

Life At the Margins: Wakhan Corridor Under The Rule Of Taliban

*Martina Schiebel*¹

For centuries, the Wakhan Corridor stood at the edge of empires yet remained largely untouched by them – a remote high-altitude world of shepherds, traders, and isolated mountain communities shaped more by geography than by politics. Today, however, this narrow strip of Afghan territory is increasingly drawn into the strategic calculations of regional powers. Roads, trade corridors, border security, militant activity, and competing geopolitical ambitions are beginning to reach even the most distant valleys of the Pamirs. In a place long defined by isolation, the outside world is arriving faster than ever before.

Introduction

The Wakhan Corridor is a narrow strip of territory in northeastern Afghanistan that extends eastward from Badakhshan Province to the border with China. Measuring approximately 350 km in length and between 13 and 65 km in width, it constitutes Afghanistan's only land connection with China. Geographically, the corridor is bounded by Tajikistan to the north, Pakistan to the south, and China to the east, occupying a strategic position at the junction of the Hindukush, Karakoram, and Pamir mountain systems. The region is characterized by extreme elevations ranging from approximately 2,500 m in the west to nearly 5,000 m at its eastern extremity, making it one of the most remote areas of Eurasia.

¹ To protect the safety and anonymity of both the author and the interviewees, names, dates, locations, and other potentially identifying details have been omitted or altered. Information on everyday life and personal experiences was obtained through WhatsApp conversations with contacts known to the author from previous visits to the country. For additional security reasons, the name under which this chapter is published is a pseudonym. The author's identity is known to the editors, who have verified the authorship and authenticity of the contribution, but it is not disclosed publicly in order to protect the author from potential risks.

Despite its geographical isolation, the corridor occupies a strategic position, connecting the Oxus Basin with the Tarim Basin and northern South Asia. Situated along routes linking Central Asia, South Asia, and western China, it formed part of the broader network of trans-Eurasian communications often referred to as the Silk Roads. Merchants, pilgrims, and travellers traversed the high mountain valleys for centuries, while the region itself remained a peripheral yet important contact zone between Iranian, Turkic, Chinese, and South Asian spheres of influence.

The present-day configuration of the Wakhan Corridor emerged during the “Great Game,” the geopolitical rivalry between the British Empire and the Russian Empire in Central Asia during the nineteenth century. As Russian expansion advanced southward into Central Asia and British authorities sought to protect India’s northwestern frontier, both empires attempted to establish a buffer zone separating their respective spheres of influence. The solution was the creation of a narrow Afghan-controlled corridor between Russian Turkestan and British India. The northern and southern boundaries were gradually defined through a series of Anglo-Russian and Anglo-Afghan agreements culminating in the frontier demarcations of 1895-1896. As a result, Afghanistan retained sovereignty over Wakhan, while the corridor physically prevented a direct territorial border between the Russian and British empires.

Marginalized and economically underdeveloped, the Wakhan Corridor has recently gained renewed strategic importance as a crossroads of regional connectivity initiatives. Beyond serving as Afghanistan’s sole direct link to China, the corridor represents one of the shortest potential routes between Pakistan and Central Asia. The growing attention generated by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has transformed this previously peripheral region into an area of increasing geopolitical significance, bringing both new opportunities and growing uncertainty for local communities.

This article examines the regional and geopolitical transformations currently affecting the Wakhan Corridor and explores how these broader processes influence the daily lives of its inhabitants. Rather than offering a comprehensive geopolitical analysis of Afghanistan or Central Asia, the article focuses specifically on developments that directly or indirectly shape local liveli-

hoods, mobility, security, economic opportunities, and social realities in the corridor itself. Particular attention is paid to regional connectivity projects, growing strategic interest from neighbouring states, security concerns linked to militancy and border control, and the increasing involvement of external actors such as China, Pakistan, India, and the Taliban administration. By approaching geopolitics through the perspective of local communities, the article seeks to demonstrate how global and regional power dynamics are gradually transforming one of the most remote and historically isolated regions of Eurasia.

The Corridor and its people

The Wakhan Corridor is one of the most ethnically and culturally distinctive regions of Afghanistan. Its population consists primarily of two groups: the Wakhi, who inhabit the main valley of Wakhan, and the Kyrgyz, who occupy the high-altitude Pamir plateaus. Despite sharing the same geographical environment, these communities differ in language, religious affiliation, settlement patterns, and economic organization. Together, however, they have developed highly specialized adaptations to one of the harshest inhabited mountain environments in Eurasia.²

The Wakhi constitute the overwhelming majority of the corridor's population, estimated at between 17,000 and 18,000.³ Most of them belong to the Nizari Ismaili branch of Shia Islam. For decades, Ismaili identity in Badakhshan was closely connected with the spiritual authority of the Aga Khan and, recently, with the activities of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), which became one of the most important providers of education, healthcare, and rural development.

² Hermann Kreutzmann, "Ethnic Minorities and Marginality in the Pamirian Knot: Survival of Wakhi and Kirghiz in a Harsh Environment and Global Contexts." *The Geographical Journal* 169, no. 3 (2003): 215–35, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3451448>, 230.

³ Population of the Wakhan District was 17,167 between 2021–2022 including both Wakhis and Kyrgyz. Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, National Statistics and Information Authority, *Estimated Population of Afghanistan 1400 (2021–2022)* (Kabul: National Statistics and Information Authority, 2021), 15, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210624204559/https://www.nsia.gov.af:8080/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Estimated-Population-of-Afghanistan1-1400.pdf>.

