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Part-1

Wakhan and Badakhshan at Asia's Geopolitical Crossroads From a Historic Passage and Buffer Zone to a Centre of Geopolitical and Geoeconomic Competition

Historical Geography and the Geostrategic Significance of Wakhan and Badakhshan

Introduction

In the political geography of the world, some regions that appear peripheral and relatively insignificant in terms of population, economic activity, and infrastructure can acquire an importance far beyond their size and internal capacity because of their geographical location. Wakhan, in northeastern Afghanistan, is one of the clearest examples of this phenomenon. At first glance, it appears to be a remote, mountainous, sparsely populated, and difficult-to-access territory. Yet when the political and geographical map of Central, South, and East Asia is considered alongside the history of great-power rivalry, Wakhan suddenly emerges from a geographical periphery as a point of contact between several strategic spheres.

The significance of Wakhan cannot be measured simply by the length of its roads, the size of its population, or the current volume of trade passing through it. Its real importance lies in its geographical position: a location that brings Afghanistan, through a narrow strip of territory, close to China and places it in proximity to Central Asia, Xinjiang, Pakistan, and the wider geopolitical space

surrounding Kashmir. Historical research has also shown that, despite its limited demographic and economic weight, Wakhan became an arena of imperial competition from the second half of the nineteenth century because of its strategic location (Kreutzmann, 2023).

This raises a fundamental question:

Why has a territory such as Wakhan, which has remained peripheral in demographic and economic terms, attracted the attention of major powers at different points in history, and why has its geopolitical significance re-emerged and continued to grow in the twenty-first century?

A convincing and comprehensive answer requires Wakhan to be understood as an inseparable part of Badakhshan and examined within the broader context of Afghanistan and its surrounding environment, rather than as an isolated territory. Wakhan is part of Badakhshan, and its significance must therefore be assessed in relation to the geographical position of Badakhshan as a whole, its natural resources, historical communication routes, international borders, and Afghanistan's political developments.

From this perspective, road construction in Wakhan should not be regarded merely as an infrastructure or transport project. A road can serve as an instrument of economic development, but in strategically sensitive regions it can simultaneously become an instrument of connectivity, trade, security, influence, and the reshaping of geopolitical relations among neighbouring states and even extra-regional powers.

This article examines this transformation in three parts. The first part focuses on the geography, history, and geostrategic significance of Wakhan and Badakhshan. The second examines roads, natural resources, and competition among regional and extra-regional powers. The third, drawing on the findings of the first two parts, explores possible futures and scenarios for Wakhan and Badakhshan.

Wakhan: A Small Geography with Major Geopolitical Significance

Wakhan is located in northeastern Badakhshan Province of Afghanistan and extends as a narrow strip of territory through the mountainous Pamir region, bordering China, Tajikistan, and Pakistan. It lies at a point where several important geopolitical spheres converge. Historical research has situated Wakhan

at the crossroads of Afghanistan, China, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent and has emphasised its role in regional relations (Kreutzmann, 2023).

If Wakhan is viewed only from within Afghanistan, it may appear to be a remote and isolated region. But when placed on the broader map of Asia, an entirely different picture emerges. To the north lies Central Asia; to the east, China and Xinjiang; to the south, Pakistan and the strategically sensitive space of Kashmir; and to the west, Afghanistan itself.

Wakhan therefore occupies a position where Afghanistan's geography connects with several major geopolitical spheres in Asia.

This location means that Wakhan's geopolitical value is not necessarily determined by the scale of its current economic activity. Commercial activity in the region remains limited, but if adequate infrastructure is developed in the future, the same geographical position could multiply its economic and political value. This is the distinction between actual and potential significance. Wakhan may not currently constitute a major global economic corridor, but geographically it has the potential to become an important point of connection between Afghanistan and its surrounding environment.

The Historical Significance of Wakhan: From a Communication Route to a Buffer Zone

The historical significance of Wakhan is not a recent phenomenon. In the past, the region formed part of wider networks of communication linking eastern and western Asia. Its position between the Pamirs, Badakhshan, Xinjiang, Kashmir, and Central Asia placed Wakhan along historical routes of human movement, trade, and regional communication.

