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# The Wakhan Corridor: An Unlikely Afghan-China Link

A Research Paper

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# The Wakhan Corridor: An Unlikely Afghan-China Link (U)

## A Research Paper

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on 1 April 1980.*

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**The Wakhan Corridor:  
An Unlikely Afghan-China Link (U)**

**Summary**

Wakhan, the long and narrow "thumb" of Afghanistan, which extends eastward between the USSR and Pakistan to China, was created in the 19th century to separate British and Russian territory. A semiautonomous district of Badakhshan Province, it is sparsely populated by Tajik and Kirghiz peoples, who have ethnic ties to groups in the adjacent areas of the USSR and China.

Because Afghanistan shares a common border with China, it would appear that the Chinese could freely use Wakhan to support the insurgents in Afghanistan. Indeed, rumors and speculations persist that the Chinese are running guns and men through the Wakhan into northern Afghanistan. Rugged terrain, high altitude, inhospitable climate, and the proximity of Russian border posts to the settled areas in Wakhan, however, make undetected use of the single main route through the corridor difficult if not impossible.

Alternate routes to the main Wakhan route present even greater physical problems. Only treacherous trails lead from northern Pakistan across the high passes of the Hindu Kush mountains into Afghanistan. Supplies could be shipped directly from China into Pakistan over the Karakoram Highway, but they would then have to be transported into Afghanistan over these Hindu Kush trails.

*The above information is Unclassified.*

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### The Wakhan Corridor: An Unlikely Afghan-China Link (U)

#### Background

The Wakhan Corridor,<sup>1</sup> a semiautonomous district of Badakhshan Province, links Afghanistan with China and forms a physical and political barrier separating Soviet Central Asia from South Asia. This mountainous eastern appendage of Afghanistan—more than 260 kilometers long and 12 to 60 km wide—was a late 19th century creation of British-Russian diplomacy, the purpose of which was to physically separate Russian territory from tribal areas then within Britain's sphere of interest. Its delineation was one of the final acts in the long Anglo-Russian rivalry over control of what is now Soviet Central Asia.

Few people inhabit Wakhan and settlements and nomadic encampments are widely scattered. The scanty population, difficult terrain, and limited access to the area has fostered administrative autonomy. Traditionally, the central Afghan Government has had little influence in the district, and the administration of the area has been left in the hands of local headmen.

The term "corridor" as applied to this area gives a misleading impression of easy transit: elevations are high (3,000 to 6,800 meters), the terrain is formidable, and the climate severe. High, glacier-scoured valleys—the *pamirs*—characterize the eastern half; travel through them is encumbered by boggy areas, occasional gorges, and glacial boulders. The western half is a narrow valley with steep slopes, but somewhat lower elevations. Nonetheless, trails wind through the maze of mountains and river gorges, and the area historically has been a route for caravans between the oases of southern Chinese Turkistan (Xinjiang Province) and Afghanistan.

Wakhan's curious configuration results from the piecing together of alignments from four separate boundary agreements. The northern boundary eastward from Eshkashem to the Sari Qul (lake) evolved in

<sup>1</sup> The spelling of the name for this area approved by the Board on Geographic Names is *Vakhan*. Throughout this paper, we have used the more familiar *Wakhan*. (U)

the course of Anglo-Russian diplomacy from 1869 to 1873. The remainder of the northern boundary, from the lake to the Chinese border, was defined by the Anglo-Russian Boundary Commission of 1895. The southern Wakhan boundary is a section of the Durand Line, which was defined by the Anglo-Afghan agreement of 1893.

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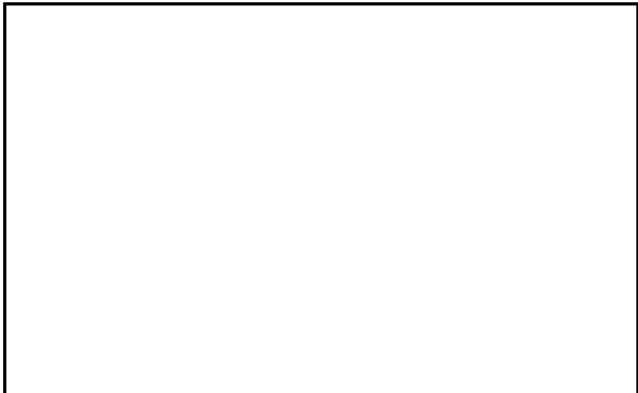
Since the purpose of these boundary settlements was to ensure that Britain and Russia did not share a common frontier, there was no sense of urgency on the part of the European powers—or of China—to complete the boundary where Afghan and Chinese territory met. Hence a gap in the border remained that was not officially resolved until the signing of a Sino-Afghan boundary agreement in 1963 and the demarcation of this 80-km boundary the following year.