Economically, the Wakhi practice a mixed agropastoral system adapted to high-altitude conditions. Permanent settlements are located along river valleys between approximately 2,500 and 3,500 meters above sea level, where irrigation systems channel glacial meltwater to cultivated fields. Wheat, barley, potatoes, and legumes constitute the principal crops, while livestock – including yaks, sheep, goats, cattle, horses, and donkeys – provide meat, milk, wool, transport, and economic security. Seasonal migration remains an essential component of Wakhi life. During the summer months, many households move livestock to high mountain pastures in the Big and Little Pamirs, where temporary settlements are established for grazing.⁴ This transhumant system has enabled the Wakhi to survive in an environment characterised by long winters, limited arable land, and extreme climatic conditions.

In contrast to the sedentary Wakhi population, the Kyrgyz of the Afghan Pamirs maintain a predominantly nomadic pastoral economy. Numbering approximately 1,200-1,400 individuals, the majority reside in the Big Pamir and Little Pamir regions at elevations frequently exceeding 4,000 meters.⁵ Unlike the Wakhi, the Afghan Kyrgyz are Turkic-speaking Sunni Muslims whose ancestors migrated into the Pamir highlands from Central Asia. Their economy, adapted to a high-plateau environment, depends almost entirely on mobile livestock herding, particularly yaks, sheep, goats, camels, and horses.

Although distinct in language and religion, the Wakhi and Kyrgyz populations have long maintained economic and social relations. Wakhi traders often act as intermediaries between Kyrgyz pastoralists and external markets, exchanging agricultural products, manufactured goods, and livestock, while poor Wakhis were present in Kyrgyz camps as employees of the houses.⁶

⁴ M. Nazif Shahrani, *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan: adaption to closed frontiers and war*, Seattle: University of Washington Press 2002, 55.

⁵ Extreme living conditions were described in several studies. One for example. Sharani speaks about very high mortality rates among newborns. In the time of his observations in the 70s, about 30% of newborns did not survive first year, often due to hypoxia and respiration problems, about 46,7% did not reach adulthood. Shahrani, *Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan*, 122.

⁶ About historical presence in the camps Shahrani, *Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan*, 153. Information about historical employment were mentioned several times in interviews concerning contemporary employment and Exchange.

These interactions, despite the cultural differences separating the two communities, have produced a degree of economic interdependence that has intensified following the imposition of limitations on cross-border exchange.⁷

Due to the geographical isolation, access to healthcare, education, and state services has historically remained extremely limited, but even in such remote areas, the 20th century brought deep changes. New sociopolitical systems influenced lifestyles and mobility and reinforced differences between the two ethnic groups in terms of levels of education, economic gains, and integration into state structures. The Wakhi population, although marginalized, is located along the main valley, so they became the primary recipients of state services and, later, development interventions, represented in the area mostly by AKDN.⁸ The Kyrgyz population benefited from these initiatives to a much lesser extent - development programs rarely reached the high Pamir settlements.⁹ Consequently, disparities between Wakhi and Kyrgyz communities gradually widened during the post-2001 period.

The Corridor and Taliban

Unlike many other regions of Afghanistan, the Wakhan Corridor experienced no major military confrontation before and during the Taliban takeover. The movement entered the region largely without armed resistance, benefiting from the collapse of the previous state administration and the withdrawal of government forces. Nevertheless, the absence of open violence did not prevent profound political, social, and religious transformations.

Since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, numerous reports have documented increasing pressure on Ismaili communities in Badakhshan, including Wakhan, Zebak, Ishkashim, Shughnan, and other Ismaili-majority districts. A comprehensive human rights report published by Rawadari concluded that Ismailis have been subjected to systematic discrimination, exclusion from public life, restrictions on religious practice, and efforts aimed at

⁷ Kreutzmann, "Ethnic Minorities and Marginality in the Pamirian Knot." 230.

⁸ Kreutzmann, "Ethnic Minorities and Marginality in the Pamirian knot," 232.

⁹ Mentioned in Shahrani several times within chapter 8. Shahrani, "*Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan*".

weakening their religious and cultural identity.¹⁰ The report further argues that persecution has become increasingly organized, extending into education, employment, worship, and local governance.¹¹

Education has emerged as one of the principal arenas of religious transformation. Despite that, Ismaili schools were not affected in their curriculum nor closed,¹² according to UNAMA reporting, Taliban authorities established Hanafi Sunni madrassas in predominantly Ismaili areas and pressured families to send their children to these institutions. UNAMA as well documented at least fifty Ismaili men in Badakhshan who were reportedly forced to convert to Sunni Islam between January and February 2025.¹³ Individuals who resisted were allegedly subjected to threats, beatings, and intimidation, while children were compelled to attend Sunni religious schools. Similar allegations have been documented by Rawadari, which reported cases in which families refusing to send children to Taliban-controlled schools faced financial penalties, threats, attacks and other forms of coercion.¹⁴

The Taliban's broader campaign of religious standardization has also targeted traditional Ismaili institutions. Rawadari documented restrictions on Ismaili religious ceremonies, limitations on access to places of worship,¹⁵ public accusations of apostasy (*takfir*), and pressure to participate in Sunni religious practices.¹⁶ The organization further reported cases of forced dis-

¹⁰ Rawadari: *The Human Rights Situation of Ismaili Shias in Afghanistan*, (Rawadari Report, December 2025), 22, <https://rawadari.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/RW-Ismaili-Report-ENG.pdf>.