A major turning point in the political history of Wakhan came in the nineteenth century with the rivalry between the Russian and British Empires, a competition historically known as the Great Game.

During this period, Wakhan's importance evolved from that of a geographical passage into a security and geopolitical issue. Afghanistan stood between the Russian sphere of influence in the north and British India in the south, and the competing powers sought to prevent their respective spheres of influence from coming into direct contact by establishing and consolidating buffer zones.

Hermann Kreutzmann's historical research on the "Wakhan Quadrilateral" shows that, from the second half of the nineteenth century, Afghanistan, China, Britain,

and Tsarist Russia all played roles in shaping the political order surrounding Wakhan. During the Great Game, Wakhan became a buffer space between competing spheres of power, while subsequent border arrangements ultimately consolidated its geographical configuration for the periods that followed (Kreutzmann, 2023).

This historical background is crucial for understanding Wakhan today because it demonstrates that its geography was initially valued as a security and geopolitical asset before it became an economic opportunity.

In other words, the major powers first took an interest in Wakhan because of its geographical position; economic and connectivity considerations subsequently became part of their calculations—.

Wakhan from the Great Game to Twenty-First-Century Power Competition

With the end of the British Empire and the emergence of a new order in Central Asia, Wakhan did not lose its significance; rather, the nature of that significance changed.

During the Soviet period, Wakhan lay adjacent to one of the most sensitive security environments of the Soviet Union. Afghanistan itself became a major arena of Cold War rivalry. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the emergence of independent Central Asian republics, and subsequently the extensive presence of the United States and NATO in Afghanistan, the security environment surrounding Wakhan changed once again.

The modern history of Wakhan can therefore be understood as a continuous chain: during the Great Game between Russia and Britain, Wakhan acquired importance as a buffer zone; during the Cold War and the Afghan wars, its security significance persisted; and with China's emergence as an economic and security power, Russia's changing role, the Taliban's return to power, and the intensification of regional and extra-regional competition, Wakhan has once again gained importance in geopolitical calculations.

This historical continuity reveals an important point: whenever the structure of power surrounding Afghanistan has changed, Wakhan has re-emerged in geopolitical calculations.

Today, in addition to US-China competition, the Russia-Ukraine war, changes in Russia's role in Central Asia, and rivalry between India and Pakistan, the ongoing

war involving Iran, the United States, and Israel has also become an important variable in the geopolitical configuration of Asia. The conflict, which began on 28 February 2026 with US and Israeli attacks on Iran, has had consequences for energy, security, and regional relations and could indirectly affect strategic calculations surrounding Central Asia and Wakhan (Council on Foreign Relations, 2026).

Under such circumstances, it is natural that Wakhan should once again attract attention.

This time, however, the competition is not necessarily about territorial acquisition. Rather, it may centre on access, connectivity, security, resource extraction, trade, and influence.

Wakhan and the Concept of “Connectivity Power”

One of the key concepts for understanding Wakhan’s future is the notion of connectivity power.

In the nineteenth century, major powers primarily sought to control territory and borders. In the twenty-first century, direct territorial control is only one form of power. Roads, railways, ports, pipelines, energy networks, trade routes, and digital corridors can also become instruments of power.

From this perspective, the Wakhan road acquires symbolic and strategic significance. If a road through Wakhan succeeds in connecting Afghanistan with China, it would not simply represent several kilometres of newly constructed infrastructure. If the necessary security and economic conditions are established, it could become part of a broader regional network of connectivity.

However, without effective mechanisms for oversight, transparency, accountability, and public access to information about mining contracts, infrastructure development could, alongside economic opportunities, increase the risks of opaque extraction, smuggling, and the unbalanced exploitation of natural resources. Indeed, the continuation of opaque mining practices in some areas has, in addition to its economic and administrative consequences, contributed to open and publicly reported disputes and confrontations among different Taliban factions, particularly between local Badakhshani and Kandahari-aligned elements.

