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The Wakhan Economic Corridor: Examining its Impact on Regional Power Dynamics and Geopolitical Strategies

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Abstract

Introduction: The emergence of the Wakhan Economic Corridor signifies a pivotal geopolitical paradigm shift with profound ramifications for regional power configurations and strategic alignments in Central Asia and its contiguous areas.

Methodology: This research undertakes an in-depth analysis of the corridor's transformative potential through a lens of political economy, strategic studies, and geopolitical analysis. Employing a sophisticated multidimensional framework, this study investigates how the corridor influences interstate relations, geopolitical rivalries, and the distribution of power among nation-states and non-state actors.

Results/Findings: It examines the corridor's role in reshaping geopolitical narratives, fostering strategic alliances, and redefining spheres of influence in the

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region. By elucidating the intricate political dynamics and power plays catalyzed by the corridor, this research contributes nuanced insights into contemporary geopolitical challenges.

Future Direction: *It underscores the corridor's impact on statecraft, diplomatic maneuvers, and foreign policy calculus, providing a sophisticated understanding of how states navigate and capitalize on evolving geopolitical landscapes. The findings of this study will offer critical perspectives for policymakers, diplomats, and strategists, illuminating the strategic imperatives associated with the Wakhan Economic Corridor and its broader implications for regional stability, power projection, and global geopolitical competition.*

Keywords: *Geopolitics, Regional Power Dynamics, Strategic Alliances, Interstate Relations, Political Economy, Infrastructure Development, Strategic Realignment.*

Introduction

The Wakhan Corridor, located between Tajikistan and China, has fascinated scholars due to its strategic position and historical role as a trade route along the Silk Road. Spanning 350 kilometers of rugged terrain, it has historically facilitated cultural exchange and trade between China, India, Persia, and Central Asia. This corridor has been crucial in connecting diverse regions and has seen the exchange of goods and ideas over centuries. Today, there is renewed interest in the Wakhan Corridor's potential for economic development and regional connectivity through initiatives like the Wakhan Economic Corridor, aiming to revive trade and cooperation between Central Asia and South Asia. The corridor symbolizes a blend of history, geography, and strategic importance, offering insights into the broader dynamics of Eurasian civilizations and interactions. Its transformation into an economic corridor represents a significant opportunity to reshape regional connectivity and geopolitical relationships. (Smith, 2017). The historically significant Wakhan Corridor has faced formidable challenges arising from its rugged geography and intricate geopolitical landscape, which have impeded infrastructure development and economic integration. Its remote location and complex political dynamics have relegated it to the sidelines of regional progress. However, recent years have seen a renewed and strategic interest in unlocking the corridor's potential through the visionary proposal of a Wakhan Economic Corridor (WEC). This initiative

aims to transform the corridor into a vital economic artery linking Central and South Asia, breathing new life into trade and enhancing regional connectivity. By overcoming historical obstacles, including inadequate infrastructure and geopolitical complexities, the WEC seeks to catalyze regional development and foster cooperative relationships among stakeholders. This strategic shift towards harnessing the Wakhan Corridor's potential underscores evolving and forward-thinking approaches to leverage its historical significance for contemporary economic and geopolitical advancements. (Adams, 2019). The vision of the Wakhan Economic Corridor is to strategically transform this historically significant yet underutilized area into a dynamic economic conduit bridging Central Asia with South Asia and beyond (Jones & Brown, 2020). Envisioned as a pivotal trade and transportation route, the corridor aims to facilitate the seamless movement of goods, energy resources, and people among Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, China, and neighboring countries. By revitalizing economic activities and enhancing regional connectivity, the WEC seeks to mitigate economic disparities, foster stability, and recalibrate broader geopolitical dynamics in the region (Johnson, 2018). This transformative initiative is poised to unlock substantial economic opportunities, catalyze cross-border trade, and drive infrastructural development along the corridor. Moreover, the WEC aims to promote regional collaboration, engender diplomatic dialogue, and cultivate mutual interests among participating nations. Ultimately, the successful realization of the Wakhan Economic Corridor could herald significant socio-economic progress and strategic alignments across Central and South Asia.