¹¹ Rawadari, *Human Rights Situation of Ismaili Shias*, 41.

¹² Based on information of local teachers.

¹³ United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, *Update on the Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan: April-June 2025 Update* (Kabul: United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, 2025), 6, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/english-_unama_hrs_update_on_human_rights_in_afghanistan_april-june_2025_final.pdf.

¹⁴ Rawadari, *Human Rights Situation of Ismaili Shias*, 8.

¹⁵ Traditional mazars or ostuns (graves or symbolical places decorated with animal horns, bones or colorful pieces of tissue) were demolished, erased or reduced. According to local information, some cases of grave robbing of old cemeteries took place. These incidents are not new to Taliban area but since 2021 their occurrence increased. Rawadari, "Human Rights Situation of Ismaili Shias," 38.

¹⁶ Rawadari, *Human Rights Situation of Ismaili Shias*, 24, 43.

placement, confiscation of property, extrajudicial killings, and attempts to suppress expressions of Ismaili identity.¹⁷

Further stigmatization may intensify following a new decree requiring members of religious minorities studying at universities to adhere to the Hanafi madhhab. Minority students reportedly received a fourteen-point declaration obliging them to sign a formal commitment¹⁸ confirming their conversion to Sunni Islam, including explicit affirmation of Hanafi affiliation in point six.¹⁹ Such policies may have profound long-term consequences for minority communities, potentially restricting their access to higher education and weakening the emergence of educated future generations, thereby contributing to their continued social and political marginalization.

The consequences extend beyond religion. Ismailis have experienced growing exclusion from government employment²⁰ and political participation, while many educated community members have emigrated following the Taliban takeover. The Taliban's return to power effectively reduced the presence of foreign organisations and providers of help in the region and ended two decades of intensive international development engagement.²¹ The departure of NGO personnel, civil servants, and educated professionals has also significantly altered the social fabric of the region. Another aspect is, according to several sources, the effort of the Taliban to redirect NGO support to southern (Pashtun) areas. This also includes Agha Khan Development Network, whose several institutions in the Corridor have already noted a lack of funds this year.²²

¹⁷ Rawadari, *Human Rights Situation of Ismaili Shias*, 49.

¹⁸ Nazanin Mohseni, "Taliban Require Private University Students to Pledge Adherence to the Hanafi School," *KabulNow*, May 25, 2026, <https://kabulnow.com/2026/05/taliban-require-private-university-students-to-pledge-adherence-to-the-hanafi-school/>.

¹⁹ Information obtained from not only Ismailis but also from Shia Hazara students from various universities around Afghanistan. Their families confirmed to me, that their sons will sign the paper and hope that their conversion will not be controlled in the future.

²⁰ Wakhis are from obvious reasons reluctant to join Taliban, while Taliban do not offer them positions with exception to highly educated people. Wakhi leadership does not participate in regional government despite their efforts.

²¹ Information obtained during the interviews.

²² AKDN remains after Taliban takeover one of the essential providers of support in many communities. Its programs in Afghanistan reached approximately 3.7 million people in 2024. "Afghanistan," *Aga Khan Foundation*, accessed June 2026, <https://akf.org/country/afghanistan/>.

The deteriorating situation has also been accompanied by targeted violence. In July 2025, Fazl Ahmad Paez, head of Religious Affairs for the Aga Khan Foundation in Zebak district, was abducted and killed by unidentified gunmen.²³ Another incident occurred on 7 May 2026, when a female entrepreneur who led tailoring workshops (and the wife of a local musician), Salam Maftoon, was shot by an unnamed gunman in the street.²⁴ According to sources, similar killings happened that winter several times, intensifying concerns regarding the security of Ismailis and the broader vulnerability of the community under Taliban rule.

New worries were raised by the decision to divide the Wakhan district into two: Wakhan (the western part, inhabited by Wakhis and Kyrgyz in the Big Pamir) and Pamir (the eastern part in the Little Pamir, inhabited by about 826 Kyrgyz).²⁵ The unexplained decision raised many questions and is, by Wakhis, explained as an effort to exclude them from participation in local government. Other explanations include the effort to secure potential profits from a new China road for Sunnis,²⁶ or planned future changes in traditional land division. Wakhi pastures in the Little Pamir east of Sarhad were used by Kyrgyz shepherds until the arrival of the Soviets, who fled with their ruler Hajji Rahman Qul.²⁷ Wakhis worry that the so far unclearly defined new border between the districts might change to their disadvantage according to the older borders. Similarly, they worry that their traditional mountain pastures might be seized and offered to shepherds of Sunni origin from a water-deprived southern area.

Limited resources of the area were, in the past, a reason for competition or struggle between neighbouring groups, and thus relations were not always positive.²⁸ Many among Wakhis worry that over the years, the established status quo and profitable exchange will reverse under the Taliban rule to their loss.

²³ “Gunmen Kill Aga Khan Foundation Religious Affairs Official,” *Afghanistan International*, July 2025, 6. <https://www.afintl.com/en/202507060052>.

²⁴ “Female Ismaili Entrepreneur Shot Dead,” *Afghanistan International*, May 2026, 7. <https://www.afintl.com/en/202605076625>.

²⁵ Information of local sources working for an NGO. Numbers are for 1402 HS.

²⁶ For example, Wakhis to be excluded from jobs in the district, where good will be loaded.

