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Part-2

Wakhan, Roads, Natural Resources and the Rivalry of Powers: From Transport Corridor to Geoeconomic Arena

The first part of this study examined the geographical and strategic foundations of Wakhan and Badakhshan. This section turns from geography to geoeconomics and examines how geographical position can be transformed into economic, commercial and strategic power.

The central issues are the Wakhan road, regional trade, the mineral resources of Badakhshan, investment, national ownership of natural resources, governance and transparency in extraction, followed by the interests and competing strategies of China, Pakistan, India, Iran, Tajikistan, Russia and the United States.

From Strategic Geography to Geoeconomic Power

The significance of Wakhan does not arise solely from its local geography. It derives from its position at the intersection of several geopolitical spaces. The more important question, therefore, is how this geographical position could be converted into economic, commercial and strategic influence.

In the twenty-first century, geography becomes a source of power when it is connected with infrastructure, capital, resources, security and communication networks. From this perspective, the Wakhan road acquires particular significance. A road is, in itself, an instrument of economic connectivity; but in a sensitive border region it can simultaneously facilitate market access, the movement of goods, greater state presence, access to natural resources and changes in regional security calculations.

At the same time, the importance of the Wakhan road should not be exaggerated. The existence of a road does not automatically create a successful international corridor. For a local route to develop into a regional corridor, several conditions must exist simultaneously: security, an operational border crossing, trade agreements, customs infrastructure, transport capacity, sufficient markets, investment and relatively stable political relations.

Recent academic research on the Wakhan Corridor similarly argues that China's security concerns take precedence over economic connectivity and that the corridor's strategic importance is asymmetric: it is potentially far more important to Afghanistan than it is to China at present.

This has an important implication for the future strategic development of Wakhan: infrastructure alone cannot determine the corridor's ultimate significance. Its effectiveness will depend on the political and institutional environment in which it operates.

The relevant question is therefore not simply whether a road can physically connect Afghanistan with China. The deeper issue is whether infrastructure development can generate a sustained combination of economic, security and political changes capable of altering Afghanistan's position within the wider Asian connectivity network.

The Wakhan Road: Between Domestic Development and Regional Connectivity

Afghanistan is a landlocked country, and dependence on neighbouring states for access to international markets has been a longstanding economic and strategic challenge. Any new route capable of diversifying Afghanistan's external connectivity can therefore have considerable significance.

Wakhan offers such a potential opportunity. A direct connection between Afghanistan and China could, under appropriate political, economic and security conditions, provide Afghanistan with more direct access to one of the world's largest economies and bring the country closer to broader Asian trade networks.

Yet geographical connection and economic connectivity are not the same thing. Two countries may be physically connected by a road while actual trade remains limited because transportation costs are high, border infrastructure is inadequate, commercial demand is insufficient, or political conditions restrict the regular movement of goods and people.

The development of the Wakhan route should therefore be understood as a process involving three stages: territorial connection; the establishment of regular flows of goods and people; and, ultimately, integration into a wider regional network of trade and transit.

Wakhan has yet to demonstrate that it can move successfully through all three stages. It is therefore more appropriate at present to regard the road as a potential strategic asset rather than an established economic corridor.

For Afghanistan, however, the political context is fundamental. Without an inclusive, popularly legitimate and accountable system of government capable of representing national interests, infrastructure connectivity risks serving external strategic or commercial interests without generating proportionate benefits for the people of Afghanistan.

The Cost and Difficulties of a Mountain Corridor

The geography of Wakhan is both an opportunity and a constraint.

Its high altitude, severe winters, mountainous terrain, difficult construction conditions and high infrastructure-maintenance costs all affect the economic viability of the route. Even if the corridor becomes politically and technically accessible, a fundamental economic question will remain: can goods transported through Wakhan compete in cost and efficiency with existing routes?

This consideration is particularly important for China. China already possesses multiple land and maritime trade routes. A new route becomes strategically significant when it offers a distinctive security, economic or geopolitical advantage.