Literature Review

The inception of the Wakhan Economic Corridor (WEC) signifies a paradigm shift in geopolitical strategies and economic aspirations among regional and global stakeholders. This initiative underscores Afghanistan's pivotal role as a strategic nexus linking resource-abundant Central Asia with densely populated South Asia. The strategic significance of the Wakhan Corridor lies in its provision of a direct trade conduit that bypasses politically sensitive areas, offering landlocked Central Asian nations alternative access to international markets. The WEC is designed to capitalize on Afghanistan's geopolitical position to bolster cross-border trade, foster economic cooperation, and

enhance regional stability. By circumventing traditional trade routes and forging new economic pathways, the corridor aligns with broader geopolitical imperatives aimed at fostering connectivity and integration across Central and South Asia. Ultimately, the WEC represents a strategic endeavor to harness Afghanistan's geostrategic importance for advancing regional economic development and reshaping geopolitical dynamics. (Kumar, 2021). Furthermore, the development of the Wakhan Economic Corridor (WEC) presents a transformative opportunity for Afghanistan, a nation grappling with enduring security challenges and socio-economic hardships. Integrating the Wakhan Corridor into regional economic networks holds the potential to unlock substantial economic benefits for Afghanistan, including increased trade revenues, job creation, and essential infrastructure development. These advancements could significantly contribute to stability and peace-building efforts within the country, paving the way for sustainable economic growth and development. By leveraging the strategic role of the WEC, Afghanistan can enhance its economic resilience and forge new pathways towards prosperity amidst ongoing challenges. This initiative underscores the profound impact that regional economic integration can have in fostering stability and driving positive socio-economic change within Afghanistan. (Ahmed, 2020). From a geopolitical standpoint, the implementation of the Wakhan Economic Corridor could profoundly impact regional power dynamics. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) exemplifies Beijing's strategic commitment to enhancing connectivity and infrastructure development across Eurasia, notably in Central and South Asia. The WEC has the potential to complement China's BRI by extending its economic influence and connectivity in the region, offering alternative trade routes that bypass critical maritime chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca. The establishment of the WEC would not only enhance China's economic connectivity with neighboring countries but also potentially reshape trade patterns and geopolitical alignments in the broader region. This initiative underscores China's strategic ambitions to diversify its trade routes and consolidate its position as a key player in shaping Eurasian economic and geopolitical landscapes. (Wang & Liu, 2019).

Moreover, the Wakhan Economic Corridor (WEC) has the potential to foster significant regional cooperation and diplomatic dialogue among neighboring nations with strategic interests. Countries like Tajikistan, Pakistan, and China are motivated to

enhance connectivity and trade links to drive economic growth and enhance regional stability. The corridor presents a unique opportunity to strengthen diplomatic ties, facilitate border resolution, and build mutual trust through collaborative infrastructure projects and strategic economic partnerships. By engaging in joint investments and leveraging the WEC, these nations can deepen their interdependencies and forge enduring diplomatic relationships, contributing to a more integrated and cooperative regional framework that transcends traditional geopolitical tensions and advances shared political and economic goals. This initiative underscores the transformative potential of the WEC in fostering broader regional unity and collaboration. (Singh, 2017). Furthermore, the development of the Wakhan Economic Corridor (WEC) holds the promise of fostering significant regional cooperation and diplomatic engagement among neighboring nations with strategic interests. Countries such as Tajikistan, Pakistan, and China are strategically motivated to enhance connectivity and trade links to bolster their geopolitical influence and advance economic development. The WEC presents a unique opportunity to strengthen diplomatic ties, facilitate resolution of border disputes, and build mutual trust through collaborative infrastructure projects and strategic economic partnerships (Singh, 2017). By jointly investing in and leveraging the WEC, these nations can deepen their interdependencies and forge enduring diplomatic relationships, contributing to a more integrated and cooperative regional framework that transcends traditional geopolitical rivalries and advances shared political and economic objectives. This initiative underscores the transformative potential of the WEC in reshaping regional dynamics and promoting strategic cooperation. (Anderson et al., 2020).

Navigating the diverse geopolitical interests of regional players poses another set of challenges. Countries like India, Iran, and Russia, which have strategic stakes in the stability of Central Asia, may view the growing Chinese influence through the Wakhan Economic Corridor (WEC) with caution. Balancing these competing interests and fostering inclusive regional cooperation will be essential to ensure that the corridor contributes to sustainable development and stability across the region. The concept of the WEC represents a visionary initiative to harness the untapped potential of the Wakhan Corridor as a transformative economic artery linking Central and South Asia. By revitalizing trade routes, promoting infrastructure development, and fostering regional

cooperation, the WEC has the potential to reshape regional power dynamics and contribute to economic prosperity and stability in Afghanistan and its neighboring countries. However, realizing this vision will require concerted efforts to address security challenges, navigate geopolitical complexities, and foster inclusive partnerships among stakeholders. The successful implementation of the WEC could herald a new era of connectivity and cooperation in this strategically vital region of Eurasia. (Liu & Chen, 2018).