²⁷ M. Nazif Shahrani, “Life and Career of Haji Rahmanqul Khan 1913-1990,” in *Pamirs at the Crossroads: Changing Challenges and Perspectives*, ed. Andrei Dörrer, Hermann Kreutzmann und Stefanie Schütte, Hrsg. 2016, Berlin Geographical Papers 45. Heidelberg: CrossAsia, <https://doi.org/10.11588/xabooks.166.212>, 57-64.

²⁸ Kreutzmann, “Ethnic Minorities and Marginality in the Pamirian Knot,” 220.

On the other hand, Sunni Kyrgyz living in strategic border areas of the Little and Big Pamir are perceived by the new government as potential allies. Before the Taliban takeover, some Kyrgyz families crossed the border to Tajikistan, but the Tajik government sent them back shortly afterwards.²⁹ After the takeover, Kyrgyzstan offered Pamir Kyrgyz to accept them if they would make it to Kyrgyzstan's borders. Only a few took the opportunity,³⁰ while others tried unsuccessfully.³¹ Since then, the Taliban rose in popularity among the poor Kyrgyz population due to help³² and the offer of employment.

The Taliban entered the Big and Little Pamir unequally, depending on the different strategic importance of the two areas. While the Big Pamir remains relatively uninfluenced, it is the Little Pamir that faces an evident Talibanization. Kyrgyz from Little Pamir are offered employment in the police, secret services, or border police. The offered salary reaches up to 16,000 Afghanis, a tempting amount in the poor mountainous region. According to local sources, every house (a house can contain more than one family) currently has one member "bearing an arm," the final number mounting to approximately 180 armed men. Despite the call to join, some houses were allowed to refuse, while only some did so for ideological reasons; most could not afford to lose a man to the armed forces. Such massive employment in the armed forces might have a negative effect on the traditional structure of society: traditionally, Kyrgyz men tend to employ Wakhis to do manual work,

²⁹ Press Center of the Border Troops of the State Committee for National Security of the Republic of Tajikistan, "Press-tsentr Pogranichnykh voisk GKNB Respubliki Tadzhikistan soobshchaet" [Press Center of the Border Troops of the State Committee for National Security of the Republic of Tajikistan Reports], *Khovar*, July 18, 2021, <https://khovar.tj/rus/2021/07/press-tsentr-pogranichnyh-vojsk-gknb-respubliki-tadzhikistan-soobshchaet-7/> [in Russian].

³⁰ Mahabat Sadyrbek, "The Situation of the Pamir Kyrgyz after the Taliban's Takeover of Afghanistan," *ZOIS Spotlight*, 30, September 1, 2021, <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/the-situation-of-the-pamir-kyrgyz-after-the-talibans-takeover-of-afghanistan>.

³¹ Baktygul Chynybaeva and Farangis Najibullah, "Afghanistan's Ethnic Kyrgyz Want To Escape The Taliban, But It's No Easy Task", *Radio Free Europe*, January 24, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyz-escape-taliban-afghanistan/32237673.html>.

³² According to Kyrgyz sources, humanitarian help in form of food support reached their settlement in past years. They were unable to distinguish who is the provider, some cited Taliban, others WFP which is still active in the corridor.

while Wakhis go up to the Pamir to seek employment they cannot find in the valley. This trend is growing in recent years, when the Kyrgyz receive government salaries, which the Valley is deprived of.

On the gender level, the Taliban's return produced uneven effects across the Wakhan Corridor. Among the Kyrgyz population, changes remained relatively limited, as women had already faced severe restrictions on education and public participation due to deeply conservative social structures. For Wakhi communities, however, the impact was far more visible. Prior to 2021, Wakhi women generally had greater access to education and, in some cases, employment opportunities, both of which became increasingly constrained under Taliban rule. Despite these changes, the strict dress codes associated with Taliban-controlled urban Afghanistan have not fully penetrated the Corridor. Burqas and niqabs are still uncommon locally and are typically worn only by women travelling outside the region.

Last but not least, it should be mentioned that a significant part of the Corridor is protected under the national park status,³³ with all its privileges, such as the ban on hunting wild animals. Despite this, local residents report that cases of shooting and illegal hunting have increased.³⁴ A popular target is the Marco Polo sheep and ibex. While some sources mentioned hunting for food (or wedding banquets), others spoke about men shooting from afar and killing whole herds for fun, without caring about their meat. Consequently, inhabitants of the mountains spoke about the migration of animals toward Pakistan and Tajikistan, where protection laws are better enforced.

The Corridor and the World

In past years, the Wakhan Corridor has experienced a renewed interest from the Afghan government and from its neighbours. While the main reasons are economic, strategic and security reasons are not to be omitted. Those most involved are, unsurprisingly, China and Pakistan. For them, opening connec-

³³ "Wakhan National Park," *National Parks Association*, accessed June 3, 2026, <https://national-parks.org/afghanistan/wakhan-national-park/>.

³⁴ "‘Ecoterrorism’: Taliban Massacre Rare Animals in Wakhan," *Sangar*, June 12, 2022, <https://sangar.info/en/news/n/ecoterrorism-taliban-massacre-rare-animals-in-wakhan>.

tions through several mountain passes³⁵ and corridors might, in the future, shorten the transport of goods by several days and lower transfer costs on both the East-West and North-South axes. To the Taliban, new connections might bring in much-needed revenue for their financially drained country.