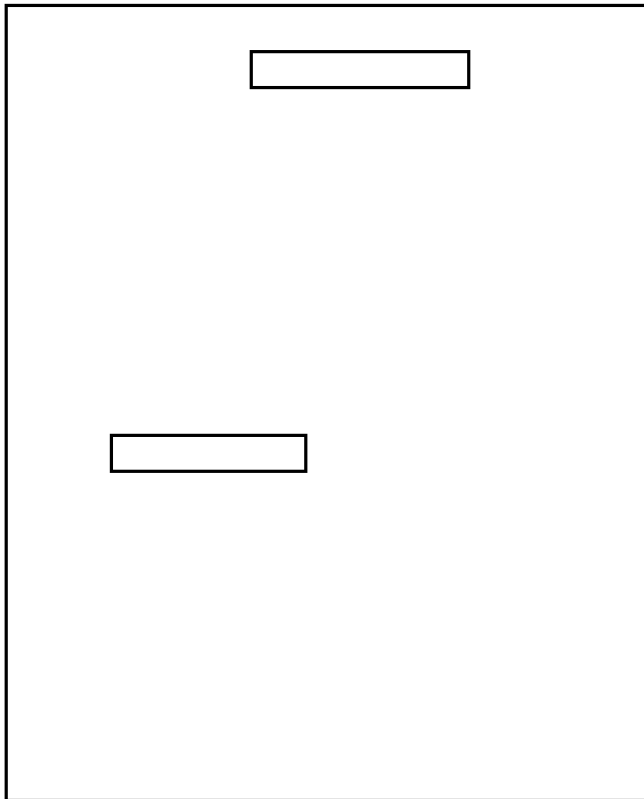
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#### The Major Route

Access to the Wakhan Corridor is restricted by terrain. Within the corridor, very high mountains to both north and south channel most travel to a single east-west route, motorable only in its western section and confined to the valleys of the Amu Darya headwaters. The southern boundary in particular is a solid mountain wall—the Hindu Kush—consisting of high peaks, glaciers, and snowfields; only a few difficult tracks cross the mountains, providing tenuous seasonal links between Hunza, Gilgit, and the Chitral District of Pakistan with Wakhan.

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**Alternate Routes**

Other access to northern Afghanistan from China is along ancient trade routes that cross northern Pakistan and enter Wakhan and Badakhshan over high passes <sup>2</sup> through the Hindu Kush mountains. Most of the Hindu Kush passes are open only a few months of the year and only a minimal amount of supplies can be moved over these mountain routes.<sup>3</sup> [redacted]

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A larger quantity of supplies could be moved into Pakistan from China by truck via the Karakoram Highway, but it is improbable that the road would be used. Not only would the supplies have to be carried by trail from the road to the Afghanistan border, but storage of supplies in northern Pakistan would be a problem. In addition, the use of the road is subject to conditions similar to those affecting the trails. The Karakoram Highway is open for only a few months from late summer through fall. The opening of the road to traffic depends on how soon the landslides that regularly follow spring and summer thaws are cleared. Snow and ice block the road during the remainder of the year. [redacted]

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**Use of Wakhan by China**

Rumors and speculations continue, particularly in the press, that China is supplying the Afghan insurgents with guns and "advisers" directly through the Wakhan "connection" or indirectly via the Karakoram Highway. There is no hard evidence, however, to support any kind of direct Chinese assistance to the Afghan rebel forces. "Chinese guns" reported captured by Soviet and Afghan forces in Badakhshan probably are Soviet automatic rifles or possibly copies of the weapons made by tribal gunsmiths in Pakistan. Reports of the presence of Chinese also cannot be confirmed. Individuals that appear to be Chinese may be Wakhan Kirghiz <sup>4</sup> who have joined the rebel forces in Badakhshan. [redacted]

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Travel within Wakhan depends on weather conditions. It is easiest to traverse the area from mid-July through November. At other times of the year travel is possible but usually involves considerably greater problems and, occasionally, risks. Heavy snow is common in the December-February period, and the valleys often become clogged with drifts when winds sweep snow from mountain peaks and ridges. Temperatures lower than 20°C below zero are an additional hazard to winter travel. During spring and early summer, melting snow and ice result in muddy, slippery trails and swollen streams, which must be crossed and recrossed on most routes. [redacted]