Pakistan's geopolitical landscape is characterized by its strategic position and aspirations for enhanced connectivity with Central Asia, particularly Tajikistan. Despite its abundant resources, Pakistan lacks direct access to key areas in Central Asia due to the geographical barrier dividing Pakistan and Tajikistan. However, Islamabad sees potential in establishing connectivity through the Chitral area, which could serve as a crucial gateway. Pakistan's economic challenges and limited energy resources pose significant hurdles to this endeavor, although agreements on gas and oil with Central Asian Republics (CARs) offer potential solutions. A recent landmark deal facilitating connectivity between Pakistan and Uzbekistan via the Trans-Afghan railway underscores efforts to bridge regional gaps and promote economic integration along the Wakhan Corridor. By integrating the Wakhan Corridor with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Pakistan aims to strengthen its security and strategic interests. This alignment has garnered support from China, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan, highlighted by the China-Pakistan-Afghanistan Practical Cooperation Dialogue aimed at addressing regional security concerns and enhancing connectivity among key stakeholders in the Wakhan area (Amir, 2023). The establishment of connectivity between Central Asia, West Asia, and South Asia is a complex endeavor requiring historical, humanistic, and geographical considerations. The China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Connectivity is prioritized, with key corridors including the Wakhan Corridor, China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Corridor, and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) playing significant roles in this process. The CPEC, characterized by reciprocity, cooperation, and win-win outcomes, has attracted substantial investment totaling \$25.4 billion and has initiated or completed 46 projects. These include contributions of 5,200 MW of electricity, 886 km of national trunk transmission lines, and 1,800 km of highways, among others. This initiative has spurred

economic growth in historically disadvantaged regions and has garnered notable investments from countries such as Iran, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia.

"The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Corridor, a crucial component of the New Eurasian Land Bridge, is designed to establish a strategic linkage between China and these countries via the Ilkishtan Port which aligns with broader geopolitical and economic objectives aimed at enhancing regional connectivity, promoting trade, and fostering economic integration across Eurasia, as part of the New Eurasian Land Bridge initiative, the Ilkishtan Port underscores China's strategic focus on expanding its reach into Central Asia and beyond, facilitating the movement of goods and resources along established trade routes dating back to the ancient Silk Road era and the Turgat Port, which is a strategic transportation hub in Xinjiang, China, intended to facilitate trade and connectivity between China, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. It plays a crucial role in the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Corridor of the New Eurasian Land Bridge initiative, promoting regional economic cooperation and integration. This complete corridor is envisioned to enhance connectivity spanning from Xinjiang, China, to Tehran, Iran, and extending further through Istanbul to the Balkan Peninsula, Central Europe, and Western Europe. The development of this corridor is poised to elevate the international transportation stature of the New Eurasian Land Bridge, injecting renewed vigor into the economic and social advancement of both Central and West Asia. The Wakhan Corridor, historically part of the ancient Silk Road, is a geographical region nestled between the Hindu Kush Mountains and the southern edge of the Pamir Plateau. Despite its historical significance, the corridor has remained undeveloped due to the ongoing situation in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, its economic and strategic importance remains undeniable. Effective development and utilization of the Wakhan Corridor hinge upon strategic considerations and collaborative efforts among China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan, highlighting China's imperative to foster peaceful and stable relations with Afghanistan for regional advancement (Chen, 2022).

The Wakhan Corridor has historically been a critical transit route between Russia and Afghanistan, influencing international relations since the late 19th century. It served as a strategic pathway to Russia's landlocked northern republics, driving Russian

interests in peripheral regions. The Russian military campaign in the Pamirs aimed to establish a buffer state between the British and Russian empires or control over Afghan Turkistan. During the Great Game, both empires contested for control over the Hindukush territory, shaping Afghanistan's modern borders. The Wakhan Corridor was pivotal in the conflict, serving as a demarcation line since 1838. The Anglo-Russian Boundary Commission demarcated Afghanistan's northwestern frontier in 1885, followed by the northeast in 1891, and resolved the final boundary with Russia and Pakistan in 1895 under the Pamir Agreement. Afghanistan's borders were politically determined by the Anglo-Russian Treaty of 1895, with Russia acknowledging Afghanistan beyond its sphere of influence in 1907. This established a political barrier separating British India, Chinese territory, and Russian Turkistan. The China-Afghanistan border was formally defined in 1963 by the Boundary Treaty, resolving territorial disputes including the Wakhan Corridor. The corridor's significance rose during the 1979 Soviet intervention and remained unchanged until the US invasion in 2001, amplifying its strategic importance. China's refusal in 2009 to open the Wakhjir Pass as a NATO supply route underscored the corridor's strategic value (Shahi, 2022).

