**Strategic importance of the Wakhan Corridor**

**[Masud Ahmad Khan](https://nation.com.pk/Columnist/masud-ahmad-khan)**

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Wakhan is a strip of land in the Pamir mountain range where China, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan share borders. The Wakhan Corridor runs North East from the mainland Afghanistan to the border of China while Tajikistan is in the north and Pakistan is in the South. The strip is 350 kilometres long and 13 to 65 kilometres wide. The total area of the strip is 10,300 square kilometres and the population is around 15,000 individuals.

It is the place where three of the highest mountain ranges in the world converge—namely Karakoram, Hindukush and Pamir. The Darkot pass is a link from Yasin (GB) to Chitral (KP) and Wakhan through the Baroghil Pass. The Irshad Pass connects the Chupursan river valley, Baba Ghundi and Gojal (Hunza) with the Wakhan Corridor. The Broghil pass of Chitral crosses the Hindukush range and connects Wakhan.

The inhabitants of the Wakhan Corridor are Wakhis and Kirghiz. The Wakhis are the Ismaili Muslims who have close links with the people of Hunza and Ghizer in Gilgit Baltistan. The Kirghiz are of Turkish origin as they descend from the Turko-Mangolian nomads of Chinese Turkestan. The inhabitants of the Wakhan Corridor, including parts of Tajikistan, Wakhan district, Kashgar, Chitral, Ishkoman and upper Hunza (Gojal) share common history, culture and language. The century long rivalry between Russia and British India for the control of Central Asian States is known as the great game. John Keay has discussed the great game played in Gilgit and Wakhan in his book ‘The Gilgit Game’.

[Pakistan accuses India of nuclearizing Indian Ocean](https://nation.com.pk/16-Feb-2021/pakistan-accuses-india-of-nuclearizing-indian-ocean)

The Soviets considered Gilgit as the potential launching pad to occupy Central Asian States by British India. The Britishers were desperate to make sure that their northern border was safe so that Russians could not sneak down through the Hindukush and Pamirs into Gilgit and Chitral.

The earliest history of Wakhan was revealed by Chinese pilgrim, Hsuan Psung, in 644. Marco Polo passed through it to go to China during the thirteenth century. It was ruled by independent Mirs and, in 1883, the area was under the control of the governor of Badakhshan. The Silk route from China to westward passed over the north of Pamir towards Samarkand or across small valleys south of it through Wakhan, Badakhshan and onwards to Bacteria—north of Hindukush in the valley of Oxus.

The British sent out expeditions into the area; the first one in the area was Moorcroft, then John Wood in 1937 and followed by Lord Curzan who was searching for the source of the Oxus river. Sire Aurel Stein, the famous British archaeologist, also passed through the region.

[Myanmar deploys military tanks amid anti-coup protests](https://nation.com.pk/16-Feb-2021/myanmar-deploys-military-tanks-amid-anti-coup-protests)

In the 19th century, the British adopted a forward policy and at that time Afghanistan was an independent country but under the control of Britishers after the treaty of Gandamak. During the great game, the Wakhan Corridor was an independent state which acted as a buffer between the Russian and British empires. Russia claimed Roshan, Shignan and Wakhan as a successor to the Kokand Khanate.

The Amir of Afghanistan was interested in Roshan and Shignan. However, Britishers persuaded Amir to exchange Roshan and Shignan with Wakhan. In July 1895, the demarcation of frontiers between Russia, the British Indian Empire and Afghanistan was carried out. The commission agreed to give all land north of Amur Darya to Russia and all land south of Amu Darya to Afghanistan. This agreement created the Wakhan Corridor which included the district of Wakhan and went up to the Chinese territory of Xinjiang. The corridor further separated British India from direct contact with Russia.

The British constructed a fort at Kalamdarchi in the Misgar valley of Hunza at the junction of the Kilk and Mintaka pass to check Russian advances from Wakhan Corridor. After the invasion of Afghanistan, Russia established military bases across the country including a base in the Wakhan Corridor which overlooked China and Pakistan strategically.

[Nigeria’s Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala named new WTO chief](https://nation.com.pk/16-Feb-2021/nigeria-s-ngozi-okonjo-iweala-named-new-wto-chief)

In June 1981, Wakhan was officially handed to Russia through an agreement between Babrak Karmal and Brezhnev. After the occupation of Wakhan, Russians expelled 2000 to 3000 Kirghiz from the region. Majority of the Kirghiz population fled to Ishkoman in Gilgit under their leader Rahman Gul. I saw Rehman Gul and his companions in the Gilgit bazaar while I was in school. After spending three years there, they were airlifted to Turkey and were settled in an area similar to that of Pamir.

Today again, the region has become the centre of a new great game played by various players initially after the construction of Karakoram Highway and now, with the start of CPEC. In 197, The Financial Times wrote that the Karakoram Highway was China’s new outlet to Africa and the Middle East. In the 80s, the Karakoram Highway was termed as the ‘Chinese Window to South Asia’.

Now, CPEC is the focus of attention of hostile agencies. Ajit Doval, the Indian national security advisor, went on the record to say that India has a 106 kilometres long non-contiguous border with Afghanistan (Wakhan Corridor). Recently, the Indian home minister made a similar statement in Lok Sabha. However, according to Indian media, even Shah’s own ministry does not recognise any border with Afghanistan.

[Lavrov accuses EU of breaking ties with Russia](https://nation.com.pk/16-Feb-2021/lavrov-accuses-eu-of-breaking-ties-with-russia)

In 2002, India established a base at Farkhor in Tajikistan with Russian support to transport Indian relief and reconstruction supplies into Afghanistan. Farkhor is linked with Tajik Ayni air force base where Indian air force personnel are also stationed.

There are media reports that China is planning to construct a road through the Wakhjir pass, the old Silk route, to link Afghanistan and Central Asian States. This road in the Wakhan Corridor would end up linking Afghanistan and Central Asian States to the Karakoram Highway and Kashgar. Any road developed after the opening of the Wakhjir pass will give China an upper hand by enhancing its dominance in the region—a clear threat to Indian interest.

The road will also help the landlocked Tajikistan to get access to the Karakoram Highway as well as Pakistani ports and Pakistan’s access to mineral rich central Asian States is likely to improve. The Chinese presence in Afghanistan will be a threat to India. And so, India along with the West is protesting against Chinese presence in Tajikistan and the Wakhan Corridor.

[Erin Holland marries Ben Cutting](https://nation.com.pk/16-Feb-2021/erin-holland-marries-ben-cutting)

China has rejected these so-called claims and confirmed that only joint training with Afghan and Tajik security forces were carried out in the past. The Wakhan Corridor can become a transit route for trade with mineral rich Central Asian States and will open new avenues of progress and prosperity.