The 2026 Pacific Focus study similarly emphasizes this asymmetry: Wakhan could provide Afghanistan with an important means of diversifying its connectivity, whereas for China the economic priority remains limited unless security concerns are adequately addressed.

For Afghanistan, the issue is equally significant. Under the present political circumstances, infrastructure development alone cannot guarantee broad national economic benefits. The institutional framework governing the route, trade, taxation, investment and resource extraction will determine who ultimately benefits from greater connectivity.

Badakhshan’s Mineral Resources: National Capital or Source of Competition?

If the Wakhan road represents an element of connectivity, the natural resources of Badakhshan represent another factor capable of increasing the region’s geoeconomic importance.

Available geological assessments identify substantial mineral potential in Badakhshan, including gold and a range of other metallic and non-metallic resources. The U.S. Geological Survey’s Afghanistan mineral assessment specifically identifies the Badakhshan Gold Area of Interest among the country’s significant areas for mineral investigation and potential development.

The existence of mineral occurrences, however, should not automatically be equated with economically recoverable reserves. A scientific distinction must be maintained between a mineral occurrence, a geological resource estimate, a recoverable reserve and a commercially viable mine. Consequently, claims concerning the precise monetary value of Badakhshan’s mineral wealth should be made only where reliable assessments support them.

Nevertheless, the broader point remains clear: Badakhshan possesses considerable mineral diversity and geological potential.

The significance of these resources extends beyond their monetary value. In contemporary political economy, natural resources can become sources of state power, instruments of external influence and objects of geopolitical competition.

The question of Badakhshan’s mineral resources must therefore go beyond what lies beneath the ground. It must also address a broader set of questions: Who will extract these resources? Where will investment capital come from? How will contracts be negotiated? How will revenues be distributed? How much value will remain within Afghanistan? Will extraction lead to domestic processing, or will raw materials simply be exported? Which institutions will supervise contracts and production? Most importantly, will natural resources become a source of national development, or a source of wealth for a narrow group?

These questions are particularly important because the economic value of a mineral resource depends not only on its geological existence but also on the institutions governing its extraction, ownership, taxation, processing and distribution.

Natural Resources and the Principle of Public Ownership

In a modern state system, natural resources cannot properly be treated as the private property of a government, political faction or ruling group. Subsoil resources form part of the national resource base and their exploitation should be governed by law, public interest, transparent contractual arrangements and mechanisms of accountability.

The mineral question in Afghanistan is therefore not merely economic. It concerns sovereignty, political legitimacy, intergenerational justice and national security.

This issue has become particularly important under Afghanistan's present political circumstances. Following the Taliban's return to power, the country's political structure underwent a fundamental transformation. The present system differs substantially from the constitutional order that existed under the former republic. Consequently, any serious assessment of mineral contracts and natural-resource extraction must examine transparency, public access to contractual information, institutional oversight, accountability and the distribution of revenues.

In the absence of effective mechanisms of oversight, transparency, accountability and public access to information concerning mining contracts, infrastructure development can create economic opportunities while simultaneously increasing the risks of opaque extraction, smuggling and unequal exploitation of natural resources.

More fundamentally, without a strong, popularly legitimate and accountable government, Afghanistan's mineral resources cannot be reliably protected as national capital, nor can their exploitation be sustainably guaranteed to serve the interests of the Afghan people as a whole.

This is not simply a political assertion; it is an institutional proposition. The long-term conversion of natural resources into national wealth requires legitimate authority, enforceable rules, transparent contracts, accountable institutions and mechanisms through which the public interest can be protected.

At the same time, a rigorous academic study must distinguish between official claims and independently verifiable facts. Assertions concerning the illegal allocation or extraction of a particular mine should be examined case by case through available contracts, company records, locations, dates, concession arrangements and other documentary evidence.

This distinction strengthens rather than weakens a critical analysis. Official institutions may present policies in terms of investment, employment, revenue generation, transparency and accountability, while the actual implementation of those policies may require independent verification. The analytical task is therefore to distinguish between stated policy and demonstrable practice.

