

CSSPR

**THE WAKHAN CORRIDOR
KYRGYZSTAN'S ECONOMIC STRATEGY
IN CENTRAL ASIA**

**Sabtain Ahmed Dar
January 2021**



THE
UNIVERSITY OF
LAHORE

Introduction

Kyrgyzstan is located in the south east corner of Central Asia bordering China, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Kyrgyzstan is not only landlocked but also mountainous which makes its economic progress and connectivity with regional states too difficult. Although the country is [blessed with minerals](#) such as gold, it does not have enough [oil and gas reserves](#) which makes it dependent on the imports related to logistics activities from other states. Consequently, Kyrgyzstan remains one of the developing countries of the former Soviet Union. In the context of Kyrgyzstan's political demographics, its mountainous terrain paves the way for [social and political divisions](#), particularly in the northern Kyrgyzstan with Bishkek its capital and southern region of Osh-Jalalabad corridor. This division has created political turmoil in Kyrgyzstan to such an extent that the country has experienced [three major revolutions](#) in the past three decades. This political division has its historical roots in the domestic policy of Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union. Premier Stalin divided the Fergana Valley region for political expediency during his tenure. This act resulted in three separate political entities in the valley that have remained at quarrel with each other since the 1950's.

With respect to Kyrgyzstan's relations with its southern neighbors, its large Tajik and Uzbek majority in the south with limited water resources has resulted in frequent border disputes with Tajikistan and

Uzbekistan. Kyrgyzstan's geo-strategic location makes it one of the contested areas between the great powers. Russia remains Kyrgyzstan's largest trading partner and has an air base in the region of Kant. Although handed over to Kyrgyzstan, the United States also has an [air base in Manas](#) which still remains a key transit point for NATO's military operations in Afghanistan. Recently with Russian strategy of Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) from the West and Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRU) from the East, Kyrgyzstan lies right into the center of the New Great Game between great powers. These are the areas where Kyrgyzstan has several options to capitalize on the interests of the major powers and concomitantly shape its regional strategy to survive as a potent state in Central Asia. One of them is the area of the Wakhan Corridor, a strip which connects Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir and China.

Wakhan Corridor and the New Great Game

The Wakhan Corridor lies at the heart of [Mackinder's theory](#) of the Eurasian heartland. It has remained the most potent strategic location since its inception in 1893. The corridor has been used by the Chinese and the Europeans to reach the sub-continent and the Indian Ocean for trade purposes. Not only for trade purposes but also as a buffer zone, Wakhan corridor remained in the limelight of the Great Game of Central Asia. Historically, since the Great Game between the Russian and the British Empires

commencing from 1838, the Chinese Civil War, the Communist Revolution of 1949, Mao's decision to block Wakhjir Pass to Wakhan, the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and NATO's invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the corridor and its infrastructural development has suffered great setbacks. However, since the opening of Wakhjir Pass (eastern corner of Wakhan Corridor) by China, a window of opportunity has opened for the regional states to participate in mutual trade partnerships. On the other hand, India [feels threatened](#) of this Chinese step as her North South Transport Corridor (NSTC) from Iran will be countered by Chinese maneuvering from the North. Not only this, the energy-rich Caspian belt in the West and its transportation linkages with BRI raises its strategic value.

With the rise of China as a potent geo-economic power, U.S. concerns have increased in the context of its [trade partnership in Central Asia and its linkages](#) with the Indian Ocean. The United States with its military presence in Afghanistan still remains a reality check for Central Asian States (CARs) and Chinese investment partnerships under the umbrella of BRI projects. Therefore, without entering into the mainland of Afghanistan, this strip paves the way for China to pursue its development projects in the region. Moreover, other areas can also be explored through Pakistan and Afghanistan providing alternative routes to China and CARs to reach the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea. The U.S. strategy in Central Asian is incomplete without forging an [alliance with](#)

[India](#). Chinese '[String of Pearls Strategy](#)' is seeking a policy which balances the Indo-U.S. partnership in Asia. If China becomes successful in connecting Europe with Gwadar, it will essentially intersect the Indo-U.S. plans in Central Asia. Therefore, for Indian designs in Central Asia, military presence of the United States in Afghanistan secures its foreign interests. Hence, this complex power play in the region has resulted into a scenario of [a New Great Game of 21st century](#) where Kyrgyzstan can use diplomatic intelligence to engage with all parties to reap fruits from transnational trade partnerships.

Prospects for Kyrgyzstan's Economic Strategy

It is important for Kyrgyzstan to consider both the northern and southern approaches to achieve its economic objectives in the midst of the New Great Game in Central Asia. Firstly, Kyrgyzstan is part of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) of the BRI which gives Bishkek a leverage to swiftly transport its goods to Tajikistan to Afghanistan and then to the Middle-East via land route. However, this does not ensure Kyrgyzstan's leverage in the Wakhan Corridor. Therefore, for Bishkek it is significant to exercise its economic interests in the Xinjiang province in China. Kyrgyzstan shares a 1064 km border with Xinjiang province. From Xinjiang, Kyrgyzstan can connect itself to the [China-Pakistan Economic Corridor \(CPEC\)](#) and by becoming part of the CPEC, all three parties can contribute in the Wakhan

Corridor through the newly opened Wakhjir Pass and hence for the overall development in Afghanistan. Secondly, policy makers in Bishkek must be equipped with all the liberal and realist tools to prolong their interests in the region and that can only be made sure by engaging with all parties. Kyrgyzstan cannot keep itself aloof from the U.S. transit center in the military base in Manas and overall interests in the region; similarly it cannot afford to put all the eggs in the Chinese basket as it is a permanent member of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union. Kyrgyzstan will need to play on all sides. Achieving liberal economic objectives by pursuing the realist model in diplomacy can ensure success for its economic strategy. Therefore, seeing both the sides of the coin carefully is essential to win the toss.

