

GEOSTRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF WAKHAN CORRIDOR FOR AFGHANISTAN, CHINA AND PAKISTAN

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Abstract

The Wakhan Corridor, a narrow strip of territory in the Badakhshan Province of Afghanistan, is situated at the crossroads of four countries: China, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan. The corridor has great historic value being part of ancient Silk Road. Even today it has great potential for regional connectivity and tourism. The Wakhan territory is considered very peaceful having no law and order problem. If a road is built across Wakhan, it will enhance trade and business activities in the region, especially for Pakistan, Central Asia and Afghanistan. It could offer a shortest trade route for Pakistan to reach Central Asia and for China to reach Afghanistan. In this backdrop the paper examines the possibilities of reviving Wakhan corridor by building roads infrastructure. The study highlights the geostrategic significance of Wakhan Corridor in the context of changing regional situation. It also discusses various challenges in undertaking this proposal.

Keywords: Wakhan Corridor, CPEC, Wakhjir Pass, Central Asia.

Introduction

China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is providing great opportunities and avenues for regional connectivity and economic cooperation. As a flagship project of BRI, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has entered in the second phase of implementation. Meanwhile China, Nepal and India are exploring the possibilities of cooperation in building Trans-Himalayan corridor and jointly benefiting from mountains' resources such as water, energy and tourism. Like Trans-Himalayan cooperation, Trans Wakhan corridor cooperation is another opportunity that requires a debate on the prospects and challenges in the operationalisation of this corridor.

Geographically the Wakhan Corridor is unique as it is situated at the crossroads of four countries: China, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan. The corridor is a narrow strip of territory in the Badakhshan Province of Afghanistan. In south it shares a 300 km with Pakistan, on its northeast and west direction it has over 260 km boarder with Tajikistan, and 74 km with China. The Wakhan Corridor appeared as a bridge among the nations with great mountains ranges on the Silk Route. During the

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19th century, Wakhan corridor was built with the purpose of a buffer zone between Britain and Russia as a result of great geopolitical games. It remained a part of Afghanistan since the colonial times.¹

The Wakhan Corridor is about 350 km long with 16 to 64 km wide, connects China with Afghanistan and separate Tajikistan from Pakistan. The western side having Panj River Valley called Lower Wakhan, whereas in east Pamir river and valleys of Wakhan with their tributaries called Upper Wakhan. Move along the east in Upper Wakhan, there are the wonderful sight of three enormous mountain ranges joining at the Pamir Knot usually named as Bam-e-Duniya (Roof of the World).

Mir Ali Mardan Shah was the ruler of Wakhan who wanted the merger of his khanate in Chitral but the British discouraged him. The Great Britain and Russia formed the 'Pamir Boundary Commission' to define their sphere of influence in Wakhan in March 1895. According to the agreement the commission identified a territory, as a buffer zone, which was thereafter lied within the domain of Abdur Rahman, emir of Afghanistan. As per the agreement: "Her Britannic Majesty's and the Government of His Majesty the Emperor of Russia engage to abstain from exercising any political influence or control-the former to the north, the latter to the south-of the above line of demarcation."² However, then the British Government was not interested to share a border with Russia. The purpose was to create a buffer zone so it was decided that: "the territory lying within the British sphere of influence between the Hindu Kush and the line running from the east end of Lake Victoria to the Chinese frontier shall form part of the territory of the Amir of Afghanistan; that it shall not be annexed to Great Britain; and that no military posts or forts shall be established in it."³

Wakhan is the shortest trade route for Pakistan to reach Central Asia and for China to enter Afghanistan. The famous Broghal Pass (Chitral) is serving as the most important gateway for Pakistan to Wakhan Corridor. Historically there had been no law and order issue in Wakhan and "no highway robbery or theft is committed in the Wakhan territory."⁴ Even during recent decades this area has experienced a relative peace as compared to other areas of Afghanistan. "These peaceful, but environmentally challenging surroundings are home to around 12,000 people living in small settlements and encampments, isolated from the rest of the country by the Hindu Kush."⁵ The local population of Wakhan is nomads whose source of income is keeping cattle.