China: Security Before Economics

Among external actors, China occupies a particularly important position because Wakhan lies directly adjacent to China's Xinjiang region.

Any serious analysis of China's policy toward Wakhan must therefore take the security dimension of Xinjiang into account. For Beijing, Afghanistan is not simply a potential market or commercial route; it is a neighbouring country whose instability can have direct or indirect implications for China's internal security.

The 2026 Pacific Focus study argues that China's approach to Wakhan is best understood through a security-development relationship in which security concerns precede economic connectivity. The study concludes that Beijing is unwilling to advance major connectivity initiatives without credible security guarantees.

This has an important implication for the interpretation of infrastructure development in Wakhan. Not every road or infrastructure project should automatically be interpreted as evidence of China's intention to establish a major commercial corridor.

China may have reasons to support limited infrastructure development for border management, security and strategic access without immediately seeking large-scale commercial integration.

If, however, border security improves and the economic conditions become favourable, the same infrastructure could eventually acquire greater commercial significance.

China’s approach may therefore evolve incrementally: security and border control first, followed by limited infrastructure and economic assessment, and potentially broader connectivity if the necessary conditions are established.

Could Wakhan Become Part of the Belt and Road Initiative?

Political commentary sometimes treats every infrastructure project in Afghanistan that has a connection to China as part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Such an assumption is analytically too simplistic.

The Belt and Road Initiative encompasses a broad range of connectivity frameworks and projects. A road leading toward China is not automatically an official BRI project.

Three concepts should therefore be distinguished: Afghanistan’s physical connection with China; China’s strategic and economic interests in that connection; and formal incorporation of a particular project into the Belt and Road framework.

These concepts may overlap, but they are not identical.

Wakhan may therefore possess strategic significance for China even if, in the short term, it does not become a major commercial BRI corridor.

Pakistan: Neighbour, Stakeholder and Alternative Route

Pakistan is one of the most important variables in the Wakhan equation.

Afghanistan has historically depended heavily on Pakistani routes for international trade, and political tensions between Kabul and Islamabad can increase the strategic value of alternative routes.

From Afghanistan’s perspective, the Wakhan road is therefore more than a route to China. In the longer term, it could provide an additional option for diversifying the country’s external trade routes.

The 2026 study of the Wakhan Corridor also links Afghanistan’s increased interest in the route to recent disruptions in Afghanistan-Pakistan trade.

From Pakistan’s perspective, however, the development of northern Afghan trade routes could reduce the relative importance of some Pakistani routes for Afghanistan.

Wakhan could therefore represent both an opportunity and a challenge for Pakistan. Its significance would depend on whether Islamabad views the route primarily as complementary to existing trade networks or as a potential competitor to Pakistan's traditional position in Afghan transit.

India: Concern over a Changing Geography of Connectivity

India cannot assess developments in Wakhan independently of its broader rivalry with Pakistan and its efforts to maintain links with Afghanistan and Central Asia.

India has sought alternative routes to Afghanistan and Central Asia, particularly through Iran. If Wakhan eventually develops into an effective Afghanistan-China route, it could alter part of the wider connectivity equation linking South and Central Asia.

This does not necessarily imply direct Indian-Chinese competition within Wakhan itself. India may be more concerned with the wider strategic consequences of the corridor than with establishing a direct presence in the region.

This illustrates an important feature of contemporary geopolitics: the configuration of routes can influence the strategic behaviour of states even when those states are not physically present along the route.

Iran: Civilizational Links and Geopolitical Calculation

Iran has no direct border with Wakhan, but excluding Iran from an analysis of Badakhshan and the wider Central Asian environment would be equally difficult to justify.

Badakhshan lies within the broader historical and cultural sphere of the Persian-speaking world, and its historical, linguistic and cultural connections with Iran and other Persian-speaking regions are significant. These historical connections should be distinguished from the contemporary foreign policy of the Iranian state, but they remain relevant to a comprehensive understanding of the region.

