and into Central Asia. Likewise, Pakistan regards it as a potential avenue of trade and energy transfer that connects to the Central Asian Republics (Smallwood & Shank, 2019).

The corridor is located at the junction of several strategic desires of the key regional powers in the region. Located near the sensitive Kashmir region, along with the troublesome

province of Xinjiang, it is one of the few places where China and Afghanistan share a direct border. This confluence of interests poses quite a tangle of strategic calculations for Afghanistan, Pakistan and China, as each tries to pursue its own interests and balance the difficulties of regional instability, militancy and disputed borders (Simms et al., 2011).

This chapter intends to locate the geopolitical significance of the Wakhan Corridor by exploring its historical antecedents and its current strategic calculus for regional players. It will examine how Afghanistan, Pakistan and China view and are using the corridor, and how it sits within the broader regional geopolitics. The chapter also explores the implications of the corridor on security relations, trading opportunities, and regional cooperation and competition. In this way, it forms the basis of not only regarding the corridor as a geographical region, but a key strategic space in regional politics in the 21st century.

2.2. Historical Background of the Wakhan Corridor

Situated between Tajikistan, Pakistan, and China, the Wakhan is a slender mountainous region in Afghanistan that holds a special place in the geopolitical history of South and Central Asia. The far North's arid landscape has long served as a political battleground for major powers, despite its harsh climate, remote location, and sparse population. The evolution of regional and global strategic problems is reflected in its origins, application, and lasting relevance. This section discusses how the Wakhan Corridor was formed and developed historically, how it was intentionally built during the Anglo-Russian rivalry of the 19th century, how it changed during the Cold War, and how it has fresh significance in the 21st century (Srebrnik, 2020).

The Wakhan Corridor itself was a product of the 19th century imperial rivalry between the British Empire and Tsarist Russia, also known as the “Great Game.” This period marked intense strategic rivalry for influence and control over Central Asia. As the British held India, they considered any expansion southwards to be a threat to their colony. Meanwhile Russia was extending her sphere of influence in Central Asia closer to the British-controlled Indian subcontinent. The area now called the Wakhan Corridor formed part of this loosely defined frontier space, and was home to the Wakhi and Kyrgyz nomads. Yet, with the British and Russian interests in the Pamirs coming to a head, it was evident that there would have to be a clearly defined buffer zone between the two empires. In 1895 the two powers, in consultation with China, had established a neutral strip of territory, the Wakhan Corridor, from the Afghan heartland to the Chinese frontier.

Its terms were ratified in the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 and defined on the ground by combined commissions (Srisookkham, 2015).

Afghanistan under Emir Abdur Rahman Khan was named as the supposed ruler of the frontier according to the terms of this treaty which did not clearly set out who among the two countries held direct control over the frontier. This policy not only preserved British India from outright Russian infringement but kept the balance of power in the area unbalanced. The corridor was actually more of a diplomatic construct, and not something that corresponds to ethnic, economic, or social realities; a truth that hampers its integrated use in the life of the Afghans nationwide. For much of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Wakhan Corridor acted as little more than a geopolitical cushion. It wasn't an economic and only in part an administrative mission, but a purely strategic one: to break the British and Russian empires apart from one another spatially. Being remote and hard to travel, it was seldom traveled, and little infrastructure even existed. The space was used as neither a boom-bust town nor place for investment, it simply should have never been occupied, politically or physically (Stanikzai, 2024).

However, the corridor was still symbolically under Afghan control and with Afghan military and administrative presence, albeit at a very low level, allowing the Afghans to claim the corridor was being run according to their laws. Strategically vital, the corridor was visited intermittently by British or Russian explorers, spies, and surveyors, who gathered intelligence under the pretext of scientific or ethnographic inquiry. Despite its invisibility, however, the corridor was the subject of strategic cartography, cartography of the maps, treaties and military documents kind. It was a physical embodiment of the balance of power around which colonial politics in Asia were arranged. A second shift in the geopolitical habits of the Wakhan was experienced throughout the Cold War. After World War II, the Soviet Union became a superpower, equal to the US, and once again took control of Central Asia. Afghanistan continued to follow a course of neutrality in foreign affairs, but was pushed toward the Soviet Union as the Cold War turned into a competition with the 1950s (Ahmad & Jamil, 2023).

The Wakhan Corridor also played a role albeit in a silent manner during the 1979-1989 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Although most military operations took place in the southern and eastern parts of the country, the border regions in the north were also surrounded and the Soviet forces could thwart the Mujahideen supply lines by controlling the borders, including the

mountainous regions of Wakhan in the northeast. But, on account of its rugged terrain and remoteness the corridor was not contested in a significant way, though. Nevertheless, the Soviet presence established the corridor as a patrolled and securitized border zone, if one with a minimum of development or state-building. This disconnect and the lack of socio-economic investment despite strategic interest is a familiar story in the history of the corridor (Ali, 2022).

The United States' invasion of Afghanistan and the 9/11 attacks in 2001 did change the region's geopolitical landscape and put the Wakhan Corridor back on the strategic agenda. The "War on Terror" and the US military's presence in Afghanistan sparked a renewed interest in the country's boundaries, with the Wakhan Corridor—the comparatively safe eastern border with China, coming into particular emphasis. In China's instance, the nation was also growing more concerned that Uyghur extremists may utilise the corridor as a means of entry into Xinjiang (Ali, 2022). While the violence of war did not reach Wakhan, China's obsession with transnational terrorism and separatism prompted increased monitoring and cooperation in security with the Afghan government during Afghan war years. China has also erected barrier fences and frontier installations on its side of the border with the Wakhan Corridor, indicating its strategic value. At the same time, China's economic projects, specifically the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), sought to include the corridor in larger plans of connectivity. While any large-scale infrastructure within the Corridor has yet to materialize, this position – as possibly emerging as a potential link between China and Afghanistan (via Pakistan), increasingly attracted analytical attention. The potential inclusion of Afghanistan into China-led economic corridors offered a new calculus of the corridor's strategic dimension (Ahmad et al, 2021).

Pakistan, too, has also started taking the corridor more seriously, notably as it fits into its larger vision of regional connectivity through CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor). While the Wakhan Corridor is yet to be directly linked to CPEC, the geography and interests of Pakistan and China in the stability of Afghanistan make the region strategically significant. In the post-Taliban era (from 2021) the corridor remains a place of geopolitical convergence. China fears the potential overflow of Islamist militancy from Afghanistan into Xinjiang but wants to engage with the Taliban to underwrite regional stability. The corridor would thus remain a historical buffer region between great powers, although its geopolitical role has changed in modern times.

The history of the Wakhan Corridor is an interesting example of how geography can influence geopolitics throughout history. From a Great Game buffer zone to a cold war front line patrolled by the Soviets, and now a possible corridor of connectivity in the 21st century, the region's strategic value has survived. Though remote and underdeveloped, it has not ceased attracting the interest of regional powers as the crossroads of Asia. It is crucial to take this historic trajectory into consideration in order to analyze its contemporary geopolitical implications, as argued in the following sections (Stanikzai, 2024).

2.3. Geostrategic Importance of the Wakhan Corridor

The Wakhan Corridor, a stretch of land jutting north-eastwards from Afghanistan right into the centre of the Asian landmass, possesses a cider-pressing kind of geostrategic value that is out of all proportion to its physical footprint. Despite its remoteness and paucity of population, the corridor holds a rare geographical status, lying at the junction of Central Asia, South Asia and East Asia. Its geographical position, as well as its proximity to China's volatile Xinjiang province, Pakistan occupied Gilgit-Baltistan, and Afghanistan's unstable Badakhshan province, makes it even more significant in regional geopolitical and security calculus. Moreover, the possible positioning of GB within the nascent constellations of connectivity and trade like Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) accentuates its importance in terms of economy and security (Amin, 2024).

The geography of the Wakhan Corridor itself is the most basic part of its geostrategic importance. It is an andelongate nectar-passage between Afghanistan and China, represents one of the rare direct connection points between Afghanistan and China and it constitutes a narrow geographical connection between Central and South Asia on the one hand, and East Asia on the other. Despite its rough and mostly untouched nature, the corridor serves as a "latent" transport route connecting three global regions of Asia. To the north sits Tajikistan and the wider Central Asian republics, with their endowments in resources, but landlocked and infrastructure-challenged. To the south lies Pakistan – the potential choke point in the Arabian Sea, and the most important member of China-led trade networks in the region. To the east lies China's Xinjiang region, a key to Beijing's domestic security policy and a building block of its foreign economic outreach.

This coincidence makes the Wakhan Corridor a potential corridor for connectivity. It has the potential of a (not an easy) direct overland route between Kabul – Kashgar or Gilgit. Such a link would also be an excellent counter-measure to the terrorist threats along the Sind-Lahore railway line, by reducing Afghanistan's reliance on the longer and more risky routes (through Iran or the Khyber Pass) and diversifying China's entry points into Afghanistan and South Asia. But the geopolitical significance of the Wakhan Corridor is not militarily strategic: it's also essentially a bet on an economic lifeline and conduit for trade. BRI, launched in 2013, aims to establish a network of economic corridors to connect Asia with Europe, Africa and beyond. While no large BRI projects currently pass through the Wakhan Corridor, its position within signing distance has bowled it some feasibility studies, as well as some geopolitical attention, particularly as China seeks to expand its trading networks into an unstable, yet resource rich neighbour like Afghanistan (Ahmad et al, 2019).

Moreover, the BRI flagship project, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), may cross path with the Wakhan Corridor and create a trans-regional axis of trade. While existing CPEC routes transit through western Pakistan, entering Xinjiang through the Khunjerab Pass, the Wakhan corridor's incorporation into the corridor could enable direct access to Afghanistan and beyond, potentially including Central Asia, thus boosting Pakistan's influence and commerce in the region.

Afghanistan, too, has much to gain from such integration. Afghanistan is a landlocked and highly transit-reliant country; and the creation of a functioning corridor through Wakhan could potentially facilitate improved connectivity, lower trade costs, and spur economic growth in its impoverished north-eastern provinces (BBC, 2024).

2.4. The Wakhan Corridor and Dynamics of Regional Security

The strategic position of Wakhan Corridor in convergence of South Asia, Central Asia and East Asia has made it a critical determinant of security dynamics in the region. Geographically remote it may be, but the corridor crosses the vital national security interests of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China. In recent years, particularly following U.S. withdrawal and the re-emergence of the Taliban, its importance for counter-terrorism, intelligence sharing and border control has grown significantly. Its utility is not in terms of traditional armed forces but rather is symbolic and

tactical in nature, in its presence to maintain regional equilibrium, to not allow a threat to transit across international frontiers (Aziz, 2021).

2.4.1. Security Implications for Afghanistan:

The Wakhan provides a strategic opportunity and governance challenge for Afghanistan. The corridor is the only direct border between the country and China and the Badakhshan province is one of Afghanistan's most underprivileged and insecure areas. Poor geography, impassable infrastructure, and minimal government presence have historically prevented Kabul from effectively ruling the province. The corridor is of considerable security significance. First, it is a border frontier for the stability of the border. While the China-Afghanistan border is relatively calm and short (approximately 76 km) absence of state control renders it susceptible to illegal acts such as drug trafficking, arms smuggling and possible movement of militants. Securing that border is crucial for preventing Afghanistan from turning into a base for actions that would impinge on regional neighbours especially China (Bohzekai, 2006).

Second, the corridor is significant for counter-terrorism cooperation. Organisations such as the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) have been active in the wider Badakhshan area, threatening not only Afghanistan, but also other countries in the region. If the corridor is left unattended, it might become a passage for such outfits wanting to move into China or Pakistan. Third, the corridor is too remote for the Afghan central government to really exert its administrative authority. The area has been historically ruled by local tribal and informal networks. A more strongly integrated corridor within national security and governance architectures would be key to improving Afghanistan's border management and developing wider regional security linkages (BBC, 2024).

2.4.2. Pakistan's Security Considerations:

Pakistan's security interests vis-a-vis the Wakhan Corridor are nuanced and influenced by regional ambitions and fears. One of Pakistan's strategic interests is to remain influential in Afghanistan particularly in those areas that adjoin with its northern regions. Given its closeness to Gilgit-Baltistan, the corridor factors into Pakistan's wider strategic considerations with regard to border security, Afghanistan-endgame influence, and connectivity to Central Asia. First, the corridor could provide a possible access to Central Asian markets. For Pakistan, which is seeking to widen its economic and diplomatic reach into Central Asia, a pacified Wakhan Corridor could

help to facilitate regional trade across Afghanistan and perhaps offer alternatives to more turbulent corridors in the west. Yet instability could get in the way of those dreams, which helps explain why Pakistan wants a friend in power and secure borders in northeastern Afghanistan (Bukhari, 2012).

Second, Pakistan wants Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor to be a space that serves as a cushion between Indian presences in Kunduz and its own northern front. And while the corridor does not directly touch Indian territory, the larger area surrounding Kashmir lies to the south, which means that any expanded Indian footprint in Afghanistan — or, for that matter, indirectly through a base, can be seen by Pakistan as strategic encirclement. Therefore, keeping the corridor free of Indian influence is part of Pakistan's conventional security calculus. Third, Pakistan is also apprehensive that the corridor could be used by religious extremist groups to further destabilize its frontiers. Then there's the possibility of other militant groups in northern Afghanistan attempting to shift to Gilgit-Baltistan, or work in concert with local groups. Thus, Islamabad prioritizes oversight of the corridor via intelligence triangulation with Kabul and Beijing (Amir, 2023).

2.4.3. China's Concerns on Security:

China's security stake in the Wakhan Corridor is chiefly focused on Xinjiang, its restive region bordering the corridor. Beijing has long worried about the potential for cross-border infiltration of Uighur militants to connect with transnational jihadi networks. While the Wakhan Corridor is one of the most insignificant routes into China in terms of the numbers of people using it, its symbolic role in Beijing's view of its own security is large. Beijing's concerns are based on the activities of the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which seeks the independence of Xinjiang and has in the past been present in Afghan neighbourhoods. The prospect that elements could take advantage of the anarchic nature of the corridor to seep into Chinese sovereign territory has ensued to Beijing tightening its grip on border security, surveillance, and diplomacy with Afghan constituents of all hues, Taliban and non-Taliban alike (Bazai, 2022).

What's more, China views the corridor as a critical piece in its broader regional-influence strategy. Stability on the Wakhan border will allow Beijing to defend its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investment in Pakistan and Central Asia. Corridor stability would enable potential future connectivity options to bind Afghanistan more deeply into Chinese economic infrastructure and to

gain strategic depth. China has therefore pushed for trilateral cooperation with Pakistan and Afghanistan on border security, intelligence exchange, and counter-terrorism, frequently using vehicles like the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue (Ali, 2022).

2.4.4. Taliban Rule and Implications for Regional Stability and the Wakhan Region

The Taliban's takeover of power in August 2021 has drastically altered the security situation in Afghanistan at home and abroad. While the group has vowed not to permit its soil to be used against neighboring countries, its control over far-flung territory such as the Wakhan Corridor is uncertain. The geographical, infrastructural and administrative trappings of the Taliban limits their ability to manage and oversee the corridor. And despite reports of Taliban delegations visiting the Wakhan and of reaching out to local communities, with no formal border management system in place, the area could serve as a passage for extremist outfits to use the region for cross-border operations. For China, the Taliban's ambiguous ties to groups like ETIM continues to be a concern. The Taliban has promised Beijing that it will not harbour these factions, but how it will be enforced in the hinterland is in doubt. The Taliban's rule is likely to turn out relatively positive for Pakistan as it reduces Indian influence in Afghanistan, but this is complicated by the presence of Afghan-based, anti-Pakistan militants of the TTP variety near its borders (Chen, 2022).

2.5. Geopolitical Significance of the Wakhan Corridor for Regional States:

2.5.1. Geopolitical Significance for Afghanistan

The Wakhan Corridor is a critical piece of geography for Afghanistan, not just for its quirk of its geographical feature but also for how it provides Afghanistan with a passageway to China and a position at the nexus of the region's major powers. This narrow strip of land, about 350 kilometers long and ranging from 13 to 65 kilometers wide, features Afghanistan's sole boundary with China, a potential pivot point in regional diplomacy, trade and strategic alignment. Underdeveloped and geographically isolated, the corridor gives Afghanistan an opportunity to redefine its geopolitical position in the region by increasing connectivity, asserting sovereignty over its remote territories, and becoming less reliant on narrow transit routes through its western and southern neighbours (Hassan et al, 2023).

2.5.2. The Corridor as Afghanistan's Only Direct Border with China

The most significant geo-political characteristic of the Wakhan Corridor is that it is the only border that Afghanistan shares with China (approx. 76 km long). This relatively nondescript stretch of frontier becomes extremely geopolitically relevant when we consider that it provides a bypass for Afghanistan into East Asia, and an outlet to one of the world's most powerful states.

