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Part-3

The Future of the Wakhan and Badakhshan: Geopolitical Scenarios, Strategic Competition, and Afghanistan's Future

The first two parts of this study demonstrated that the Wakhan cannot be understood simply as a remote territory, a border crossing, or a road-construction project. Its geographical position adjacent to China, its links with Central and South Asia, and the economic and mineral potential of Badakhshan place the region within broader geopolitical and geo-economic dynamics across Asia.

The central question at this stage is therefore no longer why the Wakhan matters, but how its strategic significance may evolve and whether Afghanistan will be capable of using that significance in pursuit of its national interests.

The future of the Wakhan is not predetermined. It would be premature to conclude that the region will become a major commercial corridor within the next ten or twenty years. Equally, its role cannot simply be reduced to security. Its future will depend on a combination of factors, including security, infrastructure, Afghanistan–China relations, the Afghan economy, natural resources, regional competition, and, above all, the political and governance conditions prevailing in Afghanistan.

For this reason, the future of the Wakhan is better examined through plausible scenarios and observable trends than through deterministic predictions.

Security: The Fundamental Condition for Connectivity

There is little doubt that China is fully aware of the Wakhan's economic and geopolitical potential. Nevertheless, any decision by Beijing regarding largescale investment and connectivity is likely to remain strongly influenced by its security assessment. For China, the question is not simply whether the Wakhan could provide a useful economic route, but also whether such a route would be secure, controllable, reliable, and economically viable.

This consideration is closely connected with the wider tensions and strategic competition among regional and extra-regional powers.

A 2026 academic study similarly suggests that security considerations remain central to China's approach to the Wakhan and that the corridor currently has greater strategic importance for Afghanistan than for China.

Consequently, the completion of the Wakhan road alone would not constitute an economic corridor. Border facilities, customs infrastructure, communications, energy, security arrangements, and the capacity for regular commercial movement would also be required.

If security and stability were maintained for several consecutive years, the likelihood of greater economic activity would increase. If security concerns persisted, however, the strategic and security functions of the Wakhan could continue to outweigh its commercial role.

The Road: The Beginning of Connectivity, Not Its End

If completed, the Wakhan road could reduce one of the major geographical barriers to Afghanistan's direct connection with China. Yet its real significance for Afghanistan would depend on whether the route could be integrated into the country's wider economy.

A road, by itself, does not generate production, employment, or sustainable development. A corridor becomes economically meaningful when trade moves through it, transport and commercial services develop, domestic producers gain access to new markets, and a significant proportion of the resulting economic value remains within the country.

It would therefore be unrealistic to expect the Wakhan to replace China's established trade routes in the short term. Its greater value may lie in providing a complementary and alternative route within a broader regional network.

In a world increasingly exposed to war, sanctions, political instability, and disruptions to global supply chains, the availability of alternative routes can itself constitute a strategic economic advantage.

Natural Resources: An Opportunity for Development or a Source of Dependency?

The mineral potential of Badakhshan could become another factor affecting the region’s future significance. Existing geological studies indicate the presence of diverse mineral resources in Afghanistan, including Badakhshan. However, a distinction must be made between geological potential and economically viable extraction.

If future exploration confirms commercially significant deposits, Badakhshan could attract greater interest from foreign investors and economic powers. Yet mineral extraction alone does not constitute development.

If Afghanistan merely exports raw materials, much of the economic value generated from those resources will be realised outside the country. By contrast, domestic processing, downstream industries, energy infrastructure, transportation, and the development of skilled human resources could retain a greater share of value within Afghanistan.

The fundamental issue, therefore, is not simply the quantity of resources available, but how those resources are extracted, who benefits from them, and how much of the resulting economic value returns to the Afghan economy and population.

Resource Governance and the Public Interest

This issue is particularly important in Badakhshan. If a region that remains economically underdeveloped suddenly becomes a centre of resource extraction without mechanisms for equitable distribution of benefits, economic and social inequalities may increase rather than decline.

The effectiveness of the Wakhan road for Afghanistan cannot automatically translate into national development in the absence of an elected and accountable government, transparency in mineral extraction and contracts, mechanisms to protect the public interest and general welfare, and a coherent strategy for national infrastructure development.