Geopolitically, Iran also occupies an important position in Afghanistan's access to international waters and regional markets. If Wakhan strengthens

Afghanistan's eastern connectivity, Iran may assess the consequences within the broader competition among regional trade routes and its own role in western Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Iran should therefore be considered at two distinct levels: the historical-civilizational level and the contemporary geopolitical-economic level.

This distinction prevents cultural affinity from being confused with state policy.

Tajikistan and Central Asia

Wakhan lies close to the Pamir region and Tajikistan, making developments there relevant to the wider security environment of Central Asia.

Tajikistan's long border with Afghanistan and its security concerns regarding instability in Afghanistan make it an important actor in the regional environment surrounding Wakhan.

Central Asian states are also interested in diversifying their trade routes. If Afghanistan's road networks develop and complementary infrastructure is established, future connectivity could potentially link parts of Central Asia with markets in South and East Asia.

Again, geographical proximity should not be confused with economic integration. Complementary infrastructure, political agreements, customs arrangements and sufficient trade volumes would all be necessary before such connectivity could become commercially meaningful.

Russia: A Historical Power in a New Regional Environment

Russia remains both a historical and contemporary actor in any broader analysis of Wakhan.

In the nineteenth century, Russia was one of the principal powers involved in the Great Game, and the transformation of Wakhan into a buffer zone was closely connected with Russian-British competition. Kreutzmann's historical study demonstrates how Afghanistan, China, British India and Tsarist Russia shaped the geopolitical configuration surrounding Wakhan during the nineteenth century.

The contemporary environment is very different. Russia is no longer the Soviet Union, while China has acquired a much larger economic role in Central Asia.

Nevertheless, Russia continues to attach importance to the security of Central Asia and its southern strategic environment. The expansion of China's economic influence may therefore represent both an opportunity for cooperation and a potential source of concern regarding the future balance of influence.

Wakhan is consequently part of a broader strategic question: will China's growing role in Central Asia and Afghanistan develop primarily in partnership with Russia, or could it eventually challenge aspects of Russia's traditional influence?

There is no predetermined answer. The outcome will depend on the evolution of relations between Moscow and Beijing as well as on broader changes in the regional security order.

The United States: From Military Presence to Indirect Competition

The role of the United States in the Wakhan equation should be examined cautiously.

During its military presence in Afghanistan, the United States operated within a wider geopolitical environment involving Afghanistan, Central Asia, Pakistan, China and Russia. However, the existence of this broader strategic environment does not by itself establish that every road or mining project in Wakhan formed part of a specific American plan.

This study therefore distinguishes between the former U.S. military presence in Afghanistan and any specific American strategy toward Wakhan.

Nevertheless, if U.S.-China competition in Asia intensifies in the coming years, the strategic significance of areas connecting Afghanistan, Central Asia and China's western frontier could increase.

Under such circumstances, the United States could influence the strategic environment surrounding Wakhan without maintaining a direct presence there, through its relations with India, Pakistan, Central Asian states and other regional partners.

This is consistent with a broader characteristic of twenty-first-century geopolitics: strategic competition increasingly operates through indirect influence, connectivity, partnerships and regional balancing rather than direct territorial confrontation.

Mineral Resources: Opportunity for Development or Resource Curse?

One of the most consequential questions for the future of Badakhshan is how natural resources will affect economic development.

Mineral resources can generate investment, employment, government revenue, infrastructure and exports. Yet in states with weak institutions, natural-resource wealth can produce the opposite outcome, contributing to corruption, economic concentration, smuggling, external dependency and political instability.

This phenomenon is widely discussed in political-economy literature as the "resource curse."

Badakhshan could therefore face two contrasting trajectories:

Resources → investment → infrastructure → employment → public revenue → development

or:

Resources → monopoly → opaque extraction → capital outflow → public discontent → competition and instability.

Which trajectory ultimately prevails will depend less on the quantity of resources than on the quality of governance surrounding their extraction and use.