The history bears witness to the fact that the strategic importance of this area has kept the surrounding countries hot on its trail. These countries include Afghanistan, Turkey, Iran and recently India, Pakistan, Russia and China. Chitral district in Pakistan is connected to Wakhan through several passages in the Hindukush making it a gateway to central Asia for the country.⁶ This corridor is getting much renewed attention in the context of CPEC even though it was neglected by the authorities in the past. Furthermore, Pakistan is accelerating its efforts to curb cross border terrorism through border management and by creating an economic interdependence with Afghanistan. The economic interdependence between Pakistan and Afghanistan may lead in ending enmity between the two countries.⁷

Wakhan Corridor as a trade route has long been used by Europeans and Chinese to access Indian Ocean through the Arabian Sea Coasts as a crucial connectivity point of Silk Route. External interventions and other happenings such as the Great Game between Britain and Russia in 1838, Chinese Communist Revolution in 1949, Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1980s and later invasion the US, NATO and coalition forces in Afghanistan since 2001.⁸ Actually all these developments did not provide a conducive environment for regional connectivity. Another factor was the difficult terrain and lack of road infrastructure and building totally new infrastructure would require huge investment.

Wakhan corridor would acquire a great geostrategic significance for Afghanistan, China and Pakistan due to changing regional alignments. The Wakhjir Pass opening from China will indubitably enhance regional trade and associations; however, India may feel concerned as this outflanking manoeuvre of running up of the Wakhan Corridor will integrate Afghanistan with China and Pakistan that would undermine its efforts of linking Afghanistan to India through Chabahr Port.⁹ Further as per its previous practice of opposing CPEC, it might show its concerns especially in the context of Jammu and Kashmir. Many believe India cannot remain aloof of these regional connectivity openings for a long time. It will ultimately request to join CPEC which is an important project economic growth of South Asia.¹⁰ This way India would be able to get benefit of energy resources of Central Asia for its economic development especially after its membership of SCO that requires all its members to “work together as active partners within the SCO to pursue common objectives of development, peace and security.”¹¹

Geo-Political Significance for Afghanistan

The opening of Wakhan Corridor will enhance political influence of Afghanistan and help in balancing its relations with major powers and the regional countries. It will enhance access of Afghan government to these areas and help it in building infrastructure and uplifting the living standards of the poor people in the area. Although the area has been very peaceful in the past but now some militant groups are establishing their footsteps in the region¹² and may exploit grievances of the poor people. For the long run to make this area to remain politically stable, the opening of the route and building of infrastructure would be useful for Afghanistan’s political future.

Central Asian States can reach out to the Indian Ocean through Afghanistan either via Iran or Pakistan, giving Afghanistan a great geo-political and geo-economic position in the region. Wakhan Corridor was controlled and managed by China in the past as a part of the old Silk route in North Eastern part of the Afghanistan. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the late nineties and the US invasion of Afghanistan in the early 2000 wreaked havoc on the country, and the pending projects of building further trade routes to connect Afghanistan with other countries lay forgotten. Many experts believe the situation is not different even today despite after the drawdown of the US and NATO forces from Afghanistan. They believe, “much desired stability for economic

development is not likely to be achieved due to Afghan culture and strategies of extra regional and regional powers to pursue their interests".¹³

Even though Afghanistan is a land locked country but the history shows it has been an important part of the old Silk trade route via Wakhan Corridor that connected China with Europe. But today Afghanistan has become a victim of proxies of conflicting interests of various regional and extra regional powers. This situation presents a gloomy picture as far as Afghanistan's prosperity and development is concerned. Further to geo-politics, Afghanistan is also facing multifarious internal challenges due to its difficult terrain and socio-cultural problem. "About 80 percent of Afghanistan comprises of tough mountains with poor communication facilities. Besides its landscape, its ethnic tribal culture, peculiar demography, and the concerns of regional and global powers kept the social development a distinct reality".¹⁴