This border offers Afghanistan strategic depth in its foreign policy. Having gone largely unused throughout its history due to its rugged location and absence of transportation infrastructure, it is still an important diplomatic resource. Having a common border means Kabul can discuss trade, security, and development directly with Beijing. In the post-2001 period, and especially under the Afghan governments, attempts were made to improve relations with China. The Wakhan border was considered a possible pathway for trade and cooperation, particularly after China extended its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) along the region (Danish, 2017).

Micheska International Affairs 01 September 2010 Afghanistan's northwest neighbours are highly suspicious in a geopolitical sense of the increased role of antagonistic Chinese economic and strategic interests in the country and the increasing Chinese assertiveness in the region. The corridor in this manner emerges as a strategic arena for the two nations to cooperate in to the mutual advantage of Afghanistan that can reap the rewards of Chinese infrastructure investment, anti-radicalism aid and Silk Road connectivity and beyond. For its part, China possesses a shared interest in stabilizing Afghanistan, largely in regard to regulating cross-border extremist movements (Guiora, 2013).

2.5.3. Territorial Sovereignty and the Challenge of Governance in the Remote Wakhan Region

Strategic significance The Wakhan Corridor is of strategic importance yet poses significant challenges for Afghanistan in matters of control, infrastructure and border control. The area is still among the most remote and inaccessible areas of the country. The difficult mountainous conditions, a small population (almost exclusively ethnic Wakhi and Kyrgyz), and limited economic opportunities have led to this region being governed by the central authorities of the various regimes in control of the country throughout its history. From a sovereignty standpoint it's a big problem. The strip is Afghan territory, but the absence of a government presence makes it vulnerable to smuggling and drug trade, human smuggling, and potential infiltration by militants from across the border. While joint police patrols outside the Friendship

Gate help prevent the Taliban from using the goods trade to smuggle or transport fighters to China, this area is under strict surveillance of Beijing and the Afghan side has long been mismanaged, with no discernible security infrastructure or customs mechanisms (Curzon, 2005).

Consolidation of sovereignty over the Wakhan accordingly is a political and security necessity for Afghanistan. Better governance in this area would allow the Afghan state to extend its reach to the border itself, strengthening the Afghan national cohesion and proving its ability to control its borders. This is particularly true under a Taliban government where international recognition and internal cohesion are closely associated with the ability to govern territory and contain transnational threats. Any bid to assert administrative control over the Wakhan, including the creation of outposts, projects, and access of locals to national development programs, would not only stabilize the area, but make Afghanistan a more credible partner in regional projects (Danish, 2017).

2.5.4. Potential Role in Breaking Landlocked Isolation and Enhancing Regional Connectivity

One of its most important strategic hurdles has long been its landlocked geography. The country has historically been dependent on sea routes via Pakistan and Iran, and has been subject to geopolitical and economic pressures due to reliance on transit infrastructure in neighboring countries. One such opportunity, albeit difficult, to lessen this dependence is the Wakhan Corridor, which when developed would become a second Chinese route, says the author. Just because there is not a modern road through it now to the rest of Afghanistan or to China's Karakoram Highway, there is a growing focus among strategic thinkers on the development of such a route. But with infrastructure investment, the Wakhan Corridor could potentially be a legitimate trade surplus for Afghanistan, to Kashgar and further on in Xinjiang. This would connect Afghanistan to Chinese markets and allow it to take advantage of Chinese infrastructure development through the BRI (Daly, 2018).

One such avenue would help to create a trade link between South and Central Asia connecting the two regions via Afghan soil. It would create new possibilities for energy transport, telecom links, and regional economic collaboration. Even more significantly it would be a symbol of Afghanistan's transition from an outlying buffer state to a trade corridor linking major regional economies. Realizing such potential will require substantial investment in infrastructure, political stability, and international cooperation. China has expressed some interest in the development of

eastern Afghanistan, but concerns about security and the presence of radical groups are seen as limiting factors in projects on a larger scale. If peace and security are achieved in the Wakhan corridor, however, the corridor might also become a key link in Afghanistan's strategy for overcoming its isolation as a landlocked nation (Dhaka, 2004).

2.5.4. Importance in Afghanistan's Broader Geopolitical Positioning between Central and South Asia

Afghanistan's geographic location between Central Asia, South Asia, and East Asia has historically made it a focal point of Great Power rivalry. The Wakhan Corridor enhances this geopolitical centrality by linking Afghanistan to three major regional zones. This strategic geography makes the task more feasible and provides Afghanistan with a potential leverage in regional multilateral forums such as the SCO, ECO and the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process. Via the Wakhan, Afghanistan can position itself as a bridge rather than a barrier between contending regional players (Chen, 2022).

The Wakhan is narrow and risky to travel but a vast swath of geopolitical importance to Afghanistan. It's the only border that the country has with China with potentials for trade, diplomacy & regional connectivity initiatives. At the same time, it pushes the Afghan state to try to assert its sovereignty over distant territories and do some actual infrastructure building. The corridor's possible significance in ending Afghanistan's geographic landlocked isolation and making it a hub in regional connector between Central and South Asia, underscores its strategic importance. Wakhan, in the shifting geopolitical calculus of Eurasia, may prove to be a most strategically significant pivot point as Afghanistan takes new steps on its struggle toward stability, statehood, and regionalism (Fair, 2011).

2.6. Geopolitical Significance for Pakistan

The Wakhan Corridor is strategically and geopolitically significant for Pakistan. The corridor, which runs between China's Xinjiang to the east and Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan to the south, is a vital hub for regional connectivity and strategic thinking. According to Islamabad, the Wakhan Corridor presents both potential and difficulties. It promotes the triangular China-Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship, enhances Pakistan's access to Central Asia, and serves as a geographic buffer that provides strategic depth and restrains India's expansion in the area (Compas,

2015). All of these elements point to the corridor's significance in Pakistan's geopolitical imminent.

2.6.1. Strategic Link to Central Asia via Afghanistan

The direct link with the markets in Central Asia is one of the most profound geopolitical imperatives for Pakistan. Although the CARs are landlocked, they are rich in energy resources and are an important region in terms of trade, security cooperation, and connectivity. Presently under-utilised as a transport corridor, the Wakhan Corridor lies on the brink of becoming the land bridge connecting Pakistan with Central Asia via Afghanistan. Strategically from Pakistan's point of view, the legal provides an alternative path that can supplement current and proposed infrastructure. The corridor could be linked to Pakistan's broader ambitions for regional trade and energy transit. Since the Wakhan Corridor creates a narrow piece of geographical contact between Afghanistan on the one hand and China, and thus Central Asia, on the other, it could serve as a means to side-step established bottlenecks and political sensibilities, especially those that have surrounded communications between competing regional players (Ali, 2024).

2.6.2. Strengthening Pakistan's Connectivity through CPEC and Regional Frameworks

The Wakhan Corridor would also fit into Pakistan's designs associated with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). CPEC sees Pakistan as a key link between the Arabian Sea in the south and western China and perhaps even beyond into Central Asia. While it is not an official part of CPEC, the Wakhan Corridor is of strategic significance since it can either act as an extension to the plan or as an alternative passageway. If China were to build a new road or rail line connecting Kashgar (in Xinjiang) to northern Afghanistan through the Wakhan Corridor, then the triangle would be complete; China to Afghanistan to Pakistan. This further connectivity would relieve pressure on the Karakoram Highway, enabling new trade, investment and regional connectivity (Hassan et al, 2023).

In addition, multilateral arrangements such as the Quadrilateral Traffic in Transit Agreement (QTAA) that involves China, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, which already exist, may be broadened to take advantage of the Wakhan Corridor. Pakistan has been looking to improve its transit and energy ties with Central Asia and is cooperating for CASA-1000 (electric

transmission) and TAPI (Turkmenistan Afghanistan Pakistan India) gas pipeline. A working trade and transit route via Wakhan would also bolster Pakistan's claim to pivotal transit nation status.

So, Pakistan sees the Wakhan Corridor primarily as a geostrategic asset, rather than as just a geographical oddity that it can play, thereby, intentionally enhancing its infrastructural diplomacy and economic diplomacy with a changed world view (Iqbal et al., 2021).

2.6.3. Relevance in Trilateral cooperation with China and Afghanistan

The Wakhan Corridor has gained traction as an ideal candidate for a Pak-China-Afghanistan convergence. All three countries have common interests vis-a-vis strategic angst concerning regional stability, terrorism and considering uniting their economies. The trilateral talk process between the three governments also has discussed connectivity, counter-terrorism, infrastructure building and the Wakhan region is repeatedly mentioned as an important area for cooperation. Pakistan has considered the corridor area as an important space where trilateral interests meet. For China, the corridor is a necessary means of maintaining stability along its border with Afghanistan and to restrict extremist forces in Xinjiang. It is an underleveraged but critical geopolitical asset for Afghanistan. And it is to Pakistan both a strategic rear flank and a route to the north. By pumping funds for trilateral projects and selling trilateral initiatives for joint measures like border management, trade and intelligence cooperation, Islamabad is seeking to have a foot hold in a regional alignment that can serve as a balance against India and serve long-term strategic stability (Hussain & Ullah, 2023).

2.6.4. Buffer Zone Value against Indian Influence and Strategic Depth Considerations

By a classical geopolitics rationale, the Wakhan Corridor gives Pakistan a measure of strategic depth vis-à-vis its traditional enemy, India. While the belt is not India's immediate neighbour, its proximity to Pakistan-occupied Gilgit-Baltistan and Indian-administered Ladakh endow the region with significant strategic importance. The corridor was historically part of the buffer put in place during the "Great Game" to separate British India from Tsarist Russia. In modern times, the corridor continues to be used, albeit passively, to insulate the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan triangle from unmediated Indian access. This impacts on Pakistan's strategic calculus, specially with Indian presence in Afghanistan during the American surge and the increasing Indo-American strategic engagement. Furthermore, the corridor is close to some of

Pakistan's sensitive border locations, such as the Wakhi-populated Upper Hunza Valley, increasing its significance in military planning and regional surveillance. Pakistan wants to avoid the Wakhan from being used as a highway for hostile intelligence penetration or separatist insurgency, specifically of spillover from unrest in Xinjiang and militants from Badakhshan (Iloliev, 2018).

The Wakhan Corridor might seem like a desolate and forbidding place, but for Pakistan it is very strategically located. The fact that it could be a potential gateway to Central Asia, its connection to the success of larger connectivity projects such as CPEC and BRI and its significance in trilateral cooperation involving China and Afghanistan, make it an important part of Pakistan's regional strategy. Second, its dual role as a buffer against India's strategic thrust projects the age-old questions of security and strategic depth on the region.

2.7. Geopolitical Significance for China

The Wakhan Corridor is geopolitically significant for the People's Republic of China, which is strategically placed to the west of China's western Xinjiang autonomous region and reaches the mountainous northeast of Afghanistan. Although the corridor lies inside Afghanistan, it has come to occupy a spot near the top of China's strategic thinking, given its proximity to mainland China's borders, including its direct border with Xinjiang. In an age when Beijing is rapidly extending its global economic reach and deepening its fears over internal security threats in Xinjiang, the Wakhan Corridor takes on two faces at once – it is a potential opening for China's western expansion and a fraught borderland necessitating careful surveillance and diplomacy (Elleman, 2014).

2.7.1. Direct Access to Afghanistan from Xinjiang Province

One unique strategic asset China has that no one else even has a comparable version of is direct contact with Afghanistan via the Wakhan Corridor. Without this corridor, Chinese contacts with Kabul have been channeled through Pakistan or Central Asia, which has complicated the political process and caused logistical headaches. The border between Xinjiang and Afghanistan is about 48 miles long, but it provides a sovereign land bridge that allows for communication, trade discussions and security cooperation to bypass Pakistan. Diplomatically, this direct access has enabled China to maintain bilateral relations with Afghanistan, rather than being influenced by that of a third party. Chinese state visits, delegation exchanges along the border and infrastructure

surveys can be carried out under China's own banner, offering Beijing a direct route of negotiation and relationship-building. Even China has overplayed this direct border card, especially since the 2001 U.S. intervention, and increasingly so since the Taliban takeover in 2021, to assure Afghan interlocutors of Beijing's abiding commitment to non-interference and mutual development. And this access supports and is part of China's broader "no-strings" approach to Afghanistan, which focuses on economic cooperation and infrastructure investments, rather than military intervention or political conditionality (Chen, 2022).

2.7.2. Containment of Separatism and Extremism Threats in Western China

Xinjiang province, where Uighur separatism have sporadically flared into violence, constitutes the main security challenge on China's interior. Chinese authorities worry that militant groups in Afghanistan or Pakistan could use the Wakhan Corridor, one of the few routes over land connecting Afghanistan to China, to slip into Xinjiang. The harsh terrain of the corridor would make large-scale movement impractical, but small groups of extremists could find advantage in its remoteness. To offset this threat, China has heavily invested in border control on the Wakhan frontier. Border areas are now heavily surveilled by technology, including high resolution cameras, motion sensors, and aerial drones. Diplomatically, Beijing has cajoled Afghan authorities (both under the previous government and the Taliban) not to give sanctuary to terrorist groups in the Wakhan area. China's counter-terrorism talks with Afghanistan and Pakistan regularly feature the call for trilateral intelligence cooperation and joint patrols to freeze the three forces out in the mountainous terrains along the porous border for good (Jamil, 2023).

In addition to these hardware control tactics, China has also adopted soft measures, including economic development and social stability promotion, in which the rationale is that by improving people's living standards, the attractiveness of separatist ideology decreases. Beijing has called for trilateral initiatives that link Xinjiang to Wakhan, such as small-scale cross-border trade points, which promote legitimate business over illicit traffic, anchoring local people in shared economic interests and reducing room for extremist activity. Put another way, the containment of separatism and extremism in western China is a major motive for China's focus on the security rules governing the region around the Wakhan Corridor. While it remains an area into which it has direct access, the CAC does not mention that this sector is exactly the kind of project that would encourage Belt and Road investments.

2.7.3. Corridor's Potential Role in the Belt and Road Initiative

Announced in 2013, China's Belt and Road Initiative weaves Eurasia together with a series of land corridors and sea routes. The Wakhan Corridor has drawn China's analytical attention as a potential future land bridge into Afghanistan and beyond into South Asia. Integration of the corridor into the BRI will necessitate major investment in infrastructure: roads on the Afghan side, border yards and logistics facilities. But the reward might be far-reaching. A link through Wakhan would help to provide an alternative southern route for Chinese goods and energy into Afghanistan, which would lessen dependence on the Pakistani route via Karachi and the Karakoram Highway. It would also allow China to increasingly diversify its trade corridors, hence making BRI more resistant to geopolitical disruption (Khan, 2023).

Under the Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing has undertaken feasibility studies, typically with the Afghan government, on extending Xinjiang's provincial highways to the Afghan border. Although no significant project has gotten off the ground, Chinese state-owned companies have shown interest in joint ventures to develop border posts, customs centers and even test eco-tourism initiatives in the Wakhan region. The efforts serve two purposes: they further integrate China into Afghanistan's economy and create a physical presence that achieves a measure of security and local goodwill. Furthermore, a BRI passage through Wakhan would be aligned with other regional programs, such as the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) initiative, by bringing Afghanistan into closer connection with the rest of the Eurasian economy. And for China, it is a chance to export its infrastructure know-how, lock in markets for Chinese products and underline its credentials as a development partner in some of the most difficult environments in the world (Javed, 2018).

2.7.4. China's Interest in a Stable Wakhan to Secure Borders and Expand Westward Integration

A stable Wakhan region meets both of China's interests, policing borders and expanding economic influence westward. Politically, a peaceful Afghan border will reduce the possibility of spillover incidents that might exacerbate domestic tensions in Xinjiang or invite international scrutiny of China's border management policies. Stability in Wakhan is considered by Beijing to be vital to preventing the spillover of any security threat there which could pose a threat to its efforts to repress "separatism, terrorism, and extremism" at home. Economically, a secure corridor

would open up the prospect of integrated westwardness, Xinjiang into Afghanistan's markets and resources, by extension possibly into Pakistan, Iran and beyond along trans-Afghan networks. China's decades-long strategy for Xinjiang is to turn it from a backwater to a hub of trade and industry; the Wakhan Corridor is a natural extension of this vision, an alternate axis for commerce and connectivity (Khan, 2023).