The central issue is therefore not simply how much mineral wealth Afghanistan possesses. It is what kind of political and institutional order can transform mineral resources into national capital.

For Afghanistan, this question is inseparable from political legitimacy. Without a strong, popularly legitimate and accountable government, mineral wealth cannot be reliably protected as national capital, nor can its exploitation be sustainably guaranteed to serve the interests of the Afghan people as a whole.

Roads and Minerals: Two Sides of the Same Equation

The relationship between the two principal subjects of this section now becomes clear.

Without roads and transport infrastructure, the extraction of many mineral resources remains difficult and expensive.

Conversely, without resources and trade, the economic justification for some expensive infrastructure projects may be weakened.

Roads can therefore improve access to mineral deposits, while mineral development can strengthen the economic rationale for infrastructure.

This interaction is central to the geoeconomic significance of Wakhan and Badakhshan.

Yet the same relationship creates a potential danger. If infrastructure is developed before effective systems of transparent resource governance are established, roads may facilitate faster extraction and transportation of raw materials without generating corresponding benefits for the Afghan population.

In such circumstances, infrastructure could reinforce the economic position of powerful domestic and external actors rather than contribute to broad-based national development.

The alternative is a development model in which infrastructure is accompanied by domestic processing, taxation, protection of local communities, environmental safeguards and transparent contractual arrangements. Under such conditions, infrastructure could contribute to sustainable economic development and greater national value creation.

Wakhan and the Question of National Sovereignty

Wakhan is also a significant case through which to examine the meaning of national sovereignty in contemporary Afghanistan.

A state that cannot effectively manage its natural resources, borders and transport networks may possess formal legal sovereignty while exercising limited practical control over its territory and economic assets.

Modern sovereignty is therefore more than military control of borders.

It also requires the state to possess the capacity to:

- register and manage natural resources;
- establish rules for extraction;
- collect taxes;
- supervise contracts;

- protect the environment;
- safeguard the rights of local communities;
- prevent smuggling; and
- convert resource revenues into public benefits.

From this perspective, the future of Wakhan will depend not only on which external power becomes more influential in the surrounding region, but also on whether Afghanistan itself develops the institutional capacity to transform its geographical position and natural resources into instruments of national power.

Competition Among Powers: Territory or Access?

An important feature of contemporary geopolitics is that competition among major powers does not necessarily take the form of territorial occupation.

States can compete over access to roads, markets, resources, ports, minerals, information, energy networks and strategic points of connectivity.

Wakhan may therefore become less a battlefield for direct confrontation than an arena of competition over access and influence.

China may prioritize the security of its western frontier.

Pakistan may be concerned about changes in regional trade routes.

India may assess the consequences for the regional balance of power.

Russia may focus on Central Asian security and the changing distribution of influence.

Iran may assess the consequences for regional connectivity and its position within wider trade networks.

The United States may view developments through the broader framework of strategic competition with China.

These interests are neither identical nor necessarily permanently antagonistic. Cooperation may emerge in some areas while competition intensifies in others.

The future of Wakhan is therefore unlikely to be a purely zero-sum contest. It is more likely to involve a combination of cooperation, competition and balancing.

Wakhan: Economic Corridor, Security Corridor, or Both?

On the basis of the available evidence, three broad interpretations of Wakhan's future can be proposed.

The first is that Wakhan could develop into a commercial corridor, increasing Afghanistan's connectivity with China and potentially wider Asian markets.

The second is that Wakhan could remain primarily a security corridor whose principal importance lies in border control, preventing militant infiltration and managing regional security.

The third—and, in this study, the more plausible—possibility is a combination of both.

Under this scenario, Wakhan would initially acquire greater importance as a security and border-management corridor. If credible security conditions, infrastructure, trade arrangements and economic incentives subsequently emerge, its commercial function could gradually expand.

This interpretation is broadly consistent with the findings of the 2026 Pacific Focus study, which places security considerations ahead of economic connectivity in China's approach to Wakhan.