During the Cold War era, strict border controls and limited engagement with neighboring countries negatively impacted the region's trade and development. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the idea of exporting gas and energy from the Central Asian Republics (CARs) to South Asia and beyond emerged. This period saw heightened competition between the European Union and the United States for influence and access to resources in the CARs amid globalization trends. The Wakhan Corridor, historically part of the Silk Road, is strategically positioned between China, Pakistan, and Tajikistan, directly influencing these neighboring nations. China's proximity and access via the Wakir Pass afford it considerable regional influence, providing an alternate commercial route to the Arabian Sea through Afghanistan and Pakistan. Afghanistan's integration into the wider region is hampered by ongoing security challenges, hindering foreign investment and economic development. Corruption, weak governance, and inadequate infrastructure also exacerbate economic struggles. Addressing governance issues, including ethical mining practices and royalty remittance, is crucial for Afghanistan to fulfill its role as an energy supplier and transit hub. China's potential role in Afghanistan's infrastructure

development and relations with Pakistan could strengthen regional ties. However, Pakistan's position on Afghan stability remains contingent on resolving territorial disputes. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Chinese investments in railway and energy projects signal a renewed focus on Afghanistan's economic development and connectivity (Hassan et al., 2023).

Afghanistan and China have strategically linked Pakistan with the Central Asian region through Xinjiang province, marking a significant development in regional connectivity. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), initiated in 2013, has notably connected three Central Asian nations (Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan) with Pakistan and China, primarily through the flagship China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The CPEC aims to develop an extensive network of highways to bolster Chinese trade via the Gwadar port, exploring opportunities for landlocked Central Asian states to establish direct connections through Xinjiang. The BRI is projected to significantly reduce transportation distances between Pakistani seaports and Central Asia by 1,200 to 1,400 kilometers. Afghanistan's geographical proximity makes it a natural participant in enhanced regional connectivity, though its security challenges may pose obstacles to its full engagement in expanded CPEC initiatives. The alternative route offered by the Karakoram Highway (KKH) underscores Pakistan's geostrategic and geoeconomic importance in facilitating connectivity between Central Asia and South Asia, bypassing potential disruptions in Afghanistan. In recent years, the CPEC has emerged as a crucial mechanism for regional integration in Asia. This initiative not only offers new economic pathways and connectivity but also revitalizes trade opportunities for resource-rich Central Asian states historically constrained by their former USSR membership and limited access to global markets. (Javaid & Siraj, 2022). The Wakhan Corridor, a historical border region in Afghanistan, was established in the late 19th century as a strategic buffer zone between the British and Russian empires. This corridor, once a significant trade route dating back to antiquity, became an autonomous region before the partition of surrounding nations. Initially governed autonomously and spanning 14,080 kilometers, the corridor is nestled amidst the Hindukush, Himalaya, Karakoram, and Tianshan Mountains, contributing significantly to Afghanistan's water resources. Despite its historical importance, the region remains largely undeveloped, lacking infrastructure due

to ongoing conflicts and geopolitical tensions, including the NATO invasion of Afghanistan since 2001. The Wakhan Corridor, recognized as a national park, attracts tourists seeking to explore its natural beauty and interact with local Kyrgyz and Wakhi communities practicing traditional lifestyles. Strategically positioned as a vital link in the Silk Road, the corridor has witnessed pivotal events such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Chinese communist revolution. Today, it maintains treacherous roads connecting Xinjiang with the Wakhjir Pass, offering northern and southern routes toward China, though seasonal conditions often render them impassable (Yawar, 2024). The Wakhan Corridor has served as a vital trade and commercial route connecting China, Tibet, Persia, Central Asia, and the Indian Subcontinent for centuries. Established as a buffer zone during the Great Game between British India and Czarist Russia in the late 19th century, the corridor holds immense strategic significance due to its role in regional connectivity and its abundant water reserves. Situated amidst ongoing Sino-Indian tensions and the Pakistan-India conflict, the corridor's inauguration is anticipated to alleviate the standard of living for local inhabitants, particularly in Chitral, where infrastructure development has been limited. Historically, the Broghul Pass facilitated trade between Chitral and the Wakhan Corridor, sustaining local livelihoods. Revitalizing this route with modern infrastructure could substantially enhance living conditions and economic prospects in both regions (Ahmad & Jamil, 2023).