As a strategic corridor connecting Xinjiang and Afghanistan, the Wakhan Corridor holds great significance for China. From Beijing's perspective, it is not merely a piece of circumstantial no man's land in the mountains with little strategic value. Additionally, it offers new opportunities for the Belt and Road Initiative and can help combat extremism. Through the corridor, Beijing has acquired unrestricted access to Afghanistan, creating opportunities for timely intelligence and intermediated diplomacy. Their security cooperation also aims to avoid any contamination of Chinese western Tibet by jihadis. Including Wakhan in the BRI planning would enable China diversify its overland routes to Europe, giving them both strategic resilience. He also had an economic agenda (Ali, 2021).

2.8. Geopolitical Significance for Tajikistan

Tajikistan, though not directly traversed by the Wakhan Corridor, shares a critical geographical and strategic proximity to this narrow strip of land in Afghanistan's Badakhshan Province. The corridor connects Afghanistan with China's Xinjiang region while bordering Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) in the east. From Dushanbe's perspective, the corridor holds considerable geopolitical value due to its potential role in shaping regional connectivity, security arrangements, and multilateral cooperation across Central and South Asia.

Firstly, the Wakhan Corridor serves as a natural high-mountain frontier, acting as both a barrier and a bridge between Central Asia and South Asia. Although current infrastructure constraints make direct passage from Tajikistan to Pakistan or China via the Wakhan impractical, the prospect of future road and trade links positions the corridor as a potential transit gateway. This would allow Tajikistan to reduce its dependence on northern routes through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan for access to global markets, thereby diversifying its geopolitical and economic options.

Secondly, the corridor carries security implications for Tajikistan’s border management. The country’s frontier with Afghanistan, stretching over 1,357 kilometers, is porous and challenging to monitor due to its rugged terrain. While the Wakhan region is sparsely populated and relatively insulated from Afghanistan’s major conflict zones, instability elsewhere in Afghanistan—including insurgency and narcotics trafficking—can have spillover effects. The geographical buffer provided by the corridor is therefore a double-edged sword: it offers physical separation from high-intensity conflict zones, but it also creates vulnerabilities due to weak Afghan state control in remote areas.

Thirdly, the Wakhan Corridor aligns with Tajikistan’s role in broader multilateral frameworks such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), and China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Dushanbe’s participation in these forums gives it a platform to advocate for stability and development in the Wakhan, aligning with Chinese and Russian security priorities in Xinjiang and Afghanistan. Moreover, Tajikistan’s collaboration with China on infrastructure and counterterrorism in its eastern regions reflects shared interests in preventing extremist infiltration through the Afghan frontier.

Fourthly, there is a cultural and ethnolinguistic dimension to the corridor’s significance. The Pamiri peoples living in Tajikistan’s GBAO share linguistic, cultural, and in some cases familial ties with communities in Afghanistan’s Wakhan region. These cross-border connections provide opportunities for people-to-people diplomacy and soft-power engagement, which could be leveraged in the service of regional stability and development projects.

Finally, environmental and hydrological considerations add another layer to Tajikistan’s geopolitical stake in the Wakhan Corridor. The Pamir Mountains, which extend into the Wakhan region, are home to glaciers and rivers that feed into the Amu Darya basin—a vital water source for Central Asia. Climate change and glacial melt in this high-altitude region have direct implications for Tajikistan’s water security, making environmental cooperation an emerging strategic priority.

The Wakhan Corridor is geopolitically significant for Tajikistan as a potential trade and transit route, a security buffer, a site of multilateral cooperation, a space of cultural linkage, and

an environmental asset. While current conditions limit the corridor's practical utility, its future development could shift the geopolitical landscape of Central and South Asia in ways that directly affect Tajikistan's strategic posture.

2.9. Regional and Global Interests and Competition

The geostrategic importance of the Wakhan Corridor goes well beyond Afghanistan, Pakistan and China, involving larger and much broader spectrum of regional and international players whose interests converge or clash in this strategically positioned strip of land.

2.9.1. Other Regional Players

India: India has no border with Wakhan but has attempted to have influence in Afghanistan through development aid, infrastructure initiatives and soft power. India's participation in Afghan reconstruction and its enduring rivalry with Pakistan also provide an incentive to have a stake in whatever paves the way for a transportation corridor that could change Pakistan's strategic calculus. If the Wakhan becomes a practical transitory route, then India could negotiate (or pay for) access to Central Asia through Afghanistan, perhaps through the corridor, thwarting Pakistan's notions and escalating Indo-Pak rivalry in Kabul (BBC, 2024).

Russia: Moscow has deep historical links with Afghanistan's northern neighbors, and is wary of any corridor nearby. Russia cooperates with China today, for example through the SCO, but it is mistrustful of any new state or system that could cut it out of its historical buffer of Central Asia. Russia's concern is to prevent the corridor from challenging its power in Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan and from developing there on terms that would conflicted with, rather than complement, Russian-led security and economic arrangements (Jafari, 2020).

Iran: Iran's strategic concern is to prevent Afghanistan from coming wholly under the influence of its eastern neighbors. Iran doesn't have much direct stake in the Wakhan Corridor, because of how far away it is, but has shown this fight over the Wakhan Corridor to be a proxy battle over expanded Chinese or Pakistan influence in northeast Afghanistan. If the corridor becomes an established trade route, Iran could intensify efforts to expand its western Afghan links (e.g., through the Zaranj-Delaram highway) to vie for transit and investment opportunities (Jabarkail, 2024).

2.9.2. International Strategic Competition

The 2001-2021 intervention saw U.S. and NATO forces being heavily involved in the south and east of Afghanistan, but generally following a war against terror they had an indirect interest in controlling all her borders, such as Wakhan. While not militarized in the corridor, coalition surveillance and intelligence operations aimed to prevent the movement of extremists. And with foreign troops reducing numbers, the United States has a strategic worry about a backsliding corridor once again offering a home to terror groups that aimed at global interests. Next Steps Future U.S. policy options might include advocating multilateral security arrangements that would encompass Wakhan monitoring (Khan, 2023).

The advent of multi-polarity enhances the symbolic value of the Wakhan Corridor as a framework for great-power competition and cooperation in the reordering world order. China wants to embed the corridor in its Belt and Road Initiative; Russia wants to secure its pre-eminence in nearby Central Asia; the West fears leaving any vacuum that could be filled by terrorist or rival-directed forces (Jamil, 2017). This crosscurrent of interests renders the corridor not only a point of tension for competition, but also a testing ground for cooperation on trans-national issues like counter-terrorism, drug trafficking and infrastructure.

CHAPTER-3

3. POLITICAL, SECURITY, AND ECONOMIC INTERESTS OF REGIONAL STATES IN THE WAKHAN CORRIDOR

3.1. Introduction

The Wakhan Corridor, a narrow strip of land in northeastern Afghanistan, holds immense strategic value due to its unique geographic location, linking Central Asia, South Asia, and East Asia. In recent years, the region has garnered increasing attention from neighboring states; Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China, each of which views the corridor through a distinct yet interconnected set of interests rooted in political, security, and economic considerations. Understanding these interests requires a multidimensional analytical framework that goes beyond mere territorial or historical claims and delves into the broader regional and global dynamics that shape the policies and engagements of these states (Malik, 2014).

Politically, the Wakhan Corridor represents an opportunity and a challenge. For Afghanistan, it is a platform towards deeper regional connection and integrations including China and central Asia in the context of post-conflict reconstruction and foreign policy. For Pakistan and China, the corridor has strategic potential for projecting influence, regional alignment and political stability. Further solidifying the corridor's political significance is the changing dynamics of Sino-Pak relations and their common alignment within China's Belt and Road Initiative (Mock, 2017).

Security-wise, the Wakhan Corridor has long been a neutral zone between competing empires and is an important front in the regional security game today. The corridor's proximity to China's Xinjiang region, where ethnic unrest and separatist movements have erupted, has made Beijing particularly sensitive to any instability in the area. Pakistan, in the same vein, considers the corridor as a sensitive region given its ties with its northern borders and the wider Afghan security surroundings. In the meantime, non-state actors remain, while terrorism and drugs still are a livelihood for some and so a regional security cooperation effort is required (Munir & Shafiq, 2018).

From an economic perspective, the possibility of trade, transit and resource exploration is unexplored in the Wakhan Corridor. Infrastructure development is still modest; however, future

investments could turn the corridor into an important link in the regional trade network, notably in synergy with some transcontinental projects like the BRI. With this in mind, the remainder of this chapter is an attempt to chart the convergence, as well as the divergence, of politico-economic and security interests between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China, and hence how each state's strategic calculus shapes its engagement with the Wakhan Corridor (Nuisser, 2019).

3.2. Afghanistan's Interests in the Wakhan Corridor

3.2.1 Political Interests

The Afghanistan's strategic vision in the region, historical identity, and geopolitics all play a part in its geopolitical and geoeconomic interests in the Wakhan Corridor. The Wakhan Corridor is strategically and emotionally important for Kabul's foreign policy, while being one of the most isolated and underappreciated regions in the nation. Given the expanding regional rivalry and need for transnational connectedness, claiming sovereignty over this little area of land is a crucial political objective. In addition to serving as a tangible reminder of Afghanistan's fictitious eastern border, the Wakhan Corridor also expresses the country's intention to maintain its independence in the face of growing regional powers like China and Pakistan (Pandey, 2019).

Particularly important in the broader context of Afghanistan's unity and territorial integrity is the claim to sovereignty over the Wakhan Corridor. Because of the politics of the colonial era, the corridor was first drawn in the 19th century as a barrier between the Russian and British empires. It is now a matter of national honour and strategic need to have undisputed sovereign authority over Wakhan in the current multipolar regional setting. A declaration of sovereign mastery over all of its territories, including the remote and mountainous Wakhan region, is crucial for a nation that has been hampered by internal conflict and foreign intervention for decades. It also helps the nation forge its place on the global scene (Munir & Shafiq, 2018).

Another of Afghanistan's major political calculations is its need to lessen reliance on Pakistan for trade and access. The foreign trade of Afghanistan has depended for years on Pakistani ports, notably Karachi, to the wider world for decades. This reliance has frequently been a bone of contention, with political disputes between the two neighbors disrupting trade and stifling growth. In this regard, the Wakhan corridor is a potential alternative land route for trade and transit, especially from China's Xinjiang region." Should it be developed with the interests of the Afghan government at the fore, this passageway could put Afghanistan directly in touch with

Chinese markets and infrastructure lines while diminishing its reliance on politically overburdened Pakistan and increasing its leverage in bilateral negotiations. Directly linked to this is Afghanistan's strategic imperative to enhance relations with China, as well with other regional stakeholders in order to balance its political alliances. China has increasingly played a role on the political map of Afghanistan in the last 10 years, mainly through economic investments and diplomatic relations. The Wakhan Valley is a geographical bridge between the two states that can serve as a bridge for cooperation between the two countries. As China sees the importance of protecting its western side, and stabilizing its neighbor, Afghanistan can use its geostrategic location to build more effective relations with China (Kaw, 2009).

Also, Afghanistan would like to leverage the Wakhan Corridor as diplomatic tool in larger regional politics. Promoting the corridor as a potential centre of trans-regional confluence, Kabul seeks to make itself a player in some significant regional gameplays, including China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) programme. This diplomacy proactive, and enables Afghanistan to influence shaping of regional agenda, not to be solely acted upon by external actors. In doing so, it aims to present the Wakhan Corridor not just as a faraway borderland but a hub of a developing structure of regional connections and cooperation. Afghanistan's desire to use the corridor in order to attract foreign investment and regional co-operation is another key political interest. That area of the world is still so underdeveloped, but you get so much opportunity out of it, and those are the kinds of things that are so attractive for long-term infrastructure and trade projects. Afghanistan apparently sees in promoting the corridor as a symbol of peaceful development and cross-border cooperation a tool to counterbalance the narrative of conflict that is projected in the name of the country. By focusing on the corridor's role in regional economic integration, Kabul has an opportunity to attract the interest of international donors and investors, in particular backers of connectivity in Central and South Asia (Kelemen, 2020).

Furthermore, Afghanistan regards the Wakhan Corridor as a strategic political ploy as it intersects and leverages both China and Pakistan's interest. In China's case, Kabul can propose cooperation on border security and counterterrorism in return for some economy assistance and infrastructure building. China doesn't want Afghanistan's instability to give way to extremism filtering into its Xinjiang province and Wakhan's" stability is of vital importance to them in this matter. As such, Afghanistan can leverage this passageway to encourage long-term strategic

partnerships with China. And, just as it plays off Pakistan in its difficult and often fraught relationship with it, Afghanistan can use its geographical proximity to China (and the corresponding Wakhan Corridor) to advantage in trade, transit and bilateral diplomacy. This triangulation approach enables Afghanistan to play its access relationships without shifting its dependence too heavily in favor of one neighbor or the other (Lambert, 2021).

Also in the post-Taliban period the interim Afghan administration has shown its willingness to pursue a more evenhanded and multi-vector foreign policy. The politics of the Wakhan Corridor all fit into this sort of thing. It provides a real path for the outreach to the east, in addition to Afghanistan's conventional, western-oriented diplomatic engagement. As regional powers vie for influence in the Central Asian region, the corridor offers a strategic opportunity for toward Kabul to position itself as an instrumental player in regional peace and stability and for regional development (Kreutzmann, 2003).

The political stake of Afghanistan in the Wakhan Corridor is multi-dimensional and futuristic. The corridor is nothing but a mechanism to assert independent sovereignty, to decrease the geopolitical compulsion and to have better diplomatist engagement with the concerned big actors in the region. It represents Afghanistan's attempt to turn the tables on geographic confinement. Investing in the political viability of the corridor, Kabul has not only sought to bolster its international standing, but to forge a more sustainable and flexible foreign policy that would reflect its geographical position at the heart of Asia (Mahalingam, 2021).

3.2.2. Security Interests

Given Afghanistan's history of instability and concern about territorial integrity, border control, and regional cooperation in countering threats to national security, the Wakhan corridor is of significant strategic importance. "Although we know it's isolated and very less populated, the area has strategic security importance to Afghanistan and is at the crossroads of unpredictable regions in Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan, China's Xinjiang and Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province," says Zerwar Khan, an official at the Afghan defense ministry. Under the circumstances of continuing internal instability and the fact of trans-nationalist extremist threats, control over this corridor is critical to the security apparatus and foreign policy goals of the Afghanistan (Malik, 2010).

Security is also a concern in the area especially between the border of Tajikistan and Pakistan as Afghanistan does not want militants to infiltrate the area and to protect their borders. The remote topography of the corridor involving high mountains and inaccessible valleys serves both as a natural barrier and for effective monitoring. The porous borders in Afghanistan have historically allowed militants, weapons and contraband to move freely. The Wakhan Corridor, although far more peaceful than many of its neighboring border areas, should not be ignored as a potential route for extremists to travel, especially militants belonging to groups such as Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), Al-Qaeda, or foreign fighters aiming to infiltrate Central or South Asia. Located in close proximity to China and Tajikistan (both also facing their own security challenges), the corridor is crucial for regional peace (Munir, 2018).

In this context, Afghanistan is aware of the need to use regional approaches, especially with China and Pakistan, to combat terrorism threats originating from or moving through the corridor. China's fears of Uyghur militants and separatists linked to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) has also led to its growing desire to engage in greater security cooperation with Afghanistan. Pakistan, likewise, is seriously concerned regarding cross-border militancy, especially as applicable to the northern Pakistan areas, and the larger militancy dynamics in the border areas. As a result, trilateral security cooperation is emerging as a theme in Afghanistan's thinking on the Wakhan Corridor. This form of cooperation would involve exchanges of intelligence and coordination patrols, and the setting up of joint mechanisms to monitor common border areas (Mock, 2017).

In response to these challenges, Afghanistan has tried to push for greater coordination with Pakistan and China on intelligence exchange and border management systems. Intelligence sharing could be used to detect any threats that are brewing in or around the corridor, while joint border control mechanisms can help in better physical surveillance of the exits or entry. While the absence of advanced infrastructure in the region might discourage significant investment in surveillance as well as patrol routes and communications infrastructure, the political interest of all three states in stabilising the corridor may still drive future development in these areas. Afghanistan's offered partnership in the realm of security is likely to be received with similar attention from China, which has already been willing to engage both South and Central Asian countries to stem the tide of extremist ideology (Munir & Shafiq, 2018).