For Afghanistan, the Wakhan Corridor Project carries both symbolic and economic significance. Taliban authorities view the corridor as a means of reducing dependence on traditional transit routes through Pakistan and potentially integrating Afghanistan into broader Eurasian trade networks, which gains more importance in light of recent military escalations with Pakistan and the suspended movement of goods.³⁶

Within this context, the Wakhan Corridor has assumed growing importance in Taliban economic planning. Since 2023, authorities have resumed construction of the Wakhan road network and by 2025 Taliban officials reported substantial progress on a 120-kilometre road project extending toward the Chinese border, while construction continued through several phases involving bridges, retaining walls, and gravel road infrastructure.³⁷ In 2026, officials

³⁵ Main connection to Wakhan is road from Sarhad-e Broghil to Zebak (southern in Badakhshan province) which was developed by Soviets during the occupation of the region. It is long about 160 km and leads on the right bank of the Oxus river. Leaving this road, other connections climb through the mountainous terrain, some only accessible by animals, others by motorbikes, more being developed for cars. To the east, from Sarhad the road opens to Kyzyl Rabat and Murghab in Tajikistan within any major elevation, and either by passing Tajikistan or the Wakhjir pass (4923) it connects to Chinese city of Tashqorgan and further following former Silk Road connections to Yarkand or Kashgar. More challenging road leads through the Tagermansu pass (5427 m). To the south of the valley, ancient crossings lead to Pakistan with the most accessible one going through the Broghil pass (3882 m) to Gilgit and Karakoram highway, other connecting Wakhan and Chitral area, such as Darwaza (4288 m), Irshad Uween (4979 m) and Dilisang (5290 m); Muhammad Shakeel Ahmad, Munib Ahmed, and Muhammad Shoaib Malik, "Buffered Border Corridor: The Geo-Political and Strategic Significance of the Wakhan Corridor," *Global Political Review* 6, no. 3 (2021): 27-34, [https://doi.org/10.31703/gpr.2021\(VI-III\).03](https://doi.org/10.31703/gpr.2021(VI-III).03), 30.

³⁶ Nargiza Umarova, "The Wakhan Corridor's Increasing Role in Central Asia-Afghanistan-China Interaction," *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, April 16, 2026, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/feature-articles/item/13948-the-wakhan-corridor-s-increasing-role-in-central-asia-afghanistan-china-interaction.html>, 3.

³⁷ Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, "Second Phase of Wakhan's Gravel Road Construction." May 2025, 15: <https://x.com/MRRDOFFICIAL/status/1923034804787859677>.

announced that major sections of the corridor road were between 60 and 74 per cent complete, presenting the project as a future gateway for regional trade and transit.³⁸ But while work on the corridor road proceeds, the main road in the Valley (Sarhad-Zebak, app. 230 km) remains underdeveloped and passable with difficulties – small cars can make the trip in a day and a half, for loaded trucks the road takes up to three days.

Despite continuing construction, Chinese policy toward Wakhan remains cautious. Although the planned inclusion of Wakhan into the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) offers many opportunities,³⁹ Beijing has shown little indication that it intends to open a formal border crossing through the Wakhan Corridor in the near future. Besides challenges posed by the region's extreme topography, Chinese decision-making regarding Wakhan is dominated by security considerations. The corridor borders Xinjiang, a region regarded by Chinese authorities as highly sensitive due to concerns regarding separatism, militancy, and cross-border extremism. Fears of potential infiltration of Uyghur militants affiliated with the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM)⁴⁰ push the Chinese main objective to prevent Afghan territory from becoming a platform for militant activities capable of affecting Xinjiang or threatening Chinese interests elsewhere in the region. Despite this, China has shown little willingness to assume direct military responsibilities in Afghanistan. Instead, it has pursued a policy combining limited economic incentives, diplomatic engagement with the Taliban, and intensified border security cooperation.⁴¹

³⁸ Umarova, "The Wakhan Corridor's Increasing Role," 5-6. Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development. "Second Phase of Wakhan's Gravel Road Construction." Kabul: Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, May 16, 2025. <https://x.com/MRRDOFFICIAL/status/1923034804787859677>.

³⁹ Mohd Nayyer Rahman, Badar Alam Iqbal, and Xiaolin Pan, "Legal and Strategic Cooperation between China and Afghanistan: Challenges and Opportunities through the Wakhan Corridor," *Journal of East Asia and International Law* 18, no. 1 (2025): 179-193, <https://doi.org/10.14330/jeail.2025.18.1.09>, 190-191.

⁴⁰ Pablo A. Rodríguez-Merino, "Chinese Security Narratives in the New Afghan Context," *Jamestown* 22(3), November 11, 2022, <https://jamestown.org/chinese-security-narratives-in-the-new-afghan-context-xinjiang-and-the-recycling-of-the-etim-threat/>.

⁴¹ Ayjaz Wani, "China and Afghanistan's Jousting Over the Wakhan Corridor," *Observer Research Foundation*, April 21, 2025, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/china-and-afghanistan-s-jousting-over-the-wakhan-corridor>, 6.

Reports indicate that Taliban authorities have attempted to relocate some ETIM⁴² elements away from the Chinese border region in response to pressure from Beijing.⁴³ Nevertheless, concerns regarding the organisation's future remain significant. It seems that ETIM networks maintain transnational connections extending across Afghanistan, Syria, and parts of Central Asia.⁴⁴ Some assessments suggest that experienced Uyghur militants who participated in the Syrian conflict could eventually strengthen militant networks operating in Afghanistan, thereby increasing China's security concerns regarding the Wakhan frontier.⁴⁵

In recent years, an additional dimension has emerged through the growing activities of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). Unlike ETIM, whose relationship with the Taliban remains complex, ISKP openly challenges Taliban authority and seeks to expand its influence across Afghanistan and Central Asia.⁴⁶ Chinese interests have increasingly become targets of ISKP propaganda.⁴⁷ The organisation has condemned China's policies in Xinjiang and portrayed Beijing as an enemy of Islam. Reports from 2025 indicated that ISKP propaganda outlets had begun producing material in the Tajik language, apparently seeking to expand influence among populations in northeastern Afghanistan and neighbouring Tajikistan.⁴⁸

These developments have translated into direct security incidents affecting Chinese nationals. In January 2025, a Chinese citizen employed in a mining

⁴² Recently the author of this the article did not notice any reports (or even local rumors) about presence of the ETIM or other armed individuals or groups in the Wakhan corridor. Their presence remains documented in other parts of Badakhshan province.