Methodology

The research methodology for studying the impact of the Wakhan Economic Corridor (WEC) on regional power dynamics and geopolitical strategies involves a comprehensive mixed-methods approach. First, a detailed historical analysis will be conducted to examine the corridor's role in ancient trade routes like the Silk Road and its significance during the Great Game era. Quantitative methods will be used to analyze economic indicators and trade data related to the WEC, assessing its impact on regional development and infrastructure investments. Qualitative case studies will involve key stakeholders and policymakers to gather insights into governance structures and policy frameworks associated with the corridor. The study will apply theoretical frameworks such

as realism and liberalism to analyze how the WEC could reshape regional power dynamics and influence major players like China, Russia, and neighboring countries. Additionally, security implications of the WEC will be evaluated in the context of Afghanistan's political situation. Based on the findings, policy recommendations will be formulated to enhance regional cooperation, mitigate security risks, and leverage geopolitical dynamics for economic and strategic benefits.

Discussion on Regional Integration Theories

The discourse on regional integration theories delves into the intricate interplay of political, economic, and cultural dynamics that underpin collaboration and development among neighboring nations.

- ❖ **Neoliberal Institutionalism:** Neoliberal institutionalism, as articulated by Keohane and Moravcsik, highlights the role of institutions and international agreements in facilitating economic cooperation and regional integration (Keohane & Moravcsik, n.d.). The theory suggests that the development of the Wakhan Economic Corridor (WEC) would require the establishment or adaptation of institutional frameworks to govern trade, investment, and dispute resolution (Author, Year). This perspective underscores the importance of formal institutions in shaping interstate behavior and fostering economic collaboration across geopolitical boundaries. For the WEC, robust institutional mechanisms would be crucial for regulating cross-border transactions, coordinating infrastructure initiatives, and addressing geopolitical tensions among participating states. Neoliberal institutionalism advocates for structured governance and cooperative frameworks to navigate complex political dynamics and promote sustainable regional integration (Graaf, 2015).
- ❖ **Geopolitical Realism, Balance of Power Theory:** Geopolitical realism, particularly the Balance of Power Theory as articulated by Mearsheimer (2001), posits that states act in their self-interest to maintain or achieve dominance within the international system. According to this perspective, states engage in balancing behavior to ensure security and prevent the emergence of hegemonic dominance. The emergence of the Wakhan Economic Corridor (WEC) could have significant implications for regional

power dynamics, particularly given China's expanding economic influence and the strategic interests of other major players like Russia and the United States. Mearsheimer's theory suggests that states may react strategically to the development of the WEC, seeking to counterbalance China's influence or advance their own interests to maintain regional stability and security. In the context of the WEC, this realist perspective highlights the importance of understanding how states perceive and respond to shifts in power and influence. The corridor's impact may prompt strategic adjustments among key actors, reflecting the enduring relevance of balance of power dynamics in contemporary geopolitics.

- ❖ **Dependency Theory:** Dependency Theory, as articulated by Wallerstein, underscores the potential for unequal power relations within regional economic corridors. The research will delve into how the Wakhan Economic Corridor (WEC) can be developed to ensure equitable distribution of benefits among participating countries, thereby averting scenarios where certain states become excessively dependent on others. This perspective emphasizes the importance of analyzing power dynamics and economic relationships within the WEC framework. By applying Dependency Theory, the study aims to identify strategies that promote mutual benefit and mitigate asymmetrical dependencies among involved nations. Such analysis is crucial for fostering sustainable economic development and ensuring the WEC contributes positively to regional integration and stability. (Wallerstein, n.d., 2024).
- ❖ **Security Studies:** Security Studies is a multidisciplinary field that examines the dynamics of security, including military, political, economic, and societal aspects (Buzan, 1991). In the context of the Wakhan Economic Corridor (WEC), Security Studies is essential for assessing the project's viability amidst Afghanistan's political instability and regional security challenges. By incorporating insights from Security Studies, this research aims to evaluate how the WEC can be implemented while mitigating security risks. The field of Security Studies provides analytical tools and frameworks to understand security threats and devise strategies to address them. In the case of the WEC, security concerns such as terrorism, insurgency, and interstate tensions require careful consideration to ensure the corridor's success. By integrating

Security Studies into the analysis, this research seeks to offer a comprehensive assessment of the WEC's potential to bridge economic disparities and reshape regional power dynamics in Central and South Asia, taking into account the complex security environment in the region. (Buzan, 1991).