3.2.3. Economic Interests

One of the most remote and underdeveloped parts of the country, the Wakhan Corridor nonetheless has immense economic prospects because of its unique location. For Afghanistan, its attraction to the corridor does not stop at the political and security level, it also encompasses big economic dreams desires for the region to be converted into a strategic anti-carry for investments trade and development. Narrow Wakhan strip in an Olympics of grandeur and decay a country ravaged by conflict and political turmoil, Afghanistan has been unable to achieve economic revitalization, but the Wakhan Corridor may be a sign of an opportunity to integrate and diversify the economic development of the region. Among the most important economic aspects of the presence of Afghanistan in the Wakhan Basin is the construction of infrastructure, in particular roads and transit terminals, to enable trade with China and the states of the former Soviet Central Asia. The corridor is currently plagued by severe infrastructural deficiencies - there are hardly any tarred roads, inadequate communication services and scant transport. But the strategic value of linking Badakhshan to China's Xinjiang province via Wakhan has been appreciated in Afghan policy circles. A passage through the Wakhan Corridor would offer China a direct overland route, significantly reducing the time and cost of commuting for trade with Afghanistan. Backed by regional players and international donors, infrastructure development in this corridor at least could become a platform for continued economic engagement (Malik, 2015).

Relatedly, Afghanistan aspires to use the corridor to access Chinese markets directly and to decrease reliance on established, and often sporadic, trade corridors. For decades, Afghanistan's exports and imports have crossed the country's borders overwhelmingly through Pakistan, in particular its Karachi and Gwadar ports. This reliance has been a weakness both economically and politically. Regular border closures, bureaucratic obstacles and political rancor have disrupted legitimate business and raised costs for Afghan enterprises. Yet another economic interest for Afghanistan in the Wakhan Corridor is the opportunity to exploit mineral resources, in particular by luring Chinese investment into the mining industry. There are believed to be untapped mineral resources worth trillions of dollars in Afghanistan, including rare earth elements, copper, gold and lithium. With China having advanced mining technology and large demand for raw materials, the corridor is an eligible door for foreign investment in these fields. China, through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has demonstrated its intentions to invest in Afghanistan's resource wealth, and

the Wakhan Corridor may act as an indispensable conduit to supply minerals to Chinese markets (Mock, 2017).

Afghan policymakers aspire for economic self-sufficiency, and the Wakhan Corridor is seen as a means of achieving this. By circumventing the traditional pathways of exchange through Pakistan and Iran, Afghanistan is shielded from regional political instability and economic subjugation. The corridor, therefore, would provide a strategic option that goes well with the larger goal of economic sovereignty for Afghanistan. Furthermore, enhanced interaction with China from the Wakhan corridor could contribute to provide Afghanistan with the opportunity to become part of regional trade and infrastructure networks like the CPEC, the CAREC plan and the BRI. These could offer funding, technical skills and institutional support to help create a stronger Afghan economy. Moreover, the Wakhan Corridor has enormous potential as a future commercial corridor from Afghanistan to China, and further to the markets of Central Asia. Nations, including Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, are looking for new paths to expand their trade and interconnectivity in the region. Afghanistan, as a country central to South, Central, and East Asia – can serve as a hub of this growing network. The corridor has the potential of evolving into a multimodal economic corridor from which it will facilitate both transit and commercial traffic through investment and cooperative network. This will strengthen Afghanistan's function as a bridge country for intra-regional trade, and expand its role in regional trade network of the Eurasian hinterland (Khan, 2019).

3.3. Pakistan's Interests in the Wakhan Corridor

3.3.1. Political Interests

The Wake demand of political interests of Pakistan is the combinations of strategies in its ambition of strategies as well as regional and diplomacy priorities. While the corridor falls completely within the Afghan terrain, its physical vicinity to Pakistan's Gilgit Baltistan and serving as a narrow bridge between South, Central and East Asia make it politically important for Islamabad. In a geostrategic landscape characterized increasingly by great power competition and regional recalibration, the Garden of da Earth considers the Wakhan Corridor as a vital space it should not only influence, but protect its interests and deny adversary ingress there. One of the most important political motives for Pakistan consideration over the Wakhan Corridor is keeping and gaining the influence in the region and enabling an indirect power in the transport point to

Central Asia. For decades, Pakistan has been striving to become a regional connectivity hub, connecting South Asia to Central Asia through Afghanistan. The Wakhan valley is small and rugged, but an alternative to the Central Asian markets with possibly less political upset. While it does not have a common border with Pakistan, its geographical location provides Islamabad an opportunity to diplomatically and economically influence access and transit arrangements by trilaterally engaging in bordering country Afghanistan to involve China. Promoting to actively what it can promote to -to promotion of such routes Pakistan once more reaffirms its stature as a transit country of sorts and therefore responds to its positioners in regional economic integration (Malik, 2011).

In addition, Pakistan has a political reckoning's which is immensely affected by its perpetual confrontation with India and the Wakhan corridor plays in to that indirectly. India's strategic footprints in Central Asia including at Airbase in Tajikistan and mounting scale of partnership with regional states of Central Asia is being seen with concern. The fact that the corridor is in geographic contiguity with Tajikistan would heighten Pakistan's wariness over any potential Indian influence along the near side of its northern frontier. Pakistan, by playing an assertive role in the region as well as working with China and Afghanistan regarding the Wakhan Corridor, wishes to nip Indian geopolitical moves in the bud. Islamabad's political interest in this region is to build up a cushion, strengthen its sway in northern Afghanistan and prevent any expansion by New Delhi in this strategic zone, nestled between China and Pakistan. Another key political objective for Pakistan is to handle diplomatic relations with Afghanistan and China, while dealing with territorial and security concerns. The Wakhan Corridor sits in what is one of the most strategically significant areas of the world, surrounded by three nuclear-armed nations, China, Pakistan and India. Pakistan knows that any instability in the corridor has the potential not only to upset its bilateral relationship with Afghanistan but also the wider regional equilibrium. In this backdrop, Pakistan advances regional connectivity as a tool of diplomacy and politics. Works like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are no longer just infrastructural initiatives but foreign-sovereignty machine. Pakistan's dream is a CPEC plus with Afghanistan and possibly CPEC reaching Central Asia through the Wakhan Corridor. The extension of equidistance to non-contiguous landmasses would similarly raise its ranking among states in the region and enable conditions for the development of trade and transit corridors to conform to Pakistan's political and strategic interests (Mahalingam, 2020).

3.3.2. Security Interests

The Wakhan Corridor and Pakistan's security While Pakistan does not have a direct border with the Wakhan Corridor, the corridor's relationship to Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan and Chitral areas (both of which have substantial strategic and security implications for Pakistan) renders it of great salience to Pakistan's national security calculus. As Pakistan continues to face threats from terror groups such as the TTP, the ISKP and other extremist groups, it has refocused its attention on securing its northern frontier without losing sight of the regional picture. One of the very obvious reasons for Pakistan's alarm, and which it would want to prevent at all costs is militants sneaking across the strip into its territory, particularly in areas such as Gilgit-Baltistan and Chitral. The regions in these areas have always been susceptible to cross border rebel action due to rugged terrain, porous borders and low presence of the state. Now that the Taliban is back in control in Afghanistan, the threat matrix has changed. The Afghan Taliban has always kept relations with Pakistan open, and it is unclear whether it actually can — or wants to — contain or expel groups such as the TTP. ISKP, whose foes include the Afghan Taliban as well as Pakistan, is especially well-entrenched in northeastern Afghanistan and remains a very real threat to using remote areas like the Wakhan Corridor to infiltrate and mount attacks. What Islamabad urgently needs is to help the local tribes to secure its gateway in the north and for a robust border surveillance to prevent such spillover (Lambert, 2021).

In the face of these challenges, Pakistan has been working towards increased security cooperation with both Afghanistan and China, understanding the fact that a joint strategy is required for effective border management and counter terrorism. The peculiar geographical environment of the Wakhan Corridor, between the areas of the three countries, calls for trilateral intelligence sharing, border guard coordination and strategic communication. In this regard, Pakistan and China in particular have endorsed a closer security arrangement based on their mutual concern for terrorism spilling over from Afghanistan (Ali, 2016).

There is also a geopolitical and strategic rationale for Pakistan to keep the Wakhan to absorb and contain violent extremism before it spills over into its own territory. Remote and sparsely populated, the corridor is a natural frontier that, with proper cooperation from Afghanistan and China could help stop the flow of militants and smugglers. Hence Islamabad backs expanded Chinese role in the sector of border safety and infrastructure development in the

Wakhan, considering Beijing a dependable friend to guarantee regional safety and security. The Pakistan-China duet on counter-terrorism has acquired a new centrality in the unfolding scenario with common concerns for ensuring security for CPEC infrastructure and Chinese citizens in Pakistan (Khan, 2019).

3.3.3. Economic Interests

Pakistan's economic interests in the Wakhan Corridor are closely linked to its broader strategic vision of becoming a hub for regional connectivity and economic integration. Although the corridor is entirely inside Afghanistan and does not physically border Pakistan, its location near to the Northern region of Pakistan and its potential as a route for trade and energy supplies cause it to be of immense economic interest to Pakistan. For Pakistan, the corridor is part of broader infrastructure projects (such as CPEC) and an important link in its regional economic diplomacy and integration, be it with China, Afghanistan or wider Central Asia. One of Pakistan's most important economic aim is to include the Wakhan Corridor in the CPEC setup. Read More Recently the Government of Pakistan has crystallized their vision for the country's economy with the announcement of CPEC as a key project in China's Belt and Road Initiative, which is already set to change both internal infrastructure in Pakistan, as well as its trading potential. And the possible addition of a corridor through Afghanistan's Wakhan region might provide for new arteries feeding into Central Asia, broadening the regional ambit of Pakistan's trade routes. Such an extension would lead to the freer flow of goods, less road congestion and make Pakistan the main artery connecting South Asia with Central Asia. Islamabad sees this integration as an avenue not only for raising trade volumes but also to raise its energy flows, pipeline connections and logistical networks that underpin regional commerce (Ahmad, 2018).

It further concluded that once connected to CPEC, Wakhan can drastically bring down transaction costs and transit times for trade flows between Pakistan and Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and further on to Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. But it is also difficult terrain and the instability of Afghanistan that limits Pakistan's immediate access to Central Asia. A well-fortified and safe trade route through Wakhan would give Pakistan an opportunity to circumnavigate some of the more restive parts of southern and eastern Afghanistan and link up more directly with the markets of the north. If Pakistan makes use of this geographical advantage, it can decrease reliance on longer and more uncertain routes and enhance trade balance for its exporters and importers.

But, like all good things, Pakistan will also have to manage the economic aspect and risk associated with changing regional equations. So whatever, the concern would be that these countries like China to Afghanistan, let's say, are going to carve out their own trade route and it's not even going to deal with Pakistan. If China and Afghanistan can develop infrastructure which allows for direct (that is, through Afghanistan) links - for instance energy pipelines and railroads - from China to Central Asia and beyond, then Pakistan would lose relevance as a transit country in regional geopolitics. This would, in part, derail Islamabad's monopoly on being the main offerer of transit trade facilities to Afghanistan, while also undermining its position in the quest for regional trade contracts. Therefore, Pakistan's economic interest in the Wakhan Corridor lies in tracking and handling possible developments that could bypass its infrastructure, and therefore its monopoly over regional connectivity (Ali, 2017).

In such a scenario economic diplomacy takes on quite some significance for Pakistan. By being actively involved with Afghanistan as well as China, Islamabad is trying to make sure that any future regional infrastructure is both inclusive and falls in line with Pakistan's interest. Economic diplomacy also presents an opportunity for Pakistan to establish itself as an indispensable player in any regional economic framework connected to the Wakhan Corridor. Offering sops It is also in Islamabad's interest to attempt to encourage trilateral economic and trade frameworks between the corridor, Pakistan's trade routes and border infrastructure to ensure that gains are shared and that Pakistani transit corridors continue to be relevant.

The Wakhan Corridor also offers potential for energy cooperation, an area where Pakistan's own interest has been growing, as it is suffering from a chronic shortage and increasing demand for energy. It is also a potentially viable corridor for future energy pipelines, gas, oil or power transmission lines, from Central Asia to South Asia. The highly publicized Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, while not transiting Wakhan, captures the larger opportunity of energy transit through Afghanistan. If conditions stabilize, Wakhan could be folded into a parallel energy corridor that would connect Central Asian energy producers to both Pakistan and China. This would go a long way to ensuring Pakistan's energy security and forming a great addition to regional energy markets. Another potential benefit will be strengthening the economic corridor between the northern parts of Pakistan (such as Gilgit-Baltistan) and any new trade and transit links through the corridors across Wakhan. Strengthening road and logistic networks in these mountainous regions may allow Pakistan to capitalize locally on potential cross-border trade.

Dry ports, warehouses, and customs facilitation close to the northern border would also enable Pakistan to gain economic value from any enhanced transit activity. These measures could also serve as a stimulus for the local economies in Pakistan's underdeveloped northern areas by better plugging them into regional markets (The Nation, 2017).

3.4. China's Interests in the Wakhan Corridor

3.4.1. Political Interests

China's political interests in the Wakhan Corridor are strongly bonded with its larger vision of strategic connectivity, geopolitical influence and stability in the region under BRI (Belt and Road Initiative). The slender land bridge linking Afghanistan to China's Xinjiang province, geographically isolated as it may be, constitutes a strategic lily pad for Beijing. Meanwhile, as Chinese influence becomes deeper and deeper across Central and South Asia, the Wakhan Corridor stands out as an integral geopolitical piece in the puzzle that can not only help it achieve its strategic objectives in the region, but also protect its western gates and project influence into the heart of Eurasia (Pandey, 2019).

The Wakhan Corridor is one of China's most important political goals as part of the BRI. In using the corridor to engage with Afghanistan, China is seeking to tie the country more closely into its multitrillion-dollar infrastructure and connectivity network. Security has delayed large BRI investments in Afghanistan, but Beijing has not stopped signaling its interest in tying the country into regional development corridors. The Wakhan Corridor is not just a symbolic and strategic pathway for connecting Afghanistan to China, but it also underlines the strategic leadership role of China in defining the developmental course of the region.

China also sees a permanent presence in the Wakhan corridor as crucial to maintaining a secure buffer between its western Xinjiang region and the rest of Afghanistan. Although the corridor is mostly empty and hard to travel, its position gives China a listening post over Afghanistan and a foothold to extend influence into Central Asia. Connecting, manning, or diplomatically populating in the region would not only increase China's regional presence locally, but also deter potential bad actors, stall extremist influences from the region entering China's hinterlands and homeland, including Xinjiang. The need to pursue its political interest in safeguarding its home, particularly against Uyghur separatism and tension in Xinjiang, is the main motivation behind China's low-profile but substantial presence in the Wakhan region.

Moreover, the Wakhan Corridor represents an opportunity for China's political interests as well, for exercising its soft power and strategically influencing both Central and South Asia. This is done in part by building greater political relationships with governments in the region, helping fund regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and using economic interdependence to influence political behavior. With Afghanistan observing SCO and China and Pakistan already being members, the corridor could act as both a physical connectivity link and a symbolic link between SCO members and observer states – a stepping stone of sorts that help China further bolster its foot in a region that is increasingly seeing pushback in the East and South of it. The corridor also provides China an experimental site for “corridor diplomacy,” for linking physical connectivity with political alignment and mutual dependence among neighboring states (Munir & Shafiq, 2018).

3.4.2. Security Interests

China's security interests in the Wakhan Corridor are embedded in larger Chinese security concerns over the stability of its western borderlands, notably in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Geographically, it is a narrow bridge between the sensitive region of Xinjiang in China and Afghanistan. This corridor is sparsely populated and geographically rugged, but it is strategically significant in Beijing's security thinking, especially on counter-terrorism, border management, and regional monitoring. A major security concern for China in the Wakhan Corridor is to prevent the spread of Islamist militancy and separatist ideas into Xinjiang. Beijing has long been plagued by unrest in Xinjiang, where the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and other Uyghur separatist groups are thought to be involved. Chinese officials have often said they worry that Islamic extremists in Afghanistan or nearby could take advantage of porous borders to infiltrate Xinjiang and foment violence or radicalize communities. The Wakhan Corridor is the only physical link between Afghanistan and Xinjiang, and is also isolated. This is why Beijing will continue to regard this region as a strategic buffer zone, in order to shield Xinjiang from external security threats (Kaw, 2009).

In doing so, China is said to have bolstered security cooperation with Afghanistan, particularly following the Taliban's takeover of power in 2021. While Beijing has stopped short of outright military intervention in Afghanistan, it has pursued joint security operations with the new Taliban government that involve sharing intelligence and monitoring the border. China wants

to make sure militant or extremist groups don't use the Wakhan Corridor as a conduit, and is quietly fighting them there. The Taliban, in exchange, have provided assurances that it will not allow its territory in Afghanistan, including Wakhan, to be used as a staging ground to threaten internal security in China. This mutual concern over transnational militancy has produced a pragmatic security alignment, even if there is not yet a formal diplomatic acknowledgment of the Taliban-led government.