Under the current conditions and the rule of the Taliban, the realisation of such an approach is not merely difficult; it is effectively impossible. In the absence of effective mechanisms of oversight and accountability, any expansion of extractive activities cannot eliminate the risks of smuggling, abuse of power, and the plundering of Afghanistan’s natural resources by domestic and foreign networks.

If natural resources were managed through a national policy based on transparency, effective oversight, and the creation of domestic value added, they could become part of Badakhshan's economic development. Under the current Taliban rule, however, achieving such an outcome is not merely difficult but impossible.

The issue of natural resources is therefore not simply an economic question. It is directly connected with national sovereignty, economic justice, and Afghanistan's long-term development.

The Wakhan within Competing Regional Routes

The future of the Wakhan will not depend solely on Afghanistan's internal conditions or on China's decisions. The route will exist alongside alternative transportation networks through Pakistan, Central Asia, Iran, and other land and maritime corridors.

The success of the Wakhan should therefore not be measured solely by whether it becomes the shortest or largest commercial route. Transportation costs, security, reliability, border arrangements, and the ability of a route to remain operational during periods of crisis will all influence its long-term viability.

Even if the Wakhan captures only a limited share of regional trade, it could retain strategic value as a complementary and alternative route.

Three Principal Scenarios for the Future

On the basis of existing trends, three broad scenarios can be considered for the future of the Wakhan.

Scenario One: The Wakhan as a Complementary Economic Corridor

Under this scenario, relative security is consolidated, the Wakhan road becomes operational, border and customs arrangements are established, and economic relations between Afghanistan and China expand.

If trade, investment, and associated services increase, the Wakhan could gradually become part of a wider network linking China with Afghanistan, Central Asia, and South Asia.

Badakhshan could also benefit through the development of commercial services, transportation, employment, and related economic activity, gradually reducing its position as a peripheral region.

Even under this scenario, however, the Wakhan is unlikely to replace the principal existing trade routes in the short term. Its more realistic role would be that of a complementary route contributing to the diversification and resilience of the regional connectivity network.

Scenario Two: The Continuation of a Primarily Security-Oriented Role

If security concerns persist and the volume of trade remains insufficient to justify major investment, the Wakhan may continue to perform primarily a security and border-management function.

Infrastructure may develop to some extent, but border control and the prevention of security threats would remain more important than commercial expansion.

This would not make the Wakhan insignificant. Rather, its security value would continue to outweigh its economic value.

Scenario Three: Increasing Geopolitical Competition

If competition among major regional and global powers intensifies, the geopolitical significance of the Wakhan could increase.

In such circumstances, competition would not necessarily concern territorial control. It could instead focus on access, influence, security, intelligence, natural resources, and transportation routes.

The Wakhan could consequently become less a conventional commercial corridor and more a sensitive point within the broader geopolitical competition unfolding across Asia.

Minerals as a Potential Game Changer

Natural resources could influence all three scenarios. If future exploration confirms substantial commercially viable deposits, Badakhshan could attract increased attention from foreign investors and major economic powers.

The Wakhan road could consequently become more significant because transportation infrastructure would be required to move equipment, materials, and mineral products.

Yet this development could also intensify competition over resources.

Where natural resources are extracted without transparency and effective oversight, the risks of smuggling, corruption, and non-national exploitation are likely to increase. Conversely, if extraction forms part of a broader national development strategy and is accompanied by domestic processing and value creation, mining could become one of the foundations of economic growth in Badakhshan.

The Five-Year Outlook

The next five years may constitute the first practical test of the Wakhan's potential.

The most important indicators will include progress on the road, the status of the China border, the establishment of customs facilities, the security environment, the scale of investment, and the development of Afghanistan–China economic relations.

If several of these factors move simultaneously in a positive direction, the probability of greater economic activity will increase. If security improves but trade and investment remain limited, the security function of the Wakhan will probably continue to dominate.

The five-year horizon should therefore be understood primarily as an indicator of the direction of change, rather than as a definitive prediction of the Wakhan's ultimate future.

The Ten-Year Outlook

Over a ten-year horizon, if commercial connectivity becomes established, its effects could extend well beyond the road itself.

Commercial centres, transport services, warehouses, mining activities, and local markets could develop, potentially altering the economic structure of Badakhshan.

Such transformation, however, could also generate negative consequences if it occurred without adequate planning, including pressure on natural resources and the environment, growing inequality, and uneven social development.