There is no doubt that Afghanistan is showing interests in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and is taking measures to develop domestic projects in line with regional connectivity such as North-South Corridors but practically, there are many issues that need the attention. The Afghan government should enhance its capacity to properly address the internal security challenges such as corruption and terrorism.¹⁵ Hasan Yaser Malik in his research on 'Stability in Afghanistan' has rightly pointed out that the ethnic division in the Afghanistan did not allow any government to implement its policies. He argues that:

*Ethnically divided Afghan warlords have always dominated the weak governments and have continuously struggled to influence each other. Such circumstances never allowed any government to formulate and implement foreign, trade and defence policies. As a result the governments could not concentrate on social development. Therefore, today the social, educational and communication facilities in Afghanistan are weak and its people mostly depend on Pakistan for food, medical and trade facilities.*¹⁶

Many believe that Afghanistan's reliance on China will increase in the post US/NATO drawdown of forces. Afghanistan's inclusion in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) would have a positive impact on its economic development. It will regain its politico-economic significance and emerge as a regional hub by linking North and East Asian countries to South and West Asian countries.¹⁷

The geo-political value of Afghanistan will be enhanced with the opening of Wakhan corridor as it will emerge an additional/ subsidiary route to Indian Ocean in combination with Karakoram Highway through Pakistan.¹⁸ It will further strengthen Afghanistan's strategic and cooperative partnership with China. Afghanistan can use this corridor as bargain chip in its relation with Pakistan and India. It will also enhance Afghanistan's strategic value in regional organisations such as SCO and SAARC.

Economic Significance

Reviving the Wakhan Corridor appears to be progressively suitable keeping in view the right time for intra-regional trade, as Iran, Russia, China and Pakistan have

convergence of interests along with Indian desire to connect with Central Asia, reflects a change in regional thinking i.e. pursuing geo-economics along with geo-politics. China's Belt and Road Initiative coincides with President Ashraf Ghani's proposal of making Afghanistan a regional hub for transit trade and Pakistan's designs of making Gwadar Port a mean to regional connectivity will help Afghanistan's integration in China's Belt and Road Initiative. In 1991, the trade between the Central Asia states was 20 percent of all trade in the region. Today, the intra-regional trade in Central Asia has decreased and reached at 3.5 percent, a consequent of the fragmentation of 'joint production processes'. "Reinvigorating intra-regional trade with access to Chinese inputs would be an efficient strategy to restore productive capacity for value-added manufacturing in a region now characterised by primary exports".¹⁹

Due to its closeness to the Karakoram Highway (KKH) the Wakhan Corridor would be linked with the US \$ 46 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a mega infrastructure investment project [US \$ 62 billion] which China developed "to transform the region into a strategic energy nexus through pipelines, power grids and railways." It will not only provide market access to Afghanistan for exporting its oil and energy products but will also help it in getting electricity for its 43 percent population who at present has no access to electricity. Most notably, Wakhan offers an alternative route bypassing troubled areas of Afghanistan. Further, it will reduce Afghanistan's dependency on Pakistan. Afghanistan's one third trade with Pakistan accounts for a trade deficit currently valued at 37.4 percent of GDP.²⁰ China has strategic and economic interests in Afghanistan. In line with these interests China is making efforts to develop and improve infrastructure in areas close to Wakhan Corridor.²¹ These infrastructural developments would also offer economic opportunities for Afghanistan.

The entire corridor is additionally critical for biodiversity preservation and there are no less than three potential ensured ranges that may soon be developed- the Big Pamir, Teggermansu and the Wakhjir Valley. These ranges together guarantee that the Wakhan Corridor is perceived universally as an area of significance for biodiversity.²²