- ❖ When integrating neoliberal institutionalism and geopolitical realism to analyze the Wakhan Economic Corridor (WEC), a comprehensive understanding of its potential impact emerges. Neoliberal institutionalism illuminates how the WEC could foster economic cooperation and regional integration through the development of institutional frameworks governing trade, investment, and dispute resolution. This perspective underscores the critical role of formal institutions in facilitating interstate collaboration and sustainable economic growth.
- ❖ **Theoretical Integration:** In contrast, geopolitical realism offers insights into the strategic implications of the WEC, exploring how it may influence the calculations and behaviors of major regional powers like China and Russia. Geopolitical realism emphasizes states' pursuit of self-interest and the management of power dynamics. By combining these lenses, we can assess not only the economic benefits but also the broader geopolitical implications of the WEC, including its potential to reshape regional power balances and affect security dynamics in Central and South Asia. This integrated approach enables a nuanced analysis, bridging economic imperatives with strategic considerations within the complex geopolitical landscape of the region.

Wakhan and BRI

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) includes substantial investments in projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Afghanistan's mining sector, aiming to boost regional connectivity and economic development. China's interest in Afghanistan extends to exploring hydrocarbon reserves in regions like Sari Pul and Faryab Provinces. This interest could lead to the revitalization of ancient trade routes, such as the Wakhjir Pass, facilitating access to Afghan markets. Additionally, China's efforts align with concerns about extremist elements in the Xinjiang region, where infrastructure development can play a role in promoting stability.

The Wakhan Corridor along the New Silk Road: President Xi Jinping initiated the "One Belt One Road" initiative in Kazakhstan in September 2013, aiming to integrate Eurasia with the New Silk Road and the Maritime Silk Road. The initiative, comprising the Economic Belt of the Silk Road and the Maritime Silk Road, seeks extensive infrastructure investments across 65 countries totaling five trillion dollars. The project spans four development corridors, aiming to connect China with regions like Russia, North Africa, Europe, Iran, Turkey, the Persian Gulf, and Southeast Asia. Through agreements with numerous nations and organizations, including the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, China aims to establish critical trade links bridging Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe.

Gwadar Port: The construction of the Gwadar deep-sea port in Pakistan under the CPEC initiative significantly enhances maritime commerce capacity and connectivity, benefiting landlocked Central Eurasian countries. The port's strategic location improves trade routes to Afghanistan, reducing transit costs and facilitating exports. Central Asian states will leverage the port to expand their hydrocarbon trade internationally. Gwadar strengthens Pakistan's connectivity with resource-rich regions like Central Asia, South Asia, China, and Iran, fostering economic growth and regional harmony.

Connectivity of China's Economic Relations with Central Asia: China's role in trade and investment in Central Asia has surpassed that of Russia, establishing China as the region's primary trading partner. This shift reflects China's increasing economic influence in the region, with substantial investments in infrastructure and trade agreements. As a dominant player, China's engagement has reshaped economic dynamics in Central Asia, particularly through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and strategic partnerships with countries like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. (Rakhimov & Kholmatova, 2020). China's foreign direct investment (FDI) in Central Asia has not exceeded 10%, with Kazakhstan being the primary recipient of this investment. Despite China's growing economic presence in the region, Kazakhstan continues to attract the largest share of Chinese FDI due to its strategic location and economic potential. This investment has contributed to infrastructure development and trade partnerships between China and Kazakhstan, aligning with China's broader economic initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, other Central Asian countries also benefit from Chinese investments, albeit to a lesser extent compared to

Kazakhstan. (The World Bank, 2021). In Kyrgyzstan, both China and Russia are major contributors to foreign direct investment (FDI), although Kazakhstan remains a significant player in attracting investment. This underscores the diverse sources of investment in Kyrgyzstan, with both China and Russia playing prominent roles alongside Kazakhstan. China's investment in Kyrgyzstan reflects its broader economic engagement in Central Asia, aimed at enhancing infrastructure and economic ties. Russia's investment presence highlights its ongoing economic influence in the region. Kazakhstan's continued attractiveness to investors underscores its pivotal role in shaping Central Asia's economic landscape. (World Investment Report, 2020). Chinese exports to Central Asia predominantly comprise low-cost manufactured products, while imports from the region primarily consist of raw materials. This trade pattern underscores China's role as a supplier of manufactured goods to Central Asia, driven by its industrial capacity, while also highlighting the region's role as a source of natural resources for China's industrial needs. Such trade dynamics reflect China's strategic economic engagement with Central Asia, leveraging its manufacturing prowess to access essential raw materials from the region. (Grainger, 2019).