If the Wakhan enters a sustained phase of economic activity during this period, its development should therefore be incorporated into a broader strategy for Badakhshan and the Afghan economy rather than treated simply as an infrastructure project.

The Twenty-Year Outlook

Long-term forecasting over twenty years is inherently uncertain. The structure of the Asian economy, relations among major powers, transportation technologies, and global trade routes may all undergo substantial changes.

It would therefore be speculative to claim that the Wakhan will necessarily become a major commercial corridor within two decades. Its future value will depend on China’s position in the global economy, competing routes, regional political developments, and Afghanistan’s capacity to manage its geography and resources.

If overland connectivity becomes more important and the Wakhan can compete with alternative routes in terms of security, cost, and reliability, its strategic and economic value could increase. Otherwise, it may retain a more limited complementary role.

The twenty-year horizon should consequently be treated not as a prediction, but as a framework for monitoring long-term structural trends.

Early-Warning Indicators

The future trajectory of the Wakhan can be assessed through a number of observable indicators.

The completion of the road, the establishment of permanent customs and border facilities, the practical opening of the route to commercial traffic, increased investment, the development of energy and communications infrastructure, greater Chinese economic engagement, and a sustained reduction in insecurity would all indicate movement towards an economic-corridor scenario.

Conversely, if security infrastructure expands while trade and investment remain limited, the security function of the Wakhan is likely to remain dominant.

If, at the same time, geopolitical competition, disputes over resources, and regional tensions intensify, the probability of the Wakhan becoming a site of strategic competition would increase.

These indicators do not predict the future. Rather, they provide a framework through which the direction of change can be monitored and assessed over time.

Badakhshan: From Periphery to Strategic Centre

Connectivity and natural-resource development could give Badakhshan greater economic and strategic importance. Yet becoming a strategic centre does not automatically mean achieving development.

If resource revenues remain concentrated within narrow networks and local communities receive little meaningful benefit, greater economic importance could simultaneously produce greater inequality and conflict.

Conversely, if roads, trade, and natural resources generate employment, production, infrastructure, and domestic value added, Badakhshan could gradually move from the periphery towards becoming one of Afghanistan's important economic regions.

The future of Badakhshan will therefore depend not only on geography and resources, but also on the political and economic system under which Afghanistan is governed and on how the benefits generated by these assets are distributed.

Conclusion

In the twenty-first century, the Wakhan occupies a position where geography, security, natural resources, and geopolitical competition intersect. Yet this position does not, by itself, determine the region's future.

The Wakhan could develop into a complementary economic corridor; it could retain primarily a security-oriented role; or, if geopolitical competition intensifies, it could acquire greater strategic significance.

Natural resources could reinforce any of these trajectories, but only if their extraction is connected to domestic economic development.

For Afghanistan, the central issue is therefore not simply the construction of a road or the opening of a border route. The fundamental question is whether such connectivity can generate trade, production, employment, public revenue, and national infrastructure, and whether Badakhshan's natural resources can contribute to national development rather than becoming another source of dependency.

Political conditions in Afghanistan will be decisive in this regard. Without an elected, accountable, and nationally legitimate government, together with effective mechanisms of transparency and oversight, Afghanistan's geographical position and natural resources may generate opportunities for others rather than translate into national power.

The future of the Wakhan can therefore be understood through three fundamental concepts:

Geography, resources, and governance.

Geography creates opportunity.

Resources create economic potential.

Governance determines whether that opportunity and potential serve the national interest and the Afghan people or are appropriated by others.

The future of the Wakhan remains open. One point, however, is increasingly clear: if Afghanistan cannot manage its geography and resources within a national framework and in accordance with the public interest, the growing strategic significance of the Wakhan will not necessarily translate into greater Afghan power.

The final question of this study is therefore not simply what will happen to the Wakhan? It is:

How can Afghanistan use the Wakhan's strategic position to shape its own future?

The Wakhan is no longer merely a remote mountainous strip of Badakhshan. Its road, proximity to China, natural resources, and position within wider geopolitical developments have made it part of a broader strategic question concerning Afghanistan's future.

The combined findings of the three parts of this study can be expressed in one proposition:

The real value of the Wakhan lies not in geography alone, but in Afghanistan's ability to transform geography, resources, and connectivity into national power and sustainable development.

If that capacity can be established, the Wakhan could become a historic opportunity for Afghanistan. If it cannot, the same geography may once again become an instrument of power for others.

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