Security Significance

Some insurgent groups such as Harakat Al-Mujahedeen's, Jund-ul-Allah, Tahrir-e-Taliban Pakistan, and Islamic Movement of Turkestan (IMT) have been using Wakhan Corridor. 'Practically an open and porous Tajik border alongside the strip of this corridor may turn it very soon into a serious headache for almost all Central Asian countries'²³ Badakhshan province located in northeast of Afghanistan was one of the most secure provinces. It was the only province, which was controlled fully by anti-Taliban groups when US intervened in the year after the withdrawal of coalition forces, in that province insurgents started growing in strategic places where this province shares border with Pakistan, China and Tajikistan. The presence of the Taliban in that strategic location is not only a threat to the Afghan government, but also can be a big threat to regional countries.²⁴ The militant groups have located themselves in Warduj and Baharak districts of Badakhshan province are economically and strategically

important. There are a variety of claims regarding the motives for their presence in that area. Their presence can be more dangerous with the current concerns created by ISIS in the region.²⁵

Geopolitical Significance for China

Chinese Wakhjir and Tegermansu Passes provide connection between Caspian Region and India. By controlling these passes China can enhance its position in the region in two ways: first it can get economic and strategic benefits; secondly it can reinforce its relations with Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Wakhan Corridor is one of the important options available to China in regional connectivity. The route is surrounded by Pakistan in the south and by Tajikistan in the north. Both Pakistan and Tajikistan have close cooperation with China. Further, it can fill in as an auxiliary to the current route via Jalalabad and Chitral connecting Pakistan and Afghanistan. Normally the route would be used from time to time when in winter the Lawari Top is closed. From the geo-politically perspective, China would like to stabilise Afghanistan by providing economic and security assistance.²⁶

Opening of Afghan-China fringe through the Wakhan Corridor over the remote 47-mile outskirts between the two nations would link China to Central Asia, Europe and Gulf countries. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani visited in October 2014. He recommended President Xi that China and Afghanistan should join hands in setting up a vehicle interface along their border at the easternmost tip of the Wakhan Corridor.²⁷

Clearly it appears that China is getting ready to open Wakhjir Pass as it has begun some infrastructural work in the Wakhjir Pass; where it has built the road up to 10 km short of the border crossing point, leaving the rest to time of its choice and domination. In addition, China has developed a supply terminal for its fringe police. It has improved its communication capacity by setting up cell phone centres and by placing the optical cable line for web/internet based offices. Cell phone centres. India has been propagating that the Chinese were occupied in delving in a passage/tunnel at Wakhjir Pass.²⁸

Economic Significance

The trade between China and Afghanistan gradually enhanced since 2001 onwards and as a result China emerged as major exporter in Afghanistan. China is also contributing positively for economic uplift of Afghanistan especially developing its natural resources and infrastructure.²⁹ Currently, China is engaged in an Aynak Copper mining venture worth US \$ 3.4 billion in the eastern Afghanistan; south of Kabul. This world's biggest copper deal is an eye sour for the US. In recent years China has invested US \$ 4 billion as it has signed a 30 year agreement with Afghanistan.³⁰ According to Afghan officials estimate, Afghanistan has minerals worth of US \$ 1 trillion comprising copper, iron ore, rare earth elements, aluminum, gold, silver, zinc, mercury and lithium. According to some media reports, 'US President Donald Trump is eyeing Afghanistan's mineral wealth to help pay for a 16-year war and reconstruction efforts that have already cost US \$ 117 billion.'³¹

Opening up of Wakhan Corridor will make existing and future energy pipeline and other economic projects more secure. China and Tajikistan are planning to establish a free trade zone in Taxkorgan, Tajikistan close to Uygur autonomous region in Xinjiang. China is Tajikistan's 3rd largest trade partner with bilateral trade volume surpassing \$ 2 billion in 2012, 15 times that of a decade ago. Beijing has agreed to extend \$ 1 billion credit to Dushanbe. US \$ 600 million have been provided to Tajikistan for construction of a cement factory in the south of Tajikistan. And new credit came on top of the \$ 900 million for building new roads, tunnels and electricity lines. Tajikistan has leased out some 600 hectares of agricultural land to a Chinese in its South. Any trade being made through Wakhjir and Tegermansu Passes will add to the economy of China, further improving its status in the region.³²