In addition to the threat of militancy spilling into China, Beijing has been wary that the corridor might be used for transnational crime, including drug and weapons trafficking, enabling illicit networks that could destabilize its border regions and fund extremist groups. Afghanistan is one of the world's biggest producers of opium, and trafficking networks frequently utilize remote routes like Wakhan for smuggling drugs into neighboring countries. Tight surveillance over narcotics movement Law enforcement professionals say watching over the narcotics flow across the narrow and rugged terrain requires technological infrastructure, combined cross-border intelligence and coordination with Afghan authorities on the one side and Pakistan, along whose sensitive border the region falls. China meanwhile wants to keep the corridor becoming a supply route so it can crush both the criminal and ideological menace that it fears a pipeline could pose to its own internal security.

China's move to fortify its position in the Wakhan Corridor is part of a larger policy of local engagement, specifically with Pakistan. Due to Wakhan's location next to Pakistan's northern areas of Gilgit-Baltistan and Chitral, the Chinese have close cooperation with Islamabad in terms of regional intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism activities. This triangular arrangement, especially with respect to ETIM and other international terrorist groups, has now become an ad hoc, but essential security arrangement. The three countries have had joint security consultations, stressing that they will coordinate actions in response to threats of extremist violence from border areas, among them Wakhan.

Wosheng, China's strategic preference of maintaining regional stability using non-traditional security means such as economic assistance, diplomatic dialogue or technology sharing, is evident in its "development for stability" focus more broadly. It is an example of the sort of influence Beijing likes to wield in places like Wakhan, where deploying hard military power is politically sensitive and logically challenging: China-linked infrastructure that is also tied to

security goals. Roads, sentry posts and digital surveillance give China the opportunity to stay vigilant and act preemptively without getting deeply involved in the military. It also serves as a tool for China to generate local goodwill while it achieves its security aims in an understated, non-provocative way (Kelemen, 2020).

3.4.3. Economic Interests

China's economic interests in the Wakhan Corridor are mounting, now that Beijing is hoping to expand and diversify its trade route options and integrate more with Afghanistan and Central Asia. The route gives China a strategic interest in using a direct land route to Afghanistan that would circumvent both Pakistan and Uzbekistan and reduce dependence on traditional transit routes. This possibility accords with China's larger across-Eurasia Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to extend connectivity and access to new markets. For China, the Wakhan Corridor is more than a stretch of real estate; rather, it's a portal to a wealth of unexploited mineral resources, new trade corridors and regional economic development. China's key economic motivations are the ability to establish direct routes for trade between China and Afghanistan via the Wakhan Corridor. Most trade between the two countries now travels on routes that cut through Pakistan's territory or longer corridors through Central Asia. The routes are frequently fraught with geopolitical sensitivities, border restrictions, and logistical hurdles. With investment in the Wakhan Corridor, China dreams of the possibility of a more efficient trade route boosting two-way trade that avoids transit countries that may slap tariffs, logistical delays or political barriers. This direct line not only adds to trade efficiency, but also strengthens China's leverage in Afghanistan as a crucial economic partner (Lambert, 2021).

To implement that vision, China has expressed interest in infrastructure projects in and around the Wakhan. Some projects such as the road investments, border facilities and customs infrastructure are relatively straightforward to implement. Among the projects are likely to be all-weather highways, logistical nodes, and border posts with modern technology and kit to speed the passage of goods and people. By upgrading the conduit's infrastructure, China's purposes are two-fold: it not only creates new economic opportunities, but it also helps enhance regional stability – something that is important for the perpetuation of trade.

A second powerful economic incentive for China is the exploitation of Afghanistan's extensive mineral wealth 'via the Wakhan Corridor. Lithium, copper, gold, and other precious

stones are abundant in Afghanistan, some of which have not been fully explored because of continued war and lack of infrastructure. Given China's quest to access products that are critical for its industrial and technological enterprise, Afghanistan would be a natural ally.

Additionally, China's economic intentions towards Wakhan fit into a wider policy of structuring Afghanistan's economic future through selective involvement. Security threats and political instability have dampened any large direct investment at this point, but China has some interest in prepping the ground for some longer-term projects. The Wakhan Corridor provides a relatively low-cost, low-visibility and highly strategic line for phased investment to pay dividends in line with improvements in the underlying security environment (Kreutzmann, 2003).

3.5. Tajikistan's Interests in the Wakhan Corridor

3.5.1. Political Interests

Tajikistan's political interest in the Wakhan Corridor is rooted in its long-term vision of becoming a "land-linked" state capable of engaging more dynamically with both Central and South Asia. For Dushanbe, the corridor represents a geographic opportunity to reduce economic and political dependency on its northern neighbors, particularly Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, for overland connectivity to global markets. By fostering infrastructure development in the Wakhan region—whether through road projects, cross-border trade agreements, or energy corridors—Tajikistan could position itself as a critical connector between China's Xinjiang region, Afghanistan, and Pakistan's ports.

The corridor also offers Tajikistan a venue for exercising soft diplomacy and strengthening its regional role. Within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Dushanbe consistently emphasizes the importance of stability in Afghanistan for the security of all member states. The Wakhan, due to its unique geography, can serve as a model zone for cross-border cooperation under SCO and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) frameworks. Political stability in the corridor would enhance Tajikistan's credibility as a contributor to regional peacebuilding efforts.

Moreover, Tajikistan's bilateral relations with China are closely tied to its eastern frontier security and economic cooperation. Beijing has invested in road networks and border facilities in

Gorno-Badakhshan, with an eye on connecting them eventually to Afghanistan's Wakhan region. Tajikistan, in turn, views Chinese involvement as an opportunity to secure investment and technical expertise for remote, underdeveloped border areas.

Cultural diplomacy also forms part of Tajikistan's political calculus. The Pamiri communities on both sides of the border share a common Ismaili religious heritage and distinct cultural identity, which Tajikistan can leverage to maintain friendly relations with Afghanistan's Badakhshan region. By sponsoring cross-border cultural exchanges, festivals, and academic collaborations, Dushanbe can build grassroots political goodwill that complements state-to-state diplomacy.

Finally, from a foreign policy standpoint, the corridor provides Tajikistan with leverage in multilateral negotiations involving Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, and Russia. As a neighbor directly affected by developments in the Wakhan, Tajikistan has a legitimate stake in discussions on border management, counterterrorism, and trade facilitation. This allows it to play a constructive role in shaping the regional agenda.

3.5.2 Security Interests

Tajikistan's security interests in the Wakhan Corridor are shaped primarily by its long and porous border with Afghanistan, which has historically been a conduit for transnational threats such as drug trafficking, illegal migration, and potential infiltration by extremist groups. Although the Wakhan itself is relatively stable compared to other parts of Afghanistan, its remoteness and limited state presence make it a potential route for illicit activities if governance deteriorates further.

From a strategic standpoint, the corridor acts as both a buffer and a vulnerability. On one hand, its rugged, high-altitude terrain makes large-scale militant incursions unlikely; on the other hand, its inaccessibility hampers effective surveillance. Tajikistan therefore invests heavily in border security infrastructure in the Gorno-Badakhshan region, often with assistance from Russia under the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) framework, and increasingly with Chinese support for high-tech monitoring systems.

The corridor's proximity to Xinjiang also aligns Tajikistan's security interests with China's. Both states share concerns about the movement of extremist elements across the Afghan frontier, particularly in the context of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Joint border exercises and intelligence sharing under the SCO framework underscore the corridor's importance as part of a coordinated counterterrorism strategy.

Additionally, Tajikistan's security calculus includes counter-narcotics operations. Afghanistan remains the world's largest producer of opium, and although the Wakhan's isolation limits trafficking, shifting smuggling routes could exploit its under-policed terrain. Tajik security forces, often in collaboration with Russian and UNODC programs, seek to maintain a preventive presence in the region to deter such activity.

Another dimension is the internal security of Tajikistan's own GBAO. Periodic unrest in this autonomous region, often linked to grievances over governance and economic marginalization, makes the stability of the cross-border Wakhan area even more important. Any destabilization could exacerbate local tensions or provide cover for non-state actors to operate across the frontier. Tajikistan's security interest in the Wakhan Corridor is rooted in its role as a frontier zone that can either reinforce national stability or expose vulnerabilities. Sustained investment in surveillance, cooperative security arrangements, and local governance capacity is central to Dushanbe's approach.

3.5.3. Economic Interests

Tajikistan's economic interest in the Wakhan Corridor is closely tied to its aspirations for regional connectivity and diversification of trade routes. Currently, Tajikistan is highly dependent on northern corridors through Central Asia and Russia, which are susceptible to geopolitical disruptions. The development of transport infrastructure through the Wakhan could provide a southern trade outlet to Pakistan's Gwadar and Karachi ports via Afghanistan, linking Tajikistan more directly to maritime trade networks.

The corridor could also serve as a supplementary route for energy cooperation. Tajikistan's vast hydropower potential—particularly from projects like the Rogun Dam—requires reliable markets. Enhanced connectivity through the Wakhan could facilitate energy exports to South Asia

under frameworks such as CASA-1000, while also enabling electricity trade with northern Pakistan.

Tourism represents another economic dimension. The Pamir-Wakhan region is rich in natural beauty, cultural heritage, and mountaineering potential. Cross-border eco-tourism initiatives could generate revenue for both Tajikistan and Afghanistan, particularly in Gorno-Badakhshan, where economic opportunities are otherwise limited. Joint tourism corridors, possibly supported by international development agencies, could also serve as a form of economic peace building.

Trade in agricultural products and artisanal goods is an additional area of interest. The Pamiri communities on both sides of the border produce unique handicrafts, dried fruits, and traditional textiles that could find niche markets regionally and internationally if cross-border trade is facilitated.

The Wakhan's inclusion in China's Belt and Road Initiative offers Tajikistan the chance to attract investment in roads, bridges, and communication networks. While geopolitical risks remain—particularly instability in Afghanistan—the potential long-term economic benefits motivate Tajikistan to remain engaged in dialogue and planning for corridor development.

3.6 Comparative Analysis of Interests

The Wakhan Corridor is a geopolitical patchwork in which Afghanistan, Pakistan and China all have different but competing political, security and economic aims. Comparison of these interest demonstrate that there are shared interests and areas of divergence that the two sides can cooperate on but also differences that may cause strife. These core interests of each state along the three dimensions are summarized in the table below.

Interest Area	Afghanistan	Pakistan	China
Political	Assert sovereignty over Wakhan Corridor	Maintain regional influence via access routes	Expand influence through BRI and SCO
	Reduce dependency on Pakistan for trade	Counter Indian geopolitical ambitions	Secure foothold to outmaneuver rivals
	Strengthen ties with China and others	Manage relations with Afghanistan and China	Support Taliban-led Afghanistan for stability
	Use corridor as diplomatic leverage	Use connectivity as political tool (CPEC)	Use corridor diplomacy for regional influence
	Attract foreign investment and cooperation	Balance India-China rivalry	Promote regional stability to protect interests
Security	Control corridor to prevent militant infiltration	Prevent militant infiltration into border areas	Secure Xinjiang via buffer zone
	Cooperate with China and Pakistan against terror	Enhance border security with China & Afghanistan	Coordinate security patrols and intelligence
	Manage Taliban challenges impacting security	Address loss of leverage if bypassed by new routes	Monitor narcotics and extremist movements
Economic	Prevent trafficking and infiltration	Maintain border stability and buffer extremism	Employ tech and soft military presence
	Develop infrastructure to boost trade	Integrate corridor into CPEC for connectivity	Facilitate direct trade routes bypassing others
	Access Chinese markets and attract investment	Reduce trade costs to Central Asia	Invest in infrastructure and border facilities
	Exploit mineral resources via corridor	Balance trade benefits against transit monopoly	Access Afghanistan's minerals
	Enhance economic independence from Pakistan	Use corridor for economic diplomacy and energy	Link with Central Asia and Iranian ports
	Potential eco-tourism and sustainable development		Corridor as supplementary BRI route

Sources: Developed by the Researcher (May, 2025)

3.6.1. Overlapping Interests

1. **Political Convergence:** There is common political interest in the region by all three countries, through the corridor. Afghanistan wants to assert its sovereignty and build a

diverse set of allies; Pakistan wants to preserve its strategic depth and counter India; and China wants to extend its regional presence as part of the BRI and forge deeper relationships with Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and Pakistan. There is thus a potential political sweet spot, since all states treasure the corridor as a means of carrying out broader diplomacy and influence (Mahalingam, 2021).

2. **Security Cooperation:** Militant infiltration and overall border security concerns are common. Afghanistan, Pakistan and China all have some level of intelligence exchange and counter-terrorism cooperation, and they do this in an informal and also more formal manner such as TTP, ISKP and Uyghur separatists. Common interest in regional stability paves the way for cooperation, especially because the corridor is close to unstable border regions.
3. **Economic Connectivity:** Every state knows the potential of the corridor to boost economic connectivity. Afghanistan wants to reduce dependency on Pakistan; Pakistan aims to integrate the corridor into the CPEC network; China views it as a supplementary BRI route. Infrastructure is an obvious joint enterprise, indeed a vehicle for regional economic cooperation.

3.6.2. Divergent Interests

1. **Political Enmities and Trust Deficits:** India-Pakistan and Pakistan's fear of losing transit leverage also creates tension with an Afghanistan that wants freedom from being shackled down to Pakistan managed transit routes. China's strategic competition with India and its balancing between Pakistan and Afghanistan complicate matters. Afghanistan's assertion of sovereignty has created the possibility of clashing with Pakistan's regional power and an increasing presence by China, resulting in some nuanced hostility.
2. **Security Concerns and Sovereignty:** Although all states hope to combat militancy, the way they do so differs. Afghanistan labours under internal chaos under the Taliban rule, Pakistan fears spillover of militants to its north and China is the completion of Xinjiang Anti-Separatism and Anti-Extremism. These different security preferences can lead to different policies, particularly in regard to Taliban governance and border security measures.

3. **Economic competition and control:** If Afghanistan begins trading with China through the corridor, Pakistan would lose its traditional monopoly which it has used to dominate Afghanistan for a long time. China's investment in and focus over Afghanistan's minerals resource might overshadow Pakistan's position as a significant regional economic player. Afghanistan's quest for economic sovereignty could be threatening to China's geopolitical economic predominance and to the regional economic diplomacy of Pakistan (Malik, 2010).

3.6.3. Areas of Synergy

- **Security Co-Operation:** The corridor is a unique space available for three-way security cooperation between relevant stakeholders in areas such as counter-terrorism and border management, contributing to regional stability and serving the interests of all parties.
- **Trade and infrastructure:** Shared infrastructure projects and trade facilitation efforts could foster economic interdependence, which would help underpin peace and respectability in the region. The Pakistan, Afghanistan and China should promote trade in the region.
- **Diplomatic Engagement:** By considering the corridor as the diplomatic asset, the conflicting interests can be reconciled as platform for cooperation and dialogue within the multilateral forums as SCO.

CHAPTER-4

4. AREAS OF COOPERATION FOR REGIONAL STATES

3.1. Introduction

The Wakhan Corridor, though geographically narrow and remote, holds immense strategic and geopolitical importance for regional states, particularly Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China. As a critical juncture connecting Central and South Asia, the Corridor offers a rare opportunity for fostering cooperation among these neighboring countries, each of which has distinct yet overlapping interests in the region. The evolving regional dynamics, especially after the political transition in Afghanistan and the growing influence of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), have amplified the significance of cooperative engagements over this strategic territory (Rafiq, 2020).

Regional cooperation over the Wakhan Corridor is not merely a strategic option, it is a necessity. Considering the common challenges that the region faces, such as cross-border militancy, narcotics smuggling, environmental degradation, economic underdevelopment etc, the unilateral approach of each state might not be enough. Collective interaction can increase security of borders, development of peripheries and economic intercourse in particularly disadvantaged and underdeveloped peripheral border regions. The Corridor can function as a link for mutual connectivity, provide economic corridors, trade ways and people to people contacts which could be flourished to have a lasting peace and prosperity (Parveen, 2022).

Afghanistan, despite its internal challenges, holds a pivotal role in this cooperation as the Corridor lies within its territory. Pakistan is strategically and by its infrastructure potential as exemplified by CPEC, well placed to cooperate in connectivity work. China, on the other hand, is said to look at the Wakhan Corridor as a possible extension of its western access; a corridor that would connect its restive western province of Xinjiang with South Asia and further afield. This overlapping of interest could be translated into pragmatic cooperation in the fields of projects, infrastructure construction, border management, counter terrorism and ecological preservation (Rezayee et al., 2023).

This chapter aims to explore and highlight the key areas where Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China can work together to develop the Wakhan Corridor as a zone of cooperation rather than contention. By identifying shared goals and mutual benefits, this discussion underlines how

strategic collaboration over the Wakhan Corridor can contribute to regional stability, economic development, and diplomatic engagement in a historically sensitive yet promising region.