At the same time, the existence of a road does not, by itself, mean that a major international corridor will emerge. Extremely high elevations, harsh climatic

conditions, mountainous terrain, the cost of infrastructure maintenance, and security concerns all create serious constraints.

A study published in *Pacific Focus* in June 2026 also emphasises this distinction. It argues that Wakhan does not have identical strategic significance for Afghanistan and China. For Afghanistan, connectivity through Wakhan may carry strategic and economic importance, whereas China continues to regard security as a prerequisite for expanding economic connectivity. From this perspective, the strategic significance of Wakhan for the two countries is asymmetric (Bazwan and Omarkhail, 2026). This distinction is crucial for analysing Wakhan's future.

Badakhshan and Wakhan in a Resource-Rich Natural Environment

Wakhan and Badakhshan cannot be assessed without taking the region's natural resources into account.

Badakhshan is one of Afghanistan's notable regions in terms of natural resources. Geological and mineral studies by the United States Geological Survey have identified numerous mineral deposits and occurrences in the province, while specialised studies have also been conducted on the Badakhshan gold province (Peters et al., 2011; Peters et al., 2014).

The USGS geological map of Badakhshan examines the region's geological structures as well as its metallic and non-metallic mineral occurrences. A specialised study of the Weka Dur gold deposit likewise indicates that the site forms part of a broader group of gold-bearing occurrences in Badakhshan (Peters, Stettner and Masonic, 2014).

Badakhshan's lapis lazuli also possesses distinctive historical and economic significance and, together with gold, gemstones, and other minerals, forms part of the province's broader mineral potential.

The significance of Badakhshan, therefore, cannot be reduced to its border location. Two important factors intersect here:

Geographical position and natural resources. Whenever these two factors are combined with transport infrastructure and investment, the region can acquire greater geoeconomic significance.

This is where the issue of mining becomes particularly important in the second part of the article. The central question is not simply: "What resources exist in Badakhshan"?

The more important questions are: Who will gain access to these resources? Under what mechanisms will they be extracted? How will the revenues be distributed? And what impact will their extraction have on Afghanistan's position within the competition among regional powers?

It is also necessary to ask whether, in the absence of effective mechanisms of public oversight and accountability, infrastructure development can lead to sustainable development, or whether, alongside economic opportunities, it may create conditions for opaque extraction and the unequal exploitation of national resources.

Wakhan: Where Afghanistan's Geography Meets Asian Geopolitical Competition

In the twenty-first century, Wakhan must be studied within a multilayered geopolitical environment.

On one side stands China, a power that places considerable emphasis in its foreign policy on the security of its western borders, stability in Xinjiang, and the expansion of regional connectivity networks. Recent studies of Wakhan also indicate that China gives priority to security over economic development and connectivity in its approach to the region (Bazwan and Omarkhail, 2026).

On the other side is Pakistan, which is connected to the wider Wakhan environment through the geography of Kashmir and its northern borders.

India, because of its longstanding rivalry with Pakistan, the Kashmir dispute, and its broader relations with Central Asia, cannot entirely disregard developments in this region.

Tajikistan, as one of Afghanistan's immediate neighbours, is also directly connected to issues of border security, Afghanistan's stability, and developments in the Pamirs.

Although Iran does not share a direct border with Wakhan, Badakhshan can be studied within the broader framework of Iran's historical and civilisational links with the Persian-speaking sphere, as well as its geopolitical calculations concerning Afghanistan and Central Asia. This cultural connection does not, in itself, imply the existence of a unified policy or direct intervention; rather, it constitutes one contextual variable that should be considered alongside security and economic factors.

Russia, because of its historical and security role in Central Asia, also follows developments in Afghanistan and along the southern borders of the region with considerable sensitivity.

At the extra-regional level, the United States remains an important actor in Asia's power structure, although the nature of its presence and the instruments through which it operates in Afghanistan have changed considerably since the period of its military presence.