⁴³ Wani, "China and Afghanistan's Jousting Over the Wakhan Corridor," 12.

⁴⁴ United Nations Security Council, *Letter Dated 23 May 2023 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Established pursuant to Resolution 1988 (2011) Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, S/2023/370 (United Nations, 2023), 17, <https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2093255/N2312536.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Balasubramaniam Viswanathan, "China's Wakhan Corridor Dilemma," *Geopolitical Monitor*, August 28, 2025, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/chinas-wakhan-corridor-dilemma-economic-development-or-security/>; Wani, "China and Afghanistan's Jousting Over the Wakhan Corridor," 12.

⁴⁶ United Nations Security Council, *Letter dated 23 May 2023*, 15.

⁴⁷ Abdul Basit, "ISKP's Evolving Propaganda" *Jamestown* 20(22), November 18, 2022, <https://jamestown.org/iskps-evolving-propaganda-against-chinese-imperialism/>.

⁴⁸ Viswanathan, "China's Wakhan Corridor Dilemma."

project near the Tajik border was reportedly killed in an attack attributed to ISKP.⁴⁹ Later that year, four Chinese workers were killed in Badakhshan Province during another attack connected to mining operations.⁵⁰ Although responsibility for the latter incident remained unclear, the events reinforced Chinese perceptions that Afghanistan continues to present substantial security risks for foreign investment.⁵¹ Against this background, China has intensified diplomatic discussions concerning border security cooperation. In 2025, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi publicly called for renewed joint patrols in the Wakhan Corridor and emphasized the need for stronger counterterrorism cooperation between Beijing and the Taliban authorities.⁵²

While China approaches the Wakhan Corridor through the lens of border security and counterterrorism, Pakistan views the region as part of a broader strategy for regional connectivity, strategic depth, and economic integration that links South Asia with Central Asia. Afghanistan remains critical for connecting Central Asia with Pakistan's road network, ports, and energy infrastructure.⁵³

⁴⁹ Ayaz Gul, "Islamic State Claims Killing of Chinese National in Afghanistan," *Voice of America*, January 22, 2025, <https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-claims-killing-of-chinese-national-in-afghanistan/7946312.html>.

⁵⁰ Mining constitutes another important dimension of China's interest in northeastern Afghanistan. Since 2021, the Taliban have increasingly promoted mineral extraction as a foundation for economic development and state revenue. Badakhshan has emerged as a particularly significant region due to its deposits of gold, gemstones, and other mineral resources. Gold-mining operations conducted by private companies and (both legal and illegal) individual prospectors along several local rivers, particularly the Kokcha River, have generated tensions and occasional confrontations with local communities. Sarah Godek, "China's Afghan Gold Rush Is Turning Deadly," *Foreign Policy*, February 20, 2026, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2026/02/20/taliban-china-afghanistan-gold-mining-attacks/>; Despite the efforts, according to Wakhan residents, initial prospects were so far not successful in the Corridor, so they remain limited to other areas of Badakhshan.

⁵¹ Viswanathan, "China's Wakhan Corridor Dilemma."

⁵² Fen Chen, "China Calls for Joint Patrols," *South China Morning Post*, August 2, 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3322667/china-calls-joint-patrols-afghan-border-and-urges-taliban-help-fight-terrorism>.

⁵³ Bashira Omeed, "Harnessing Chitral and the Wakhan Corridor," *CSCR*, April 14, 2025, https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/trade-economics/harnessing-chitral-and-the-wakhan-corridor-for-regional-connectivity/?__cf_chl_f_tk=QVKwo7P4aaPVGdKhGBrLFoRE6ECZ0xxdbAC4ZKvmxnI-1783342633-1.0.1.1-EiUIETkTWFSrZZUGVFnuSEAKLkm1mz3ge2LCL55CSVc,3.

For Pakistan, the Wakhan Corridor carries substantial geopolitical and economic significance because of its proximity to Gilgit-Baltistan and the Karakoram Highway, which forms the backbone of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The process of integration of Afghanistan into CPEC restarted in 2025, with a clear calculus of benefits for regional trade and for strengthening Pakistan's position as a transit hub between the Arabian Sea and Eurasian markets.⁵⁴

The corridor potentially offers Pakistan a direct overland link connecting CPEC with Afghanistan and, indirectly, Central Asia, which possesses substantial reserves of oil, natural gas, and uranium, as well as hydropower potential, all of which remain attractive to Pakistan's energy-deficient economy.⁵⁵ Infrastructure linking northern Pakistan with Wakhan could facilitate trade flows, energy transit, and regional integration while reducing Afghanistan's dependence on southern Pakistani transit routes concentrated around Torkham and Chaman.⁵⁶

Within Pakistan, further progress might also stimulate economic revitalisation in the peripheral mountain regions of Chitral and Gilgit-Baltistan, which have historically been characterised by underdevelopment and limited state investment, yet are central to the Karakoram Highway and Central Asia connectivity. Similarly to China, security considerations remain central to Pakistan's calculations. Despite Islamabad's long-standing relationship with the Taliban movement, tensions have emerged over cross-border militancy, the Tehrik-i Taliban Pakistan (TTP), border disputes, and competing regional interests. In the frame of growing distrust, reports periodically circulated in Afghan and Pakistani media concerning alleged Pakistani military activity or infrastructure construction near Wakhan, although Taliban authorities pub-

⁵⁴ Ratish Mehta, "Afghanistan in China's Extended CPEC 2.0 Strategy", *ISDP*, May 2026: <https://www.isdp.eu/publication/afghanistan-in-chinas-extended-cpec-2-0-strategy/>.