4.2. Rationale for Regional Cooperation

A strategic land-bridge on the roof of the world The Wakhan Corridor is a narrow, albeit strategically significant strip of land situated in the northeast of Afghanistan, surrounded to the east and south by the Great Pamir, the Hindu Kush to the west and the Hindukush, while forming the Afghan subsequent border with Pakistan to the south. Long neglected as a result of its isolation and inaccessible terrain, changes in regional strategic politics and the growing emphasis on connectivity are again focusing attention on this corridor. Regional cooperation involving Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China on the Wakhan Corridor is not only desirable, it is the only way. A number of geographical, political, economic and security factors buttress the requirement of these states to work together (Rowe, 2010).

4.2.1. Interconnected Geography and Shared Borders

The Wakhan corridor, geographically, the area physically joins the three countries (Central, South and East Asia) together. Wakhan district of Afghanistan sits south of Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan and east of its Xinjiang region. This peculiar location potentially allows it to become a land bridge for cross-border transit, trade, and regional integration. The distant, but strategically situated corridor opens up an opportunity to build new routes that can support existing regional connectivity initiatives. With the co-terminus and contiguous space this so calls for a corridor neither of the all three cannot use nor secure that corridor without the other cooperation. Geographical proximity is therefore a natural foundation for regional cooperation (Salamwatadar, 2024).

4.2.2. Common Problems: Internal Security, Underdevelopment, and Border Control

The strategic opportunity provided by the Wakhan Corridor comes with a set of common threats that requires a cooperative approach as well. Chief among these are security challenges emanating from militancy, terrorism, and cross-border smuggling. Still plagued by domestic disorder, Afghanistan has neither the resources nor the institutions to effectively monitor or control its remote borderlands. The porous borders create dangers not only for Afghanistan, but for Pakistan and China, which both face their own threats from extremism and crossings of the

joint frontier. Pakistan has long faced militant activity in its north, as China worries about the spread of extremism into its Xinjiang province (Sanchez, 2018).

The area, apart from being security challenged, is grossly underdeveloped. The Wakhan corridor is devoid of even the most rudimentary infrastructure; there are no roads, telecommunications or health facilities. Its severe climate and rugged mountainous landscape is one of the least developed regions of the greater geospatial area. This underdevelopment is a common concern as it promotes instability in the region and deters the broader objective of integration. Promote joint development efforts that would have the added benefit of improving local standards of living, diminishing the lure of extremism, and setting the stage for a durable peace (Sarbiland & Stanikzai 2024).

Another pressing issue for all three states that share the border is border management. Monitoring and controlling the border area has been challenging because of the harsh terrain and lack of designated crossing points. There also lacks a coordinated procedure of surveillance, intelligence mechanism, and road infrastructure at the border between the two neighbouring districts of Jammu and Kathua. This coordination has been lacking as a result these borderlands will continue to be exposed to cross-border threats and may affect the potential for economic activity (Scobell et al., 2014).

4.2.3. Key Drivers of Connectivity and Integration Benefits Both Sides

Connectivity and economic integration between countries would benefit mutually from regional cooperation in the Wakhan Corridor. China has its eye on extending the BRI for an overall investment and infrastructure development. The Wakhan could be connected to a broader region through, for instance, expansion of the BRI and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project, linking the Wakhan to other roads, rail projects, or trade hubs. This would give China new entry points whilst allowing landlocked Afghanistan better access to the regional and global marketplace (Shafiq, 2019).

From Pakistan's point of view, connectivity via the Wakhan Corridor can have the potential to enhance its regional trade connectivity, particularly in relation to its economic linkages with Central Asia and China. Better infrastructure and commercial routes might now integrate the north more effectively, bringing new economic opportunities and prospects for stability. Afghanistan is a country that is now deprived of proper development as well as regional

recognition and would have greatly benefited from this cooperation. Incentivizing regional states into cooperation on economic and security projects might also integrate the country into regional politics and development. But the Wakhan Corridor could provide Afghanistan with the opportunity to transform itself from a battleground where great powers vie for influence into a zone where they can work together on their common interests (Shahi, 2022).

4.2.4. Regional Institutions and Mechanisms

Existing multilateral frameworks including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) could also serve to deepen regional cooperation. These agencies offer political, economic and institutional infrastructure that may help to enable joint projects across the Wakhan Corridor. The SCO, that encompasses all three of the countries, has increasingly emphasized regional security, economic development and counter terrorism. (Shahrani, 2019). Equally, the ECO, which promotes regional economic development, may help projects of infrastructure, trade liberalization, as well as energy cooperation. The Wakhan Corridor's integration into ECO infrastructure projects might bring in these and investment and help develop a region that has long been isolated from the rest of the world. One of the potentially most hopeful initiatives of infrastructural and economic integration is the BRI led by China. Its financing tools and project priorities would facilitate the building of roads, information systems and border facilities which, aside from rail, make up the Corridor. Although there are political sensitivities, especially with reference to Afghanistan's internal politics, tactful diplomacy and a clear planning process should go a long way to addressing concerns and ensuring viable conversations (Srebrnik, 2020).

4.3. Existing and Emerging Frameworks for Cooperation

4.3.1. Trilateral Dialogues and Forums

The trilateral engagement between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China marks a significant development in regional diplomacy aimed at fostering peace, stability, and economic cooperation in a volatile yet strategically important part of Asia. These three geopolitically linked countries, sharing a blend of mutual security and economic interests, have so far been determined to enhance their multilateral engagement to tackle the common concerns. To this end, several trilateral dialogues, forums and cooperation mechanisms have been formed, providing important space for

establishing trust, strengthening diplomatic coordination, and exploring areas of practical cooperation – notably with regard to the Wakhan corridor (Srisookkham, 2015).

China has been instrumental in both starting and continuing trilateral talks between Afghanistan and Pakistan. China, which has significant economic stake and vested interests in regional stability, particularly in the western Xinjiang region, is playing the role of a neutral facilitator as a major regional power. The China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue has been the main trilateral mechanism where the three countries hold annual meetings and exchange views on regional topics, counterterrorism cooperation, border security and economic integration. Such dialogues mark a dawning recognition among the three countries that they are increasingly interdependent for long-term stability and development.

Confidence-building measures (CBMs), essential to help overcome deep-seated mutual mistrust, especially between Afghanistan and Pakistan. A confidence building activity undertaken by a trilateral mechanism. Historically uneasy ties between Kabul and Islamabad, which have traded accusations in the past of cross-border militancy and political meddling, have also been a roadblock. But facilitated by China as an intermediary for stability, in fairness these handful of joint declarations and communiqué expressions have shown commitment to rebuilding mutual trust and co-operation. For example, at the second tier, at the trilateral level, the joint statement following the second-degree trilateral foreign ministers dialogue in Kabul in 2018 mentioned mutual respect for sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs, and the peaceful settlement of disputes. The trio had decided to work together on counterterrorism, improve border controls and support the BRI to be expanded to Afghanistan. This step was significant in the institutionalization of trilateral cooperation and convergence of strategic interests (Stanikzai, 2024).

Another significant outcome was an agreement on Trilateral Cooperation Mechanism on Counterterrorism and Security which aims identify cooperation intelligence sharing, funds and capacity building and coordinate in the field of law enforcement. This kind of cooperation is particularly important for border areas such as the Wakhan Corridor, which remains vulnerable to terrorist penetration, weapons smuggling, and contraband due to its inaccessibility and dearth of surveillance equipment. By collaborating in this way, these three nations will be able to much more effectively address these common threats.

In addition to the security dimension, economic cooperation has been a focus of trilateral discussions. China on the other hand has suggested that Afghanistan be included in the wider framework of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) giving Kabul access to regional trade networks and economic gains. Its implementation hit snags, ranging from the Afghan war to security on agreed routes, but the vision is a major signal for future cooperation. If widened to embrace the Wakhan Corridor such projects could be a driver of development, something that promotes cross border trade and infrastructure investment.

Trilateral meetings have also facilitated people to people contacts, collaboration in education and culture for strengthening societal relations. This type of soft-power diplomacy complements the strategic objectives behind the trilateral framework, mitigating the threat and suspicion peoples feel about each other. Youth exchange programs, scholarships and training programs are already underway, China is starting to take the lead in providing both study opportunities for Afghans and travel experience for Pakistani youth (Tanwar, 2020).

Crucially, these trilateral processes are not isolated instruments, but rather work as integral supplements to their larger regional institutions like the SCO and the ECO format. They have also contributed to strengthen a regional order built on multilateralism, non-intervention and shared prosperity. And for Afghanistan — and for that matter, the Taliban — they offer a vital means of Afghanistan, given its very partial recognition by the rest of the world under the caretaker Taliban regime, to stay engaged in regional diplomacies. But there are still limitations and difficulties that must be addressed. Trilateral cooperation could face challenges due to political instability in Afghanistan, cyclical challenges in bilateral Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, and mistrust over China's strategic intentions. Furthermore, without practical application of the agreed initiatives, the forums may be more symbolic, transformative. It is therefore crucial that the tripartite talks are institutionalised, with demarcated working groups, time frames and monitoring systems to maintain the momentum (Timmins, 2008).

4.3.2. Role of Multilateral Platforms

In the strategic significance of the Wakhan Corridor, it is these multilateral formats that could provide important platforms for, and spur, regional cooperation, infrastructure development and addressing transnational challenges. The corridor's geopolitical position connecting Afghanistan, Pakistan and China has brought it to the fore of numerous regional and international

projects. Institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program, and the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) provide organized platforms for dialogue, trust-building, and joint projects. These institutions lend (limited) institutional weight and financial muscle required to sustain the vision of turning the Wakhan Corridor into more than a marginalized place, a conduit for regional cooperation (Tolonews, 2024).

4.3.3. Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Regional Coordination

The SCO, established in 2001, is a political, economic and security group led by China and Russia that also includes Iran, Pakistan and most Central Asian nations and has Afghanistan as an observer member. The eastward expansion of the organization's agenda has increasingly centered on regional peace and security cooperation, terrorism and ethnic relations, and economic integration—all matters crucial for the stability and development of the Wakhan region. The SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) is most applicable, given that the Wakhan Corridor continues to be a soft underbelly for militant spill over movements, cross-border contraband smuggling and drug trade (ur Rehman, 2021).

The SCO not only provides a platform for joint security discussions, intelligence sharing, and coordinated counter-terror operations between Afghanistan, Pakistan and China. It offers regular exchanges at the ministerial and working levels, helping ensure ongoing dialogue and preventing escalation. In support of larger connectivity initiatives, the SCO promotes interconnected transport networks, as well as interconnected energy infrastructure and free trade zone development amongst member states. As a multilateral cover, the SCO may provide a neutral and stable platform on which to build consensus and coordinate policies between the interested parties in the Wakhan Corridor (Verij, 2021).

4.3.4. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a Driver of Infrastructural and Economic Cooperation

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's regional infrastructure and economic cooperation initiative is perhaps the most impactful of its kind in modern times. Proposed in 2013, the BRI aims to build trade and infrastructure networks to connect Asia, Africa and Europe along ancient trade routes by constructing ports, roads, railways, dams and power plants. For the Wakhan

Corridor, the BRI is a game changer that can reverse decades of being off the map, neglected, and underdeveloped. Afghanistan is not an official participant in the BRI, but China has indicated its willingness to push CPEC into Afghanistan through the Wakhan Corridor area. The proposed extension could help drive roads, fiber-optic lines and energy into the region and boost trade between Central and South Asia. The BRI also envisages logistical hubs, border markets, and transit buildings that might burgeon local economies and foster cross-border trade (Wei, 2018).

The BRI's more inclusive infrastructure financing model—accessed through entities like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)—provides much-needed capital for underdeveloped and inaccessible areas like Wakhan. In addition, BRI-related cooperation frequently encompasses capacity-building initiatives, vocational training, as well as cultural dissemination that supports local governance and enhances human development metrics. Yet, Beijing's success in the Wakhan Corridor will be contingent on political stability, regional confidence, and open implementation of its BRI projects. Debt dependence and environmental impact as well as local community involvement are three issues that need to be addressed for infrastructure projects to be sustainable and beneficial to all (Weaver, 2020).

4.3.5. Regional Connectivity Frameworks: CAREC and ECO

Alongside SCO and BRI, mechanisms such as the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) and the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) are offering ways for practical cooperation in connectivity, trade and energy. CAREC, which is backed by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), seeks to support economic expansion and integration within the region by investment in transport corridors, trade facilitation and energy collaboration. Relevant for the Wakhan is its corridor approach, where it has established two priority corridors for the east-west and north-south transport routes from Central Asia to South Asia and China. The drive towards customs harmonization, border infrastructure, and regulatory coordination under the CAREC umbrella provides an opportunity to enable the Wakhan Corridor to develop into a predictable and efficient trade mechanism (Xiaoqiang, 2014).

So has the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), which consists of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey, simply because of the sensitivity it has or Central Asian from the beginning has advocated regional connectivity, expanding trade and development cooperation. Building cross-border infrastructure, multi-modal transport corridors, and regional economic

integration are the focus of ECO's Vision 2025 and its Transport and Communication Program. The Wakhan Corridor suits ECO's objectives, since it can connect Central Asia with South Asia, by a potential trade route that can guarantee variegation for emerging trade routes, and a wider inclusivity in terms of economic exchanges. Institutional mechanisms of ECO, including ministerial summits, project financing and a forum for multilateral dialogue are other opportunities for policy coordination. Afghanistan and Pakistan have been active in ECO, and, given China's increased informal involvement in ECO related projects, the ground for trilateral and regional cooperation has been considerably widened (William, 2010).

4.4. Potential Areas of Cooperation

4.4.1. Border Security and Counter-Terrorism

The Wakhan Corridor forms a strategic sliver of land perched at the frontier of Afghanistan, Pakistan and China. Despite its remoteness and inhospitality, it is exposed to a diversity of transnational threats including terrorism, cross-border militancy, smuggling and illicit trade. It means border security and counter-terrorism becomes a key issue for trilateral cooperation. Afghanistan, Pakistan and China need to reinforce the coordination of such efforts to not only insure regional peace and stability, but also secure future economic and infrastructure development through the corridor (Yawar, 2024).

4.4.2. Shared Patrols, Surveillance and Intelligence Gathering

Joint patrolling and coordinated surveillance are some of the best ways to keep a tab on border when one is dealing with such treacherous terrain. Due to challenging geography and lack of state presence in the Wakhan Corridor, single lateral efforts without cooperation are likely to fall short. Tripartite border force patrols between Afghanistan and Pakistan have strong potential to increase information sharing and prevent illicit cross-border movement. China already has a modest security presence in its Xinjiang region that borders the corridor and has expressed willingness to stabilize the neighboring spaces through joint mechanisms (Ze Kai, 2015).

Real-Time Intelligence Sharing and Engagement: Real-time sharing of intelligence is essential for preventing and responding to threats. A potential trilateral intelligence-sharing mechanism, perhaps though the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), could facilitate the dissemination of information, track jihadists, and monitor the movement of armed bands. It would

cut response time, and build trust among the three countries. In addition, border liaison offices or joint command centers in strategic locations could be intermediaries for coordination, analysis and operational planning.

4.4.3. Fighting Cross-Border Terrorism and Extremism

In general, the area surrounding the Wakhan Corridor has been a corridor for insurgent groups when the state's control over Afghanistan is weak. The emergence of extremist factions, ISIS-K and affiliated elements of Al-Qaeda and other militant groups is a direct threat to Afghanistan, as well as Pakistan's northern territories and the Xinjiang region of China that is increasingly sensitive to any sign of ethnic and religious radicalization. In this scenario, the only recourse is the trilateral method in dealing with cross-border terrorism". Joint approaches could feature joint training of the security forces, exchanging good practices on deradicalization and joint monitoring of the recruitment and financing networks of terrorist organizations. Anti-terrorism drive could also be reinforced with joint border check posts having sophisticated surveillance and biometric security gadgets that keeps continuous watch over the movement of men and material across the borders (Zhang, 2022).

4.4.4. Joint Work to Combat Trafficking and Illegal Trade

Security and threats One of the significant threats in the Wakhan has been traffic by the illicit trade in arms, illegal drug trade, wildlife trade and human trafficking. Afghanistan has long been a leading supplier of opium and heroin, and the remote passes through the mountains of the corridor could be used for the smuggling of these drugs from Afghanistan to Pakistan and China. Border security and counter-terrorism form the basis for any framework of long-term cooperation between us in the Wakhan Corridor. Through joint efforts, including coordination for patrolling, intelligence exchange and cooperation in combating terrorism, Afghanistan, Pakistan and China can transform this historically fragile frontier into basically a conduit of stability and security. Supported by economic and social developments, such initiatives can lead to greater regional integration and a common commitment to peace (Rafiq, 2020).