To be sure, China turned into the principal outside nation in decades to sign an oil exploration agreement with Afghanistan, making it workable for the later to get US \$ 7 billion over coming 25 years. The geo-economic imperatives of Afghanistan and Chinese massive investment in Afghanistan show the desire of both the sides to further consolidate their ties especially in the economic cooperation. Presently, many Chinese companies are involved in various economic and development projects in Afghanistan. It is likely that soon China would be the largest investor in Afghanistan's huge energy and mineral resources.³³

Security Interests

China's engagement in the Wakhan corridor remained limited due to geographical constraints. Further, the reason that China is still considering whether to officially open the Wakhan corridor or not, even though Afghanistan has asked China several times to open Wakhan, because it serves not only as a business route, but the treading pathway of human trafficking and drug flow as well. In fact, China's foremost interest of not opening up to Wakhan is to prevent the spread of terrorism, particularly terrorist movement in Wakhan corridor.

Opening of linkage with neighbouring Kyrgzs and Wakhis will not only improve their lifestyle, but will also add to a sympathetic tone from the entire population of the Wakhan Corridor in particular and Afghanistan in general. By winning the hearts of all the Muslims of Tajikistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan can ease out Indian projected Chinese concerns of possible terrorism in its neighbouring Muslim.

China will have an exceptional opportunity by connecting Beijing through road networks across the region which in turn will provide it an edge over rivals in its venture for Central Asia's New Great Game. Through a nexus of rich Central Asian States in terms of oil and natural resources besides China's mammoth trade potential will put its competitors in a perturbed situation. Since Afghanistan is one of the important countries in the prevalent regional geo-strategic scenario therefore, China will have the prospect to overwhelm India and carry out uninterrupted trade activities across Central Asia and the Arabian Sea through Gwadar Port of Pakistan. The completion of One Belt-One Road initiative will serve as a benign trade and

transportation route for the landlocked Afghanistan and other Central Asian Republics by having a secure and cost effective trade route. This also will dissuade the emerging influence of extra-regional powers such as Japan and the United States and facilitate China to solely triumph in the New Great Game.³⁴

Geopolitical Significance for Pakistan

Pakistan can greatly benefit from the Wakhan Corridor as its northern highlands along Chitral provide an excellent trade route linking Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asian States through Wakhan Corridor. The 250 kilometres passage starting from Broghal Pass may connect Chitral with Afghanistan via Mastuj and Booni.³⁵ The proposed route can help a great deal to balance the Indian influence in Afghanistan by building/upgrading existing link road from Shandur to Gilgit via Gahkuch and Singul to Karakorum Highway. Further it may serve as an alternate for another route through Wakhjir Pass which due to harsh climatic conditions remained closed for about five months every year.

If the Wakhan Corridor plan gets operational, it will help in countering India's plan to isolate Pakistan in the region. This makes it all the more important for Pakistan to open all passages in the Hindu Kush mountain range that access Wakhan Corridor including Ochhili Pass (5553 meters high), Khan Khun Pass (4985 meters high), Broghal Pass (3801 meters high), Darwaz Pass (3893 meters high) and Karambar Pass (4358 meters high) to suit its geo-political scenario.³⁶

On May 27, 2017, the first meeting of China-Pakistan-Afghanistan Practical Cooperation Dialogue was held in Beijing. During the session, the three countries agreed upon trilateral cooperation and to undertake practical measures for regional security and cooperation.³⁷ In 2016, Pakistan, Afghanistan, China and Tajikistan formed a joint force to counter terrorism named as QCCM (Quadilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism). The alliance was formulated on the understanding that all four countries will provide support to each other in intelligence sharing, capacity building, training/exercises, situation evaluation and counter terrorism. It was also agreed upon that all the decisions at QCCM would be made in consensus with all members.³⁸

A Tripartite meeting of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan was held on July 6, 2017 in Dushanbe where Emomali Rahmon President of the Republic of Tajikistan, Muhammad Ashraf Ghani, the President of the Republic of Afghanistan, Muhammad Nawaz Sharif then Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan discussed the significance of regional connectivity and transit trade potential. Further implementations of development projects including highways, railways and trade routes was also discussed and deemed important during this meeting. It was also agreed that the building of trade routes will attract investment in the region and will help the transport and energy sector as well.³⁹