Potential Economic Benefits of Improved Connectivity for Badakhshan

If the Wakhan road eventually develops into an active commercial route, Badakhshan could benefit through:

- greater access to foreign markets;
- lower transportation costs for some goods;
- increased commercial activity;
- expansion of transport and logistics services;
- employment opportunities;
- increased economic value of land and infrastructure; and
- improved conditions for mineral development and processing.

Yet these benefits cannot be assumed to occur automatically.

If most commercial activity simply passes through the region while value is created elsewhere, the impact on the local economy could remain limited.

The objective of future economic policy should therefore not be merely to facilitate the movement of goods through Wakhan. It should be to ensure that a meaningful proportion of economic value is created and retained within Afghanistan.

The same principle applies to mineral resources. If raw materials are extracted and exported without domestic processing, Afghanistan's share of the final value will remain limited. If processing facilities, supporting industries and domestic value chains are developed, natural resources could instead become an engine of broader economic development.

Environmental and Community Considerations

Any major infrastructure or mining development in Wakhan must also be assessed in relation to the region's fragile natural environment.

Wakhan is a high-altitude mountainous environment in which road construction and mineral extraction could affect water resources, grazing land, wildlife, soil and the livelihoods of local communities.

Economic development without environmental assessment can create long-term costs that are not reflected in initial financial calculations.

Major mining contracts and infrastructure projects should therefore be assessed not only in terms of financial return but also in terms of environmental impact, social consequences and the long-term interests of local communities.

This consideration will become increasingly important in future decades, particularly as water resources, ecological stability and high-altitude environments acquire greater strategic and economic value.

Conclusion to Part Two

Wakhan is moving from a stage in which its importance was primarily geographical and security-related toward a potentially more complex stage in which infrastructure, natural resources and economic competition may reinforce one another.

The Wakhan road could increase Afghanistan's connectivity with China, but transforming that physical connection into a functioning economic corridor will depend on security, border infrastructure, trade volumes, economic viability and stable political relations.

Badakhshan's mineral resources provide another potential source of geoeconomic significance. Geological assessments have identified important mineral potential in the province, including the Badakhshan Gold Area of Interest. These resources could become a major opportunity for national development, but without effective governance, transparency and institutional oversight, they could instead become sources of corruption, competition, unequal distribution and the outward transfer of national wealth.

The political and institutional question is therefore inseparable from the economic one. Without a strong, popularly legitimate and accountable government, Afghanistan cannot reliably ensure that its mineral resources are protected as national capital or that their exploitation serves the broader interests of its people.

China occupies a particularly important position in the Wakhan equation, but recent research indicates that Beijing's approach should not be interpreted solely through an economic lens. Security along China's western frontier remains a fundamental consideration, and economic connectivity is conditional upon credible security arrangements.

Pakistan, India, Tajikistan, Iran, Russia and the United States each approach the region from different strategic perspectives. Wakhan could therefore become a point where competition over connectivity, natural resources and security increasingly intersect.

Ultimately, the future of Wakhan will not be determined by a single external power. Its trajectory will emerge from the interaction of geography, infrastructure, security, natural resources, governance and the competing interests of regional and extra-regional powers.

Yet the fundamental questions remain.

If current trends continue, what might Wakhan become over the next five, ten or twenty years? Could it develop into a commercial corridor, remain primarily a security zone on China's periphery, or emerge as a major geoeconomic region through the development of Badakhshan's mineral resources? To what extent could intensifying U.S.-China competition enhance its strategic significance? Could Russia and the Central Asian states respond to prevent a major shift in the regional balance of influence?

Above all, will Afghanistan be able to transform the exceptional geographical position of Wakhan and the natural wealth of Badakhshan into instruments of national economic power and effective sovereignty, or will these geographical and natural advantages once again become instruments of competition among others?

These questions provide the foundation for Part Three, which moves beyond the assessment of present conditions to examine the possible future trajectories of Wakhan and Badakhshan through historical, economic, security and geopolitical scenarios.

To be continued