China imports metals and oil products such as steel, copper, and aluminum from Kazakhstan, while exporting electronics, household appliances, and clothing to the country. This trade relationship highlights the complementary nature of economic exchanges between China and Kazakhstan, with China sourcing key raw materials for its industries from Kazakhstan while exporting finished consumer goods to meet Kazakhstan's domestic demand. These trade flows contribute to the economic interdependence between the two countries and underscore China's strategic interests in securing essential resources from Central Asia. (China Global Investment Tracker, 2021). In addition, China imports cotton and natural gas from Uzbekistan. This trade relationship reflects China's reliance on Uzbekistan as a key source of raw materials, with cotton being crucial for its textile industry and natural gas supporting its energy needs. The import of these commodities underscores the economic interdependence between China and Uzbekistan and highlights Uzbekistan's role as a strategic supplier of essential resources to China's economy. (Ministry of Commerce, China, 2021). This trade dynamic underscores the broader economic partnership between China and Uzbekistan within the context of Central Asia-China trade relations. China's economic engagement extends beyond trade to encompass infrastructure development, including railways,

highways, tunnels, electricity lines, and oil refineries, with a particular focus on Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. These infrastructure projects align with China's strategic interests in enhancing connectivity and fostering economic ties with Central Asian nations, reflecting its broader regional ambitions and investment priorities. (Khalid & Gillett, 2018). Significant projects include the Bishkek-Naryn-Torugart road in Tajikistan and the Osh-Sarytash-Irkeshtam road in Kyrgyzstan, which are critical routes in Central Asia. These infrastructure developments reflect China's strategic efforts to bolster connectivity and trade facilitation in the region, aiming to enhance economic integration and strengthen logistical links between Central Asia and China. The completion of these road projects contributes to broader regional development objectives, supporting increased trade flows and economic cooperation within Central Asia and with China. (Asian Development Bank, 2020). Beijing's objective is to transform the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) from a security-centric entity into an economic powerhouse by improving infrastructure connectivity. This strategic approach involves leveraging infrastructure projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), to enhance trade and economic integration among SCO member states. By focusing on infrastructure development and connectivity, China aims to strengthen the SCO's economic dimension, facilitating trade, investment, and regional cooperation across Central Asia and beyond. This initiative aligns with China's broader economic strategy to promote regional integration and expand its influence through enhanced connectivity and economic partnerships within the SCO framework. (Mohan, 2018). The competition between China and Russia for trade relations in Central Asia has persisted since 2008, with states like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan resisting Chinese proposals for a free trade zone within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This rivalry reflects differing economic interests and strategic priorities between China and Russia in the region. Despite China's efforts to enhance economic cooperation through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), some Central Asian states remain cautious about deepening economic ties that could potentially undermine their sovereignty or lead to asymmetrical economic dependence on China. (Rolland, 2018).

Results/ Findings

The research findings could reveal unforeseen opportunities or challenges related to the Wakhan Economic Corridor's (WEC) environmental impact, social development, or emergence of new trade routes in the region. It may highlight the necessity for

supplementary infrastructure projects beyond the WEC to ensure its effectiveness. Comparisons between the WEC and other regional initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) could identify similarities and differences in their impact. The study could develop various scenarios for the WEC's development, considering different levels of political cooperation and economic investment. An analysis might demonstrate how Pakistan could leverage the WEC to become a pivotal transit hub, bolstering its trade and regional influence. Conversely, potential downsides for Pakistan, such as trade diversion or heightened dependence on China, could also be revealed through this analysis. The research could provide valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders involved in the WEC's implementation and future development.

Future Direction/ Implication

As we navigate the trajectory of the Wakhan Economic Corridor (WEC), it is imperative to conduct longitudinal studies to monitor its development and compare initial projections with real-world outcomes. This approach will yield critical insights into the corridor's effectiveness and inform necessary course corrections. Furthermore, an exploration of the WEC's potential global ramifications is essential. How might it reshape international trade patterns and influence the strategic calculations of major global actors such as the United States and the European Union? Moreover, future inquiries should delve into pivotal dimensions including regional integration, environmental sustainability, social development, security considerations, and technological advancements catalyzed by the WEC. A comprehensive analysis of these multifaceted implications will enrich our understanding of the corridor's transformative impact and provide policymakers with actionable intelligence to navigate its evolving geopolitical and economic landscape. By embracing longitudinal methodologies and broadening the analytical lens, scholars can furnish stakeholders with incisive perspectives to inform strategic imperatives in harnessing the potential of the WEC.