4.4.5. Trade and Transit Connectivity

The Wakhan Corridor has significant potential to be developed into a strategic bridge between Central Asia and South Asia and Western China. Originally deemed a hinterland or back

area, it is increasingly the focus of regional attention as a facilitator of trade and transit connectivity. As demand for alternative trade routes, regional integration, and economic diversification increases, efforts to develop transport infrastructure, facilitate customs, and sign cross-border trade agreements and pacts across the Wakhan Corridor forms an area for closer cooperation between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China (Parveen, 2022).

4.4.6. Development of Transport Corridors through Wakhan

The first step in improving trade links is the creation of a holistic route through Wakhan." Being the narrow strip linking northeastern Afghanistan with China's Xinjiang region, the Wakhan Corridor has the potential of providing a direct land bridge between Afghanistan and China, as an alternative to the much more vulnerable and clogged routes across Pakistan or Iran. For Beijing, creating a CPEC bypass through Afghanistan via Wakhan could provide a stable and smooth transportation corridor, away from turbulent areas in the region, and diversify China's means of reaching the South and Central Asian regions. For Afghanistan, a corridor would provide access to regional and global markets through Pakistani seaports such as Gwadar and Karachi, in addition to land access to Central Asia (Rezayee et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, Pakistan, however, has a huge transit trade opportunity between China and Afghanistan but that could leverage its geography for logistics, warehousing and re-export. Regional cooperation—constructing feeder roads, rail connections, and transport logistics nodes inside or near the Wakhan region—could help turn the region into a new corridor that is vital for regional connectivity. China, which has the technical and financial wherewithal to support such infrastructure projects, could offer such assistance as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Pakistan and Afghanistan may work out mutually or trilaterally those infrastructure agreements that concern construction standards, maintenance responsibilities, and operational procedures.

4.4.7. Facilitation of Cross-Border Trade Agreements

Infrastructure by itself is not enough without enabling regulation. Thus, the harmonization of measures and facilitation of negotiation of regional trade agreements are critical to ensure the operationalization of transit connectivity through Wakhan. Such agreements need to cover tariffs, transit fees, customs procedures, standards for documentation and mechanisms for resolution of disputes so that traders have predictability and a lower level of transaction costs. Afghanistan and

Pakistan can expand on their Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) and add some Wakhan route specific clauses engaging with China as a stakeholder. Coordination can be easily achieved by Trilateral or Regional MoUs between the three countries on Trade Facilitation, Transit Rights, and Joint Logistics (Rowe, 2010).

4.4.8. Energy and Economic Integration

The Wakhan Corridor is relatively small and rough geographically, but it can facilitate large-scale regional energy cooperation and economic integration between Afghanistan, Pakistan and China. Enhancing connectivity: Embracing the global trend towards diversifying and optimizing energy supplies by procuring energy from multiple sources, strengthening the energy-related infrastructure, and developing industrial cooperation in the wider ‘region’ Beyond the region Having a strategic location nestled between Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent, Gwadar-Kashghar would serve as an energy corridor linking the energy markets, associated infrastructure, and industries of Western China, Central Asia and South Asia. Potentials of Energy (Gas, Electricity) Pipeline Interconnections. For decades, the search for natural gas, which is important both as an energy fuel and as a raw material in the chemical industry, has been a global enterprise (Salamwatadar, 2024).

Among the most interesting potential areas of regional cooperation are the construction of transnational energy pipelines across or near the Wakhan Corridor. As Turkmenistan and other Central Asian states boast large gas reserves, and as China and Pakistan emerge as significant consumers of energy, Afghanistan can become a key transit country. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, among others, has sought to do that for some time. While it is not just the TAPI pipeline that passes through Wakhan, any future additional or alternative energy corridors could, in fact, make use of the relatively secure and geopolitically strategic route through Wakhan. More, the concept of integrating the Central Asia-South Asia (CASA-1000) electricity transmission project into a wider regional network, such as via northern Afghanistan, including the Wakhan corridor, tying Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan’s hydro power capacity into energy-starved Pakistan, might be appreciated.

4.4.9. Investment Partnership for Infrastructure and Development

To facilitate energy integration and more general economic cooperation, we believe there is a need for investment together in physical and institutional infrastructure. Some of the projects, such as road access, transmission lines, and energy terminals, storage and grid connections, connecting periphery energy producing areas with centers of energy consumption, can be developed in Afghanistan, Pakistan and China together. Multi-lateral development banks like the AIIB or the ADB could be funding partners and institutions like the SCO could help plan and resolve conflicts. Trilateral agreements and feasibility studies are needed to estimate the technical, economic and environmental issues concerning them (Sanchez, 2018).

4.4.10. Institutional cooperation in the Border Segments

Besides in the sector of energy, another feasible option for regional cooperation is in the lines of industrial integration and cross-border economic zones. Developing Special Economic Zones (SEZs) or border industrial parks near the Wakhan Corridor could help to stimulate investment, to ease the entry of small-and-medium-sized enterprise (SMEs), and to create textile, agriculture, mineral, and light manufacturing regional value chains. China's knowledge in the development of SZs from an industrial zone perspective and that of Pakistan in SEZs under CPEC can be coupled with Afghanistan's natural resources and cheap labor to create win-win economic clusters. These areas can provide tax preferences, customs facilitation and other trade facilitations to promote business linkages among regions (Sarbiland & Stanikzai 2024).

4.5. Environmental and Cultural Collaboration

Besides geopolitical and economic considerations, the Wakhan Corridor has deep environmental and cultural elements that provide a good basis for trilateral cooperation among Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China. Nestled between the Pamir, Hindu Kush, and Karakoram mountain ranges, this slender strip of land hosts unique ecosystems, rare wildlife, and ancient cultural connections. Its ecological vulnerability and cultural wealth require joint policy to facilitate sustainable development, protection of the environment and dialogue in culture (Scobell et al., 2014).

4.5.1. Sustainable Development of the Wakhan Region (Eco-Tourism, Conservation)

The extreme ruggedness and isolation of the corridor have saved it from any significant human activity, other than what has been getting documented for centuries. But climate change,

unregulated tourism and local poverty are increasingly threatening the environmental stability of the region. Sustainable development in the shape of ecotourism and community-based conservation programs can turn the corridor into a model of environmentally friendly development.

Projects in eco-tourism, backed by the three regional states and foreign funders, could encourage responsible travel to vulnerable regions, provide jobs locally and foster an understanding of why conservation is necessary. Collaborative investments in eco-lodges, trekking routes and cultural heritage centers might draw tourists and at the same time protect local traditions and biodiversity. Development initiatives of this kind must ensure local participation, especially of the indigenous Wakhi and Kyrgyz communities, in planning and implementation so as to ensure development based on inclusiveness and respect for traditional life (Shafiq, 2019).

4.5.2. Conservation of Shared Mountains Ecosystems and Biodiversity

The Wakhan lies in a broader network of transnational mountain ecosystem on which snow leopards and ibex share habitat with Marco Polo sheep, and hundreds of unique local species. These delicate eco systems are under growing pressure from illegal hunting, glacial retreat and environmental degradation. Cross-border conservation is necessary to conserve this common natural heritage. Environmental cooperation under a trilateral format could cover various areas including wildlife monitoring, anti-poaching patrols, as well as targeted conservation. Create transboundary protected area or peace park-connecting protected areas in Afghanistan's Wakhan National Park, Pakistan's Khunjerab National Park and China's Taxkorgan Nature Reserve a transboundary protected area or peace park can be a potent symbol of regional cooperation in safeguarding biodiversity (Sanchez, 2018).

4.5.3. Cultural Exchange and Historical Relationship

The Wakhan Corridor was not only a strategic route of passage; it was a historic bridge across which flowed travelers, monks and merchants in the days of the Silk-Road. The Persian-Turkic-Chinese-South Asian melange present in the region provides ample opportunities for cultural exchanges and cultural diplomacy.

Shared cultural initiatives including historical research, archaeological heritage preservation, exchanges of scholars and artists and cross-border cultural festivals could be

implemented to revive the shared historical linkages and enhance people to people contacts. Such exchanges would also help to prevent grievances and tension in the region in the long term, as well as relay messages of peace and classes on the other parties' culture and religion (Shahi, 2022).

4.6. Humanitarian and Development Cooperation

Because of its geographic isolation and historical neglect, the Wakhan Corridor has long been one of the least developed corners of the larger Afghanistan-Pakistan-China tri-junction. Infrastructural disconnect, hostile climatic conditions, and limited social services had made them vulnerable to poverty, diseases, and malnutrition. These problems also present a singular regional opportunity for humanitarian and development cooperation, where Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China also find themselves working together on matters that go beyond security and the economy (Shahrani, 2019).

4.6.1. Joint Development Programs in Wakhan and Surrounding Areas

One of the most important tasks will be the formulation and operation of joint development programmes according to the special conditions of the Wakhan Corridor and the neighbouring area. Such programmes can help to redress the historical underinvestment in this border region, providing the basis for growth that is both inclusive and stable. The trilateral cooperation can further facilitate construction of infrastructure, including basic road connectivity, small scale irrigation/rainwater harvesting/small solar projects, drinking water facility etc. With China's financial power, Pakistan's geographical logistics and Afghanistan's local necessity, we could work jointly on ensuring that the construction takes the form of a local, relevant and sustainable project (Srebrnik, 2020).

4.6.2. Projects on Health, Education, and Livelihood The Underdeveloped Border Areas

Very little healthcare and education are available in the Wakhan region. Communities are largely served by simple health posts, little professional medical care is available and the schools are ill constructed and ill equipped. Cross-jurisdictional health and education initiatives are a potential means to address these service gaps and to strengthen the human capital of the region. Mobile health services and cross-border medical camps, as well as training for local health workers, could offer immediate relief and ensure a better long-term health scenario. Such services can be delivered by countries like China and Pakistan (which relatively have better healthcare

infrastructure) who can provide technical support and trained personnel to the areas of Afghanistan having inadequate facilities (Srisookkham, 2015).

4.6.3. Managing Humanitarian Access in Times of Natural Disasters or Displacement

Harsh terrain and exposure to climate-related emergencies, including avalanches, flooding and glacial lake outbursts, mean the Wakhan region is at risk of humanitarian disasters. In these circumstances, regional-level humanitarian access mechanisms are critical to ensure timely and comprehensive reaction. Afghanistan, Pakistan and China may consider joint emergency response mechanisms: preplacement of relief supplies as well as of rescue teams, and joint air and land corridors for humanitarian access. Creating a tripartite humanitarian task force or emergency management centre in, or near, the border area might greatly increase readiness and disaster prevention. Humanitarian and developmental assistance to the Wakhan Corridor makes sense, not only as a moral responsibility, but also as a particularly strategic investment in regional stability and human security. Through collaboration on poverty reduction, health improvement, and educational and disaster response initiatives, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the PRC can mutually build trust, mitigate vulnerabilities, and help lay the foundation for a stronger, more unified border region (Stanikzai, 2024).

4.7. Challenges to Regional Cooperation

But as positive an outlook cooperation on the Wakhan Corridor may offer, there are still a number of obstacles that would prevent any real regional cooperation between Afghanistan, Pakistan and China from taking place. These challenges are rooted in historical animosities, continued political instability, different military and strategic requirements and the complicated web of external powers at play in the region. Understanding these challenges is essential to developing realistic policy approaches that can get beyond and create sustained cooperation (Tanwar, 2020).

4.7.1. Mistrust and Historical Grievances between Afghanistan and Pakistan

One of the most serious obstacles to regional cooperation is the continuing lack of trust and tension that have predominated between Afghanistan and Pakistan, with unresolved historical irritants. At the heart of the friction is the Durand Line, which the government of Afghanistan has refused to recognize as the official border since Pakistan's creation in 1947. The border dispute

has triggered mutual suspicion over sovereignty of territories and cross-border movements. Accusations of backing proxy groups, meddling in internal affairs and cross-border collateral killings have aggravated the relationship" over the decades, he added. Afghanistan regularly claims Pakistan shelters or covertly backs militant groups fighting to overthrow the Kabul government and destabilise security across the terror-battered country. For its part, Pakistan is terrified of Afghani alliances with India, and is keenly aware that Afghan soil is used by entities hostile to its own.

Frictions from these unholy remains spill into regional efforts. Initiatives to cooperate on the Wakhan Corridor are bound to involve mutual trust and transparency, but the baggage of history can result in reluctance or roadblocks. Cooperation on joint border management or security can, for example, be undercut by allegations of spying or asymmetrical sharing of gains. Moreover, Afghan domestic politics is also mired in these bilateral tensions where nationalist blocks remain averse to healing ties with Pakistan. Without a real thaw or practical measures to build trust at the bilateral level, trilateral cooperation at a more general level could stumble (Timmins, 2008).

4.7.2. Political Instability in Afghanistan and Governance Gaps

Another major hurdle is Afghanistan's persistent political instability. The nation is the victim of decades of conflict, regime failures and fractured systems of government that limit its ability to communicate with its neighbors effectively. Excessive turnover has created a governing environment characterized by internal factionalism and weak institutional capacity, all of which limits the Afghan state's trajectories on both implementing agreements, coordinating cross-border projects and providing the security necessary for infrastructure projects. The unstable security is further compounded by insurgents and areas within the Wakhan Corridor that remain unreachable, thwarting the creation of secure transport and trading links.

Furthermore, corruption and poor administrative systems are other aspects where transparent project management and resource distribution is hampered. Donor fatigue and changing levels of international assistance to Afghanistan have made it even harder to govern. Such instability erodes not only Afghanistan's negotiating position, but especially the security risks as well as the sustainability of long-term investments for both Pakistan and China in the

region. Without changes in governance and stabilization, Afghanistan could continue to be a weak link in regional cooperation mechanisms (Tolonews, 2024).

4.7.3. Differing Strategic Priorities and Foreign Alignments

Another formidable obstacle concerns the diverging security strategies and foreign policy predilections of Afghanistan, Pakistan and China. Despite a common focus among the three states on regional connectivity, their motivations and objectives differ, and this has a bearing on the coherence with which they can pursue collaboration. For China, its focus is mainly rooted in economic and security interests associated with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the interest that it has in a stable western frontier. It aims to connect Afghanistan to the regional infrastructure networks in order to improve passage ways, make secure its energy and resource requirements. China also wants regional stability in order to avoid the proliferation of extremism spilling-back into Xinjiang (ur Rehman, 2021).

Pakistan has its own interests in terms of obtaining transit routes to Afghanistan and Central Asia through its territory, potential trade opportunities and countering India in the region. But its strategic attention is still predominantly concentrated on its western border and ties with war-torn Afghanistan, frequently impacted by its ongoing competition with India. Afghanistan's focus, in the meantime, is on internal rebuilding, protection of its sovereign rights, and development of relationships that would help finance its recovery and its security. Its foreign alignments — historically with the United States and India, as well as parts of Europe, can sometimes clash with Pakistan's interests and make trilateral cooperation more difficult. These rival strategic interests produce competing policy options, investment preferences and diplomatic positions that militate against a common approach. Talks on infrastructure paths, security measures or trade accords may grind to a halt over clashing national interests.

4.7.4. Influence of External Actors and Competing Interests

The geopolitical significance of the Wakhan Corridor has drawn in all manner of outside powers with conflicting agendas that undermine local collaboration. The US, India, Russia, and other world powers' presence further complicates the strategic situation in a region, where local initiatives are frequently impacted by more overarching geopolitical contests. The United States and Afghanistan have a long-standing strategic relationship, assisting its government and military.

Its existence has defined policy in Afghanistan and constrained Pakistan's influence. Washington's lukewarm attitude toward Chinese investments in the Afghan infrastructure space is yet another factor which is influencing the dynamics of trilateral cooperation (Verij, 2021).

India is trying to assert its own interests in Afghanistan, push back against Pakistan's influence, and is wary of China's growing role there. Indian investments and diplomatic overtures also help create regional networks that run parallel with China-Pakistan frameworks. Russia, which has deep historical ties to Central Asia and interests in counterterrorism and regional security, is also a factor. It has worked with China under the umbrella of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) but has had ties independent of that with both Afghanistan and Pakistan. These outside entanglements can result in myriad overlapping or contradictory regional initiatives, lines of funding and security arrangements that make trilateral agreement difficult. Potential competition between the major geopolitical actors may turn collaborative infrastructure projects into battlegrounds which, in turn, may slow down or stop their realization.

4.8. Prospects for Strengthening Cooperation

The Wakhan Corridor, positioned at the crossroads of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China, has the potential to act as a centre of regional collaboration. Yet despite these challenges, the outlook for enhanced trilateral cooperation, the very source of peace, economic development and stability for this region that is in need of peace and prosperity, is promising. In order to do so, several important aspects need to be taken into account, namely, furthering confidence-building, using China's nascent role as a stabilizing force, institutionalizing mechanisms and devising strategies with a longer term perspective beyond short-term geopolitical calculations (Wei, 2018).