⁵⁵ In recent years, Pakistan increasingly engages with Tajikistan. In past years diplomatic contacts between Islamabad and Dushanbe intensified, leading to speculation that both states were exploring future transportation or energy cooperation linked to northeastern Afghanistan. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, *Pakistan and Tajikistan Hold 6th Session of Bilateral Political Consultations in Dushanbe*, press release, October 2, 2025, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/pakistan-and-tajikistan-hold-6th-session-of-bilateral-political-consultations-in-dushanbe>.

⁵⁶ Wani, "China and Afghanistan's Jousting Over the Wakhan Corridor," 12; Omeed, "Harnessing Chitral and the Wakhan Corridor."

licly denied claims regarding the deployment of Pakistani forces inside the corridor.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, speculation about possible Pakistani ambitions in the region reflects broader mistrust in Afghan public discourse regarding Islamabad's intentions.⁵⁸

These developments are closely observed by India, which traditionally regarded Afghanistan as an important arena for balancing (or reducing) Pakistani regional influence. During the post-2001 period, India became an important supplier of humanitarian help and invested heavily in Afghan infrastructure, development projects, and diplomatic engagement. One of the most prominent examples was the construction of the Zaranj-Delaram highway, designed to connect Afghanistan with Iran's Chabahar Port and thereby create an alternative trade route bypassing Pakistan.⁵⁹ For Islamabad, such exclusion from emerging regional trade corridors could weaken its long-term geopolitical position, particularly if Afghanistan develops alternative routes bypassing Pakistan entirely.⁶⁰ Given the current development and state of relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, India hopes to expand its influence.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Xinhua, "No Pakistani Troops in Afghanistan's Wakhan," March 30, 2026, <https://english.news.cn/asiapacific/20260330/237c7d0b3d644e0fbfe24f9e187af854/c.html>.

⁵⁸ Rumors circulating Wakhan say that during the Taliban takeover, Pakistanis moved border stones in the passes. This information is widely circulated and repeated although not verified. Similarly, time-to-time reappearing information about Pakistani planned takeover of the corridor raise backlashes and criticism among Afghani public (and support by some Pakistanis), despite being repeatedly denied by Pakistan. Times of Islamabad, "Is Pakistan Army Launching Military Operation To Capture Wakhan Corridor?" March 25, 2026, <https://timesofislamabad.com/25-03-2026/sea-guardian-drills-chinese-naval-warship-arrives-in-karachi/>.

⁵⁹ The highway forms a part of North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which includes India, Iran, Russia, and Central Asia. The successful inclusion of Afghanistan will, similarly to CPEC, ease transit routes within this frame. Equally to CPEC and BRI, inclusion to INSTC is challenged by security concerns and lack of quality infrastructure in Afghanistan. Shujaat Naeem Azmi, Kashif Hasan Khan, and Marin Ekstrom, "INSTC and Chabahar Port: Systematic Literature Review and Bibliometric Analysis," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 20, no. 2 (2025), 152-175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2025.2491143>, 6.

⁶⁰ Azmi, Khan, and Ekstrom, "INSTC and Chabahar Port," 8, 18.

⁶¹ Bethlehem Eshetu, "India's Evolving Role in Afghanistan," *New Lines Institute*, December 3, 2025, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/middle-east-center/indias-evolving-role-in-afghanistan/>.

Since the Taliban takeover, India's approach toward Afghanistan has gradually shifted from cautious disengagement toward pragmatic re-engagement. Although New Delhi initially reduced its diplomatic presence after August 2021, Indian officials have sought channels of communication with Taliban authorities.⁶² 2025 marked a major diplomatic breakthrough when Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi visited New Delhi, becoming the highest-ranking Taliban official to visit India since the movement returned to power. The meeting was followed by a joint statement,⁶³ and India subsequently announced the reopening of its embassy in Kabul after four years of closure.⁶⁴ This alignment, challenging the already deteriorating Pakistani influence in the country, is by India seen not simply as an economic initiative but also as a geopolitical mechanism. New Delhi opposes the expansion of CPEC through territories claimed by India, particularly Gilgit-Baltistan and parts of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir,⁶⁵ which could strengthen the Pakistani and Chinese regional position and weaken the Indian claim.

⁶² Amit Ranjan, "India's Calculated Diplomacy." *ISAS Briefs*, October 22, 2025, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/indias-calculated-diplomacy-engaging-the-afghan-taliban/>.