<sup>2</sup> See appendix A for a list of the passes. (U)

<sup>3</sup> For example, to move one metric ton requires seven camels, or 10 yaks, or 15 or more ponies. One ton would equate to fewer than 150 rifles without ammunition. (U)

<sup>4</sup> See appendix B for a description of these people. (U)

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## Appendix B

### Population Groups in Wakhan

Wakhan is sparsely populated and some areas—principally the high valleys, or *pamirs*—are only seasonally occupied. Tajiks are the most numerous ethnic group, inhabiting the western half of Wakhan. The eastern and higher portion of the Wakhan Corridor traditionally was the home of nomadic Kirghiz, most of whom have fled during the past two years to Pakistan.

#### The Tajiks

An estimated 5,000 to 6,000 Tajiks live in the western part of the Wakhan Corridor. They belong to a subgroup known as mountain or hill Tajiks, who are adherents of the Ismailiya Shia sect of Islam and whose spiritual leader is the Aga Khan. They are of medium height and generally have brown hair and eyes and a generous amount of Mongoloid admixture. It is not unusual, however, for Wakhan Tajiks to have yellow or red hair, or blue eyes, in combination with high cheekbones and the epicanthic eyefold. The Tajiks speak Wakhi (Vakhi), a dialect of the Pamiri family of the East Iranian languages; many of them also speak Dari, the Afghan form of Persian.  25X1

The Tajiks are a hardy, self-reliant, and usually peaceful group of mountain farmers and herders. Their principal crops are peas, beans, millet, and highland wheat and barley. The irrigated fields are terraced and require large quantities of manure to get even a moderate yield. Animals—yaks, cattle, goats, sheep, and ponies—are shifted seasonally to rich upland pastures. Settlements in Wakhan are hamlets composed of one or more extended families, each of which can have a dozen to as many as 50 members.

Tajik society is nontribal, but kinship structure dominates the political process. The heads of traditionally important families form a council, and the headman (*malik*) is selected from among its members. The office is not hereditary: a *malik's* power and tenure depend on his personality and the amount of influence and support he can maintain.  25X1

**The Kirghiz**

The Kirghiz, who have inhabited the *pamir* area in the eastern end of the Wakhan Corridor, are a pastoral people. They are shorter than average in height, and have coarse black hair, dark brown eyes, broad faces, and epicanthic eyefold. They speak a Turkic dialect of the Altaic family of languages and are members of the Sunni sect of Islam. Their society is tribal in organization and they have little in common, except as followers of Islam, with their Tajik neighbors. [redacted]

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The Wakhan Kirghiz numbered fewer than 3,000 in the early 1970s; after their access to China was cut off they suffered untold hardships from year-round isolation in the bitter cold of the high *pamir* valleys. Probably few, if any, Kirghiz now remain in Wakhan. [redacted]

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This branch of the Kirghiz had customarily moved their animals (yaks, ponies, sheep, and some Bactrian camels) each fall into the lower valleys around Kashgar in Chinese Turkistan. During the winter, they received religious instruction, some medical treatment, and a selected few of their members raised grain for the entire clan or tribe. Following the Russian Revolution (1917) and the Chinese Civil War (1949), their traditional migration routes through Russian and Chinese territory were gradually closed. The Afghan Government offered them land in the main part of Badakhshan, but they refused to become "lowlanders," partly because they could not tolerate the heat of the lower valleys and partly because their headman's (khan's) position depended on keeping them together as a viable political and ethnic unit. [redacted]

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Under the strong leadership of Khan Rahman Quol (Rahman Gul), the Wakhan Kirghiz managed to survive economically through the annual sale of their animals and animal products in Kabul. What the Wakhan Kirghiz could not combat, however, was an infant mortality rate of nearly 50 percent and the death of nearly one-third of their women in childbirth. In addition, denial of access to their mullahs in China placed the burden of religious instruction and education on the shoulders of the khan. Illiteracy increased, since one individual could not reach more than a few people. [redacted]

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In October 1978 several hundred families of the Wakhan Kirghiz reportedly migrated into the Hunza Valley of Pakistan, both to survive as a people and to evade interference from the pro-Communist regime in Kabul. Many of those who reached the Hunza Valley—including their animals—reportedly have died, however, primarily from the effects of altitudinal and other environmental change. [redacted]

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