4.8.1. Confidence-Building Measures and Diplomatic Engagement

The first step towards improving regional cooperation would be the adoption of confidence-building measures (CBMs) which would help reduce distrust and sow goodwill among the three neighbouring countries. Years of historic grievances, especially between Afghanistan and Pakistan, have sapped trust and slowed cooperation. Hence, practical CBMs that focus on transparency, communication, and phasing in cooperation can open doors to expanded collaboration.

These measures might include a regular series of joint border patrols, intelligence sharing and development projects across the border that actually benefit local communities. Clear protocols to resolve border disputes, govern movement across the border and neutralize security incidents can also mitigate tensions. There should be institutionalization of trilateral diplomatic and technical-level meetings and engagements so that there is constant interaction and personal relationships grow among the three interlocutors. Participation in cultural, educational, and environmental projects could also be used as a means to build confidence by promoting common interests other than security or economy. For instance, through trilateral festivals, academic exchanges and joint conservation projects in Wakhan, people-to-people connectivity can be developed and constituencies for cooperation built from the ground up (Weaver, 2020).

4.8.2. Role of China as a Stabilizing Economic and Political Actor

China's growing footprint in the region (through the BRI) and its presence as one of the permanent members of the UN Security Council make it a crucial stabilizing force. Beijing has the economic power and diplomatic leverage to seize a unique opportunity to help push cooperation in the Wakhan Corridor. On the whole, China has taken a pragmatic non-interventionist approach, prioritizing economic connectivity, infrastructure development and regional stability. Such a posture has allowed it to engage with Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asian states simultaneously, weaving a network of dependencies which, when required, can be exploited to underpin a trilateral dialogue between all three enforcing parties (Xiaoqiang, 2014).

4.8.3. Need for Institutionalized Mechanisms for Dialogue and Coordination

Although informal diplomacy and bilateral negotiations have been instrumental in addressing regional concerns, the complex problems lying in the wake of the Wakhan Corridor mean that there is a need for institutionalized dialogue and coordination mechanism. There can be no better way of ensuring consistency, reducing misinterpretation, and creating opportunities for policy formulation in depth than appropriate formal frameworks.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) are existing regional institutions, representing interesting models and forums for multilateral dialogue. These bodies could be enhanced, or a special trilateral working group on the Wakhan Corridor could be established, to help deepen technical collaboration, gene conflict

management and facilitate project implementation. Institutionalised arrangements would also facilitate coordinated monitoring and assessment of cooperation initiatives, which could be adapted in line with results and changing conditions. They may even encourage the harmonization of policies on trade, customs processing, security protocols and environmental norms, cutting down on administrative messes (William, 2010).

4.8.4. Long-Term Vision for a Peaceful, Integrated Border Region

Finally, the development of cooperation through the Wakhan Corridor is in need of a vision that goes beyond narrow political and economic interests to a future of peace, connectivity and common prosperity. This vision must be focused on the corridor as an integrated space that transcends being a peripheral, psycho-borderland region in the process of being economically and politically gentrified, to a space that will generate value for local populations, and that speaks to regional stability. This would involve the establishment of multimodal transport corridors to connect remote communities to regional and national markets, promote cross-border cultural and educational cooperation and collaboration on environmental conservation to protect fragile alpine ecosystems (Zhang, 2022).

There are ambitious opportunities to boost cooperation over the Wakhan Corridor, but they will require purposeful efforts to realise. The cornerstone of sustainable trilateral cooperation will be built upon confidence building, China's stabilizing role, institutionalized tools, and a comprehensive long-term vision. Effectively leveraging these factors will not only unlock the geo-economic and geopolitical potential of the corridor, it will also contribute towards establishing durable peace and sustainable development in one of the most strategically important regions of Asia (Yawar, 2024).

CHAPTER-5

5. MAJOR FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

5.1. Major Findings of the Study

The Wakhan Corridor, a narrow strip of land in northeastern Afghanistan, stands as a critical geopolitical junction connecting South Asia, Central Asia, and East Asia. Its strategic position, though often overlooked historically due to its remoteness and challenging terrain, has gained renewed importance in contemporary regional politics. The corridor borders Tajikistan to the north, Pakistan to the south, and China to the east, serving as a natural gateway that links disparate regions and cultures.

The geopolitical importance of the Wakhan Corridor continues to focus attention, particularly with the emergence of regional connectivity plans, notions of cross-border security and also changing dynamics of great power contestation in recent years. The Wakhan valley: the Crossroads of the Great Game for the 21st Century as old trade roads and new economic corridors are being re-conceived in light of shift and balance of power in the world, the Wakhan emerges as the space key yet to be opened. It offers the potential to create new trade, energy and communications corridors through the heart of Eurasia.

Furthermore, with the continued expansion of infrastructure, communication and investment, as well as regional integration processes such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the Wakhan Corridor is viewed today not only as a historical remnant of the game but as much more. It now stands as a arena for potential collaboration and conflict among regional powers. And the main players, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China, all have different, but also similar, interests scuttling throughout the Wakhan Corridor, which add up to a complicated strategic formula. Afghanistan perceives the Wakhan as a lens of sovereignty, access and regional connectivity. As a landlocked state, Afghanistan views the corridor as a door to China and the wider East-Asian market. The corridor is also symbolically significant for Kabul, which considers the Taliban occupiers and for which upholding national sovereignty and extending governance to the outermost reaches of the country are vital. Stability in Wakhan may also help support more general state-building efforts and connectivity as part of an economic recovery.

Pakistan, meanwhile, sees the corridor as a linchpin of a larger regional policy of increasing connectivity and bolstering its influence in Central Asia. The hypothetical connections of the Wakhan Corridor with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) also provide Islamabad with the opportunity to further entrench its strategic and economic interests. Corridor too has domestic internal security ramification of Pakistan especially to the extent being close to Gilgit-Baltistan and porous nature of itsski highland borders.

China's interest in the corridor is quite evident, for reasons related to regional stability, counter-terrorism and increasing the footprint of its own BRI. The corridor leads directly to China's troubled region of Xinjiang and keeping this region shielded from extremist influences is a major part of Beijing's agenda. In addition, a secure and accessible Wakhan Corridor is consistent with China's aspiration for transcontinental connectivity and economic integration, including alternative access routes and resiliency in trade corridors.

It is true that there are areas where the convergences of interest between the three nations meet—in security cooperation, in border management, in trade facilitation, all have been widely noted and discussed—but the divergences are also clear. Pakistan and China, for instance, may converge substantially in economic and strategic interests, but Afghanistan's fluctuating instability and governance creates a natural barrier to long-term cooperation. In addition, the domestic agendas of each country, as well as their security doctrines, influence the way in which these countries view the corridor and the partnerships it requires.

But the Wakhan offers plenty of opportunities for regional integration, despite the difficulties. Such a cooperation can be respectively focused on, among others, securing and monitoring the borders, improving infrastructure, sustainable development, and the balance of nature and environment in this land, which is highly sensitive from the ecological point of view.

Border security is a common concern, however. Cross-border management plans, intelligence-sharing and counter-terrorism tactics can all serve to reduce such threats that stem from the seepage through such porous mountainous passes. Combined with its close proximity to dangerous areas, the potential for useful security cooperation would also offer some protection against regional and transnational threats including drug and arms smuggling, and the infiltration of jihadist extremists.

Trade and infrastructure are a second –area where collaboration abounds. The corridor could become a transit route if roads, communication lines and energy pipelines are built through the area to connect different parts of Asia. The multilateral OCA initiatives can be funded either through multilateral mechanisms or bilaterally, especially from bottomless Chinese pocket under the BRI.

Cooperation on environmental is also crucial. The Wakhan Corridor is also environmentally sensitive, and massive development should respect rare wildlife. Community-based environmental assessments, conservation activities, and the encouragement of sustainable means of livelihood for local communities can ensure that development does not lead to destruction of the environment.

Institutional mechanisms of dialogue and policy coordination among various regional forums -- such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), and regional confidence-building forums – already exist. They can serve to institutionalize cooperation by building the corridor into wider regional agendas.

But operationalizing such cooperation still poses challenges. Political uncertainty in Afghanistan, hostile regional relations, weak infrastructure and bureaucratic lethargy often slow momentum. Moreover, divergent political agendas, such as India's absence in regional corridors or the Western skepticism of BRI intentions, add nuance to apparently uncomplicated cooperation proposals.

When it comes to the geopolitical complexities of the Wakhan Corridor they reflect the wider regional and global complexities. As both a focus of cooperation and competition, the corridor represents the twin currents of cooperation and competition shaping Asia today.

On the one hand, the corridor serves as a reflection of the emerging multi-polarity in the region, which sees medium-sized players like Pakistan and Afghanistan engaging with a growing China within the paradigm of pragmatic cooperation. It underscores the trend towards regionalization of foreign policy, with states focusing on their neighborhood engagement, economic connectivity.

Then again, the corridor does also reflect the region's fragmentation and competition. Internal chaos in Afghanistan along with big-power rivalry frequently ends in either policy

deadlock or a disjointed move. The presence of third parties the US, Russia, and India adds an additional dimension to the regional calculus.

The theoretical construct of this study derived from Neo-realism and Neo-Liberalism, provides an analytical instrument that enables us to make sense of the behavior of regional powers. According to neorealism, the Wakhan Corridor is a strategic area, where the state actors are rational, and driven by security, balance of power and interest which are also human nature. China's worries about security in Xinjiang, Pakistan's quest for wider strategic depth and Afghanistan's desire to prevent further compromise of its sovereignty all accord with realist presumptions. The lack of trust, occasional cooperation, and focus on state interests reinforces the realist belief that anarchy in the international system results in states needing to pursue self-interest.

Neoliberalism, in return, brings a positive counterweight. It emphasizes the importance of institutions, economic dependence and cooperation. Shared trade, environment, and connectivity interests and multilateral instruments used through institutions such as the SCO also underscore potential cooperative behavior amongst states that have different strategic objectives. The corridor's status as part of the BRI and other economic projects corresponds to the liberal presumption that mutual gain can generate cooperation. Significantly, this work demonstrates convergence of these two theories. Neo-realism explains the cautious, calculated behavior of states, while neo-liberalism describes the new zones of interdependence and institutional cooperation. In this manner, we have learned from both viewpoints regarding the regional geopolitics of the access to the Wakhan Corridor.

5.2. Policy Recommendations

The following policy proposals are therefore recommended for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China in light of the analysis and findings of this study so that the strategic opportunity provided by the Wakhan Corridor can be realized.

- i. **Establish Institutionalized Trilateral Mechanisms:** This lack of a strong institutional architecture amongst the three principle actors prevents long-term coordination and continuity of policy. Please is pushing for a trilateral institutional mechanism so that regular consultation and coordinated action can take place and to set a formal agenda, perhaps under the aegis of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) or Economic

Cooperation Organization (ECO). This institution would be able to monitor policy planning, coordinate technical co-operation in the areas of infrastructure and security, and supervise the conflict resolution courses. An institutionalized configuration of this kind would serve further to promote accountability and coherence in policy over time.

- ii. **Prioritize Joint Investment in Infrastructure and Security:** Afghanistan, Pakistan and China should Pool in resources together on the physical and digital infrastructure of the Wakhan Corridor to make it a viable trade and transport route. China, through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) can exercise technical and financial leadership in this investment effort, however, the coordinated planning and orchestrating with Afghan and Pakistani higher authorities is a prerequisite for sustainability and local ownership. Likewise, solid security - shared border controls, border surveillance and co-ordinated anti-terrorism – is necessary to protect investments and secure the passage. Economic projects will not come to fruition or be successful without the proper safeguards.
- iii. **Engage International and Regional Organizations for Support:** In addition to the proposed trilateral cooperation, the role of international and regional organizations can be invoked to deliver actual capacity and legitimacy. UN, AIIB, World Bank, and ADB can offer crucial technical, financial, and development support. They can also finance feasibility studies, environmental assessments and infrastructure, in ways that foster transparency and inclusive development. Regional institutions like the SCO and ECO, can act as forums for policy coordination and dispute resolution whilst providing the wider framework for infusing corridor as part of regional cooperation projects.
- iv. **Promote Inclusive Development and Local Engagement:** Finally, any development plan for the Wakhan Corridor must be tailored to meet the demands and preferences of the local population. The area's exceptional ethnic, cultural, and ecological profile also needs to be taken into consideration and conserved. Policy makers need to ensure that local communities, especially in Afghanistan's Badakhshan province, are directly engaged by and benefit from corridor-specific programs. It could mean jobs, educational options, access to health care, and initiatives for locally led development. Sustainable and equitable development will not only help to increase the legitimacy of corridors but also reduce the chance of local opposition and unrest.

v. **Foster Confidence-Building and Trust Development:** The realization of the potential of the Wakhan Corridor requires one simple thing above everything else: trust between Afghanistan, Pakistan and China. There has been long-standing mistrust, politic tensions and suspicions around security that have often blocked any kind of constructive engagement in the region." Thus, commencing structured dialogue and informal diplomacy tracks—notably people to people contacts, academic exchanges, and cultural initiatives—can aid in confidence-building. Frequent trilateral summits or track-II dialogues could also help increase transparency and decrease misunderstandings. It would provide the base for a much closer collaboration on strategic and wider economic interests.

5.3. Conclusion

This thesis has explored the geopolitical significance of the Wakhan Corridor, emphasizing its role as a strategic interface between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China. As a narrow but historically and geographically vital stretch of land, the corridor represents both a physical passage and a metaphorical bridge, linking regions, cultures, and strategic ambitions. The core argument advanced in this study is that the Wakhan Corridor, despite its marginalization in historical narratives, holds transformative potential for regional connectivity, economic integration, and cooperative security, provided there is sustained political will and strategic foresight among stakeholders.

The findings suggest that while each state; Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China, approaches the corridor from distinct political, economic, and security angles, there exists a notable degree of complementarity in their long-term interests. Afghanistan views the corridor as an essential mechanism for its own sovereignty and economic participation. Pakistan sees strategic connectivity to Central Asia, and for China, the corridor is a key to border stability and the expansion of the BRI. If these converging interests can be reinforced by trust, common values and mutual gains, they form the basis of fruitful cooperation.

At the same time, the corridor has its challenges. The political situation in Afghanistan, and distrust at regional level, and less advanced infrastructure is a major hindrance. Farther, conflicting interests, as well as power asymmetries between the stakeholders, are expected to undermine a concerted effort. These challenges reiterate the need for a multi-dimensional and comprehensive policy framework astute to realist but informed by liberal cooperative natures.

Other than that, the strategic future of the Wakhan Corridor will hinge on regional actors moving from a reactive to a proactive engagement down the road. Instead of passively treating the corridor as a byproduct of geopolitical considerations, Afghanistan, Pakistan and China should design it as an active space of building regional peace, prosperity and partnership. The outcomes of this endeavor depend not only on policy and financial initiatives but on shared perspectives based on political dedication, mutual respect, and stability in the long run. The Wakhan Corridor epitomizes a singular nexus of geography, history, and geopolitics. Whether it becomes a corridor of opportunity or a forgotten periphery will depend on the ability of regional powers to work together instead of letting shallow nationalisms take over. The choice, and the potential, lie in their hands.

External actors like the United States, Russia, and India, whose interests in Central and South Asia overlap with the corridor's destiny, also influence the Wakhan Corridor's course in addition to regional players. For example, Wakhan's development may be indirectly impacted by India's concerns about CPEC or U.S. counterterrorism efforts. Similar to this, Russia may present different opportunities for multilateral engagement due to its historical connections to Central Asia and its membership in the SCO. To fully grasp the range of opportunities and limitations the corridor faces, it is imperative to acknowledge these external factors.

Inclusionary governance that involves local communities, ethnic Wakhi and Kyrgyz populations, whose livelihoods and cultural heritage are linked to the land will be necessary for the Wakhan to maintain long-term stability. If top-down policies ignore grassroots views, they run the risk of escalating tensions. The necessity of participatory development, where infrastructure projects and security frameworks are in line with local demands and traditional governance institutions, is highlighted by lessons learnt from Afghanistan's previous mistakes.

At the crossroads of geopolitics and history, the Wakhan Corridor presents a litmus test for regional cooperation in a time of changing power relations. Balancing conflicting national interests with common objectives of stability, connectivity, and sustainable growth will determine its destiny. The corridor's transformative potential is still obvious, despite ongoing obstacles like political mistrust and infrastructure deficiencies. Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China can turn Wakhan from a frontier outpost into a hub of Eurasian integration by embracing cooperative frameworks.

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