The first side of the coin is the southern approach for Kyrgyzstan to gain access to the Arabian Sea. Gaining access to the sea is crucial for the economic growth of Kyrgyzstan. **Pakistan can help Kyrgyzstan import and export its goods via the land route from the Arabian Sea, to terminate in the north where Wakhan Corridor can be used as [the vortex point](#).** There are two main routes that can intersect with the Wakhan Corridor. Firstly, **the route emanating from Gwadar Port along with the Indus River, and then from Karakoram Highway to Xinjiang Province in China.** Secondly, **the Pakistani route emanating from Gwadar and from Quetta-Kandahar to the Wakhan Corridor can also be used to achieve trade objectives.** The other side of

the coin is linked with Iran. The Iranian route can also help Kyrgyzstan to gain access to the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea. The Iranian land route starts with its terminal point at the Chabahar Port, and from the Chabahar it passes through Zahedan and finally terminating in north of Afghanistan, where again, Wakhan corridor with Wakhjir Pass is essential for Kyrgyzstan to consider.

In relation to the latest geopolitical trends in Afghanistan, there are plausible perceptions that the U.S. might leave Afghanistan. However, [the U.S. is still present in Afghanistan](#) and perhaps this is the foremost reason why China avoided the Iranian route for the third phase of BRI and chose Pakistan's route to gain access to the Arabian Sea. Similarly, Bishkek should also have a clear threat perception in relation to its economic objectives in the region. The Wakhan Corridor lies right in the middle of all these intersecting trade routes where its significance cannot be ignored. It is the need of the hour that the U.S. with its economic liberal objectives should also engage in economic integration of the CARs and the South Asian states. Not only South Asia but also the U.S. needs a friendly Afghanistan. Following are the major areas which can be further studied and explored by Kyrgyzstan to use the Wakhan Corridor to amplify its economic strategy in the region:

- 1- The Wakhjir and Tegermansu Passes have always been the only links in Central Asia that connect the West and the East. Anyone who controls these passes essentially dominates the strategic and

economic calculus of power politics. Kyrgyzstan has a perfect opportunity to use BRI and good relations with Afghanistan to have a strategic advantage in these areas of awesome potential.

2- Kyrgyzstan due to its gold mines is naturally good in mining projects. Currently, China is engaged in the Aynak Copper Mining Project worth \$3.4 billion in Afghanistan. With the 30 years contract with Afghanistan, China is keen to complete its economic objectives in Afghanistan. Kyrgyzstan should also engage in diplomacy with Afghanistan to offer and take part in the mining projects.

3- Kyrgyzstan will also need to work on its soft power in the region. Working on the Xinjiang province where Kyrgyz population also co-exists with the majority Uyghur Muslims, Bishkek should stretch its trade from Xinjiang to Wakhan and from Wakhan to central Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Pakistan. Such facilities provided by Kyrgyzstan to these people will not only enhance its soft power but also increase the Muslim brotherhood which would eventually safeguard the existing and future gas pipelines in the midst of war on terrorism.

4- In pursuit of such a strategy, Kyrgyzstan can also concomitantly work with the U.S. and India to ensure balance among great powers. Although India is aligning itself with the U.S. to block Chinese attempts from gaining full access from Wakhjir Pass, Kyrgyzstan can still work with them for political expediency if one day Kyrgyzstan

gains access to the Indian Ocean. It should be noted here that India does not have land access to Afghanistan through Pakistan. Therefore, the NSTC and dependency on the Iranian route to reach Central Asian States must not be sidelined in Bishkek's threat perception.

5- Lastly, Kyrgyzstan can provide dry cargo to all these states engaged in the transnational trade partnerships. These cargos can also help Kyrgyzstan gain strong foothold in the Wakhan Corridor. Kyrgyzstan's ironclad alliance with Afghanistan is essential to achieve these tasks. If not Wakhan, there are three alternative major trade routes in Afghanistan which can also be explored in the future to transport its goods inside Pakistan, Afghanistan and from Afghan mainland to the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. Firstly, from Mizar e Sharif to Gwadar, this passes through Kabul to Peshawar. Secondly, from Mizar e Sharif to Gwadar, this passes through Quetta to Gwadar. Thirdly, from Herat to Chabahar, this passes through Delaram and Zahedan. All three can be further explored for the purpose of import and export.

All these trade routes and their safety solely relies on stability in Afghanistan. Allama Muhammad Iqbal, the poet of the east predicted what we are witnessing today. He said that the heart of Asia is Afghanistan, and if there is no peace in Afghanistan, there will be no peace in Asia.

**Sabtain Ahmed Dar is Research Associate,
Center for Security, Strategy and Policy
Research, University of Lahore.**