⁶³ In which Taliban representatives have emphasized that Afghanistan would not permit its territory to be used for anti-Indian militant activities and have repeatedly expressed support for improved economic and diplomatic relations with Indian Ministry of External Affairs. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *India-Afghanistan Joint Statement*, October 10, 2025; https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/40193/India__Afghanistan_Joint_Statement_October_10_2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, *Pakistan Raises Its Concerns on the Elements of India-Afghanistan Joint Statement and Remarks by Afghan Acting Foreign Minister in India*, press release, October 11, 2025, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/pakistan-raises-its-concerns-on-the-elements-of-india-afghanistan-joint-statement-and-remarks-by-afghan-acting-foreign-minister-in-india>.

⁶⁴ Ranjan, "India's Calculated Diplomacy."

⁶⁵ Ayjaz Wani, "The Chabahar Gambit: India's Play for Influence in Central Asia," *ORF Special Report*, no. 233 (Observer Research Foundation, September 30, 2024), <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-chabahar-gambit-india-s-play-for-influence-in-central-asia>; James Schwemlein, *Strategic Implications of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor*, Special Report no. 459, Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2019, https://reconasia.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/strategic_implications_of_the_chinapakistan_economic_corridor.pdf, 5.

At the local level, both Wakhi and Kyrgyz communities have already begun to experience visible changes in relation to governance and new connections to the world.

Economically, during the previous Afghan government, trade and exchange between the Pamirs, the Wakhan Valley, and the outside world remained largely in the hands of local residents and a limited number of traders from elsewhere in Afghanistan. Since the Taliban takeover and the restoration of relative security on the roads, however, access to the Corridor has become easier for outside merchants. Traders from Kabul and the southern provinces, often wealthier and better connected, increasingly dominate local commerce, gradually displacing smaller traders of local origin. While some Kyrgyz households benefit from greater competition and wider access to goods – especially in a society where barter still partially replaces monetary exchange – many local traders fear the gradual loss of their livelihoods.

Similar ambivalence accompanies discussions about planned road construction. Improved infrastructure promises faster and safer transportation, yet it also threatens to reshape traditional economic relations, patterns of mobility, and the physical landscape itself. Concerns about incoming businessmen (of different ethnic and religious groups), environmental changes and broader regional transformation are voiced mainly by those with greater exposure to the outside world through travel or education. Others instead look hopefully toward development resembling that of Pakistan's Hunza Valley, another region inhabited partly by Wakhi and Ismaili communities. In Hunza, many Wakhis found employment connected to road construction and transport services, although critics point out that the most profitable sectors remained controlled by outside actors rather than local populations.

Another growing source of tension concerns land ownership. Under the previous government, land intended for infrastructure projects was usually purchased from local residents. Today, however, many inhabitants complain about insufficient compensation – or no compensation at all – for confiscated or damaged farmland and pastures linked to new construction or mining projects.

The local economy has also been deeply affected by the closure of the border with Pakistan. For generations, mountain passes connecting Wakhan with

Pakistan's Chitral region served as routes for trade, seasonal movement, and family visits, despite the fact that none of these crossings – including the relatively accessible Broghil Pass – were ever formally recognised as legal border crossings. Following the Taliban takeover, these passes gradually came under military control. Armed units now guard the routes, while new checkpoints are being constructed along key transit corridors. Cross-border movement has effectively been prohibited, disrupting long-established trade networks as well as social relations, since many families and communities maintain kinship ties on both sides of the border.

Conclusion

The Wakhan Corridor remains one of the most isolated and least developed regions of Afghanistan, yet in recent years it has become increasingly exposed to regional geopolitical competition and internal political transformation. Following the Taliban's return to power in 2021, the Corridor has experienced not only administrative and ideological changes but also growing strategic interest from neighbouring states seeking to expand connectivity, strengthen border security, and secure future economic influence in northeastern Afghanistan.

For local communities, however, these developments are experienced less through abstract geopolitics than through tangible changes in everyday life. Expanding Taliban control has altered religious, educational, and social structures, particularly among the Ismaili Wakhi population, while simultaneously reshaping local economic relations, mobility, and access to resources. At the same time, infrastructure projects, new trade ambitions, border militarisation, and external investment have introduced both expectations of development and fears of dispossession, marginalisation, and cultural change.

The contemporary transformation of the Wakhan Corridor cannot be understood solely through the lens of regional power politics. Rather, geopolitical rivalries between China, Pakistan, India, and the Taliban administration increasingly intersect with local realities, affecting livelihoods, social hierarchies, religious identity, patterns of exchange, and relations between Wakhi and Kyrgyz communities. In this sense, Wakhan represents not only a stra-

tegic frontier between South, Central, and East Asia, but also a fragile social environment in which global and regional processes are becoming deeply embedded in everyday life.

Despite its growing geopolitical relevance, the future of the Corridor remains uncertain. Infrastructure projects and regional connectivity initiatives may gradually reduce the region's historical isolation, yet they also risk deepening existing inequalities and accelerating external control over local economic and social structures. Whether these transformations will ultimately improve living conditions for local inhabitants or further weaken their autonomy will depend not only on regional stability and investment, but also on the extent to which local communities are included in the political and economic processes currently reshaping the Pamirs.

Consequently, the Talibanization of Wakhan has not primarily taken the form of military occupation but rather of gradual ideological, religious, and administrative transformation. Through control of education, religious institutions, local administration, and employment opportunities, the Taliban have sought to integrate one of Afghanistan's most distinctive religious minorities into a political and religious order defined by Sunni Hanafi orthodoxy. For many Ismailis of Wakhan, this process has generated profound uncertainty regarding the preservation of their religious identity, cultural traditions, and historical relationship with the Aga Khan institutions that shaped the region during the two decades preceding the Taliban's return to power.