Economic Significance

The route proposed here will not only elevate Pakistan's economy but will also increase the trade with Central Asian States. This will help Pakistan to repay its foreign debts. Low debt will allow the country to be more variant in its foreign policy that could benefit the national interest rather than limiting it due to poor economic condition. The connectivity of Pakistan to Central Asia will also allow the exploration of natural mineral resources for example, uranium which holds great importance for all stake holders in the region.⁴⁰ For Landlocked countries such as Central Asian States distance coefficient of gravity model is 5.5% (every 1% decrease in distance from port increases the trade by 5.5% and CPEC will decrease this distance by 22%). It is expected that Pakistan's trade with Central Asian countries would increase manifold. The northeastern Badakhshan province of Afghanistan is bordering China, Pakistan and Tajikistan through Wakhan Corridor. The province has large scale natural resources such as Azure, Gold, Ruby and Diamond mines in addition to Copper and Iron.⁴¹ Pakistan and China can help Afghanistan in exploring these natural resources.

Afghanistan has assumed the role of contemporary epicenter for energy producing Central Asia with growing energy markets of India and China that connect through the CPEC project. The construction of supply depots in Wakhan Corridor and establishing border access routes, auxiliary facilitate China to access Afghanistan's natural resources. In addition, with the inclusion of India and Pakistan as permanent members in SCO there is also prospective chance to soon materialize the TAPI project as well. However, the regional prosperity and the economic growth in Central Asia are particularly linked with the question of enduring peace and stability in Afghanistan.⁴²

However, the opening of Wakhan Corridor will provide an alternate route to Central Asian countries and Russia by avoiding troubled region of Afghanistan. China is helping Pakistan to stay away from the last's "circle" by India. With China protecting its "all climate" partner Pakistan, India may seek the United States for help with forming occasions in Afghanistan.

Security Interests

Opening up of the Wakhan Corridor will assist in Pakistan's security and strategic interests by enabling an increase military posture and countermeasures against Indian intrusions in Gilgit-Baltistan from Ladakh region. The areas across Qala Panja, Mintaka and Wakhjir Passes interlink Gilgit-Baltistan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan particularly such an interlinked connection was further reinforced in 1996 with China's construction of concrete-base suspension bridges in the valleys of Darel, Yasin, Gupis, Shigar and Tangir. Moreover, the Darel and Tangir bridges connect with the Indus right-bank road as an interchange for protractible supply line towards the KKH; one of world's highly intercepted air targets. The susceptible strangle points of Indus valley and Gilgit town are also sidestepped besides these bridges connect the districts of Diamer and Ghizer with Swat. Whereas, Pakistan is connected with Tajikistan through the bridges of Gupis and Yasin that also serve as an offsetting factor against prospective Afghan progression through Wakhan Corridor into the Ghizer and Hunza districts.⁴³

Meanwhile, these bridges offer a parallel way in to the Chitral district amidst winter months when it usually gets obstructed and merely becomes reachable through Afghanistan. Similarly, the Shigar Bridge alternately serves as a supply line towards Siachen and Shaksgam sectors of Baltistan. During the Kargil War, the Chorbat, Masherbrum and Salto valleys witnessed intense Indian attacks whereas; the Shigar Bridge assisted Pakistan to maintain its significant military presence in the Nubra-Turtuk sectors.⁴⁴ Wakhan can serve as an important trade corridor. It is in the interest of China, Pakistan and Afghanistan, if a road is developed across Wakhan. This will enhance trade and business activities, especially in Chitral and Afghanistan. While discussing the prospects and geo-strategic importance of operationalising Wakhan Corridor, it is equally important to discuss the challenges to initiate such plan.