Wakhan therefore cannot be studied solely through the Afghanistan-China relationship. It forms part of a much more complex network:

China — Russia — United States — India — Pakistan — Iran — Tajikistan — Afghanistan.

These countries, however, do not share identical objectives. It is precisely this divergence of interests that makes Wakhan a particularly useful subject for geopolitical analysis.

From Geographical Significance to Geoeconomic Significance

One of the central questions of this research is whether Wakhan can move from a potentially important geopolitical location to an actual geoeconomic asset.

The answer depends on several variables:

1. Development of transport infrastructure;
2. Security along the routes;
3. Afghanistan's relations with China and its neighbours;
4. Regional trade capacity;
5. Transportation costs;
6. Extraction and processing of natural resources;
7. Afghanistan's political stability;
8. Legal and economic mechanisms for investment;
9. Competition or cooperation among regional powers;
10. The future policies of China, Russia, India, Pakistan, and the United States.

The future significance of Wakhan is therefore not predetermined.

Wakhan is a geopolitical possibility, not a predetermined geopolitical outcome.

If infrastructure, security, trade, and resource governance are developed together, its importance could increase. But if insecurity, political isolation, high infrastructure costs, and negative competition prevail, geography alone will not be sufficient to transform Wakhan into a major economic corridor.

This distinction forms the foundation of the analytical approach adopted in this study.

The Central Research Question

Based on the preceding discussion, the central research question can be formulated as follows:

Given its geographical position, historical background, natural resources, and infrastructure developments, what role could Wakhan and Badakhshan play in the emerging geopolitical and geoeconomic order of Asia, and how will competition among regional and extra-regional powers shape the future of the region?

Alongside this central question, several subsidiary questions arise:

Can the Wakhan road transform Afghanistan into an important regional connectivity route?

Can Badakhshan's natural resources become a source of economic development, or will they become a source of intensified competition and opaque extraction?

Does China primarily view Wakhan as an economic opportunity or as a security concern?

How will India and Pakistan respond to geopolitical changes in the region?

What policy will Russia adopt in response to the expansion of Chinese influence in the vicinity of Central Asia?

What role could the United States play if it once again changes its strategy toward Central Asia?

And finally:

Will Wakhan eventually become an economic corridor, a security zone, an arena of power competition, or a combination of all three?

Preliminary Hypothesis

The preliminary hypothesis of this study is that:

The future significance of Wakhan will arise not from any single factor but from the convergence of three fundamental elements—geographical position, natural resources, and connectivity potential. However, the extent to which this potential is realised will depend on security, political stability, resource governance, and competition among regional and extra-regional powers.

From this perspective, Wakhan could potentially evolve from a peripheral region of Afghanistan into an important geopolitical and geoeconomic node in Inner Asia. Such a transformation, however, is not inevitable and will depend on the behaviour of both domestic and external actors.

Conclusion

Wakhan cannot be assessed solely according to its present-day economic indicators. Its principal value lies in its geographical position and in the relationship it establishes between Afghanistan and its surrounding environment.

The history of Wakhan demonstrates that the region has previously entered the calculations of major powers because of its geographical position. During the Great Game, Wakhan became a buffer zone between competing empires; during the Cold War, its security significance continued; and in the twenty-first century, with the rise of China, changes in Russia's role, India-Pakistan rivalry, and shifts in US policy, it has once again attracted geopolitical attention (Kreutzmann, 2023).

The important difference today, however, is that geography is increasingly being linked with infrastructure and natural resources.

If roads, trade, mineral resources, and security can be integrated within a sustainable framework, Wakhan could acquire greater economic and strategic significance. If such conditions do not emerge, its importance may remain primarily security-related and geopolitical.

This is where the central issue of Part II begins: the Wakhan road, the natural resources of Badakhshan, and the competition among powers seeking to use the geography of the region to advance their security, economic, and geopolitical interests. Wakhan should therefore be understood not merely as a remote border

region, but as a potential geopolitical and geoeconomic asset whose future will depend on the interaction of geography, infrastructure, resources, governance, and competition among regional and extra-regional powers.

To be continued ...