Challenges in Reviving Wakhan Corridor

There are various challenges in undertaking in reviving the Wakhan Corridor. Firstly, the terrain is very difficult in building road infrastructure and would require huge investment. Secondly, China is reluctant in opening/building Wakhan corridor due to issue of terrorism. Third, India as per its previous practice of opposing CPEC, may feel concerned as this outflanking manoeuvre of opening up in the Wakhan Corridor will further integrate Afghanistan with China and Pakistan. India is making propaganda to tarnish the image of China among the Afghan population. A former Indian Army Chief Gen. V.K. Singh has termed China's role in the region as an outflanking move. He added that "India risks losing the influence it has in Afghanistan because of a China-Pakistan link that is getting stronger and is seen in evidence here,"⁴⁵ India can hire the services of terrorists like the IS to damage Pakistan and Chinese interest in and around Wakhan. The Indian secret service, RAW is very active in Afghanistan. At least thirteen IS fighters of India were killed when the US dropped the mother of all bombs on the cave complex in the Tora Bora mountain in Nangarhar province.⁴⁶

India realized the importance of Wakhan long before. It renovated Farkhar airbase in Tajikistan at a cost of 350 million rupees in 2007 to keep watch on the moves of China and Pakistan in the region. It extended the runway so that its jet fighters could land at the base. India has also constructed three hangars at Farkhor base. This strategic investment has given India an exceptional watch tower. But India can no longer base its fighters and helicopters there because of Russian pressure.⁴⁷

India wants to further its interests in Central Asia as well as to reach the north-west front of Pakistan in minutes and keep a check on the western front of China. Strategically, it provides major support to the Indian Army operating in Afghanistan and Siachen.⁴⁸ Indian fighter planes flew from Tajikistan and bombed the Taliban positions in northern Afghanistan. The former President Pervez Musharraf objected to the use of Farkhor airbase by India. He said "Farkhor air base of India is a real concern, Indian planes would be able to reach Pakistan within minutes using the air base."⁴⁹ Russia is suspicious of the Indian activities, especially its tilt towards the US and asked

Tajikistan not to allow India to use its bases. Pakistan and China can join Russia to counter the Indian moves in the region.

Recommendations

- Chinese and Afghan officials are discussing the possibility of building modern road and rail connections and even an oil pipeline through Wakhan Corridor. With the Opening of the corridor, Afghanistan's dependency on India will decrease and Indian influence on Central Asian Countries will also be diluted. It will be a serious setback to Indian efforts to isolate Pakistan. It is very important for Pakistan to integrate itself with the Central Asian Countries. Efforts to improve relations with Afghanistan should continue both at bilateral and multilateral levels.
- Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and Tajikistan Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM) to counter terrorism should be strengthened as opening up of Wakhan Corridor would require peaceful environment free of militant groups such as the IS and its affiliated groups.
- One important step in the fight against terrorism is to stop the movement of terrorists between Pakistan and Afghanistan through effective border management. With cooperation already underway with regard to Islamic State, the armies of Pakistan and Afghanistan should now extend this collaboration to counter militant groups in and around Wakhan corridor.
- In case Afghanistan continues providing space to India while ignoring Pakistan's interest, then Pakistan should enhance its influence in Wakhan corridor and use it as a pressure tactic to compel the Afghan government and its security forces to stop cross border terrorist incursions into Pakistan.

Conclusion

The Wakhan Corridor has a great Geo-strategic significance for Afghanistan, China and Pakistan. The opening of this corridor will have serious implications for regional and global players involved in Afghanistan, especially India and the US. Today, most of the countries, including US would support opening of this corridor through Wakhjir Pass. However, India may show its concerns as it did in case of CPEC. Being located on the crossroads between energy rich Central Asian States, and Caspian Region and oil rich Strait of Hurmoz; Pakistan has a few implications over it which it needs to handle very pragmatically in line with the interest of the regional powers. To get maximum benefits Pakistan should continue its pledge in building cooperation with China, Afghanistan and Tajikistan. The paper has discussed the Geo-strategic significance of using Wakhan Corridor for regional connectivity arguing that opening of this route will create a conducive environment for peace, stability and economic development in the region. It will also help Pakistan to improve its diplomatic and economic strength being a part of this corridor.

NOTES

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