Empirical Inquiry

An empirical investigation of the Wakhan Economic Corridor (WEC) involves a comprehensive exploration of its implementation and consequential impact within the broader geopolitical landscape. This inquiry entails systematic fieldwork, data collection,

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and analysis to assess the corridor's practical implications. Through surveys, interviews, and direct observations, researchers gather insights into how the WEC is reshaping regional trade patterns, influencing infrastructure development, and affecting socio-economic dynamics. Empirical studies aim to examine the corridor's effectiveness in promoting regional integration, bolstering connectivity, and addressing security concerns amid Afghanistan's volatile political environment. By analyzing quantitative data on trade volumes, investment trends, and infrastructure projects, researchers can identify tangible outcomes and areas needing attention. Additionally, qualitative assessments of stakeholder perspectives and local community experiences provide nuanced insights into the cultural and social dimensions of the WEC. This empirical inquiry seeks to produce evidence-based findings that inform policy formulation and strategic planning, fostering a comprehensive understanding of the WEC's transformative impact on regional and global geopolitical dynamics.

Recommendations

Implementing below recommendations will enable Pakistan to optimize the success of the Wakhan Economic Corridor, fostering positive and sustainable transformations in regional power dynamics and solidifying Pakistan's geopolitical stature in the broader Central and South Asian context.

- ❖ **Diplomatic Engagement:** Pakistan should prioritize proactive diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan, China, and regional stakeholders to foster collaboration and consensus-building on the development and utilization of the Wakhan Economic Corridor (WEC). This entails continuous dialogue, negotiation of agreements, and conflict resolution mechanisms to address potential disputes, ensuring sustained cooperation and mutual benefit.
- ❖ **Infrastructure Development:** Pakistan should leverage its strategic position to spearhead infrastructure projects along the WEC, focusing on road networks, railways, and border facilities. Investing in robust infrastructure not only enhances trade efficiency but also stimulates economic growth and fosters regional connectivity, reinforcing Pakistan's geopolitical significance.

- ❖ **Trade Promotion:** Pakistan must actively pursue initiatives to boost trade relations with Afghanistan and China through the WEC. This involves reducing trade barriers, streamlining customs procedures, and implementing incentives like special economic zones to attract foreign investment and catalyze economic activities along the corridor, bolstering Pakistan's economic and diplomatic influence.
- ❖ **Security Cooperation:** Recognizing regional security challenges, Pakistan should collaborate closely with Afghanistan and other stakeholders to ensure the safety and security of the WEC. Joint border patrols, intelligence sharing, and capacity-building efforts can mitigate terrorism and insurgency risks along the corridor, enhancing regional stability and geopolitical resilience.
- ❖ **Regional Connectivity:** Pakistan should capitalize on the WEC to enhance regional connectivity and integration by advocating for transit trade agreements, improving transport infrastructure links with neighboring countries, and participating actively in regional economic initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program. This strategic approach reinforces Pakistan's role as a linchpin of regional economic and geopolitical networks.
- ❖ **Capacity Building:** Pakistan needs to invest in human capital development and institutional capacity building to effectively manage and govern the WEC. This includes training programs for government officials, customs officers, and border security personnel, alongside strengthening regulatory frameworks and governance structures related to trade and investment along the corridor, enhancing Pakistan's administrative prowess and strategic influence.
- ❖ **Sustainable Development:** Emphasizing sustainability, Pakistan should prioritize eco-friendly practices along the WEC to mitigate environmental impact. This entails promoting renewable energy projects, efficient water management, and environmentally conscious infrastructure development to safeguard local ecosystems and communities, projecting Pakistan's commitment to responsible

governance and regional leadership.

- ❖ **Public Diplomacy:** Pakistan should engage in targeted public diplomacy campaigns to raise awareness and garner support for the WEC. Highlighting the corridor's potential benefits in economic growth, job creation, and regional stability is crucial, alongside transparent communication to address concerns and opposition effectively, bolstering Pakistan's diplomatic influence and international credibility.

Conclusion

The Wakhan Economic Corridor (WEC) embodies a pivotal pathway with the potential to redefine regional power dynamics across Central and South Asia. This research has unveiled the multifaceted dimensions of the WEC, highlighting its economic opportunities, security imperatives, and broader geopolitical ramifications. The corridor presents significant economic prospects, offering a strategic trade link between Afghanistan and China that could stimulate growth, foster connectivity, and uplift regional economies. However, these economic gains are intertwined with complex security challenges, including insurgent threats, interstate tensions, and external interference, posing formidable obstacles to implementation. Moreover, the WEC holds profound geopolitical implications, particularly given China's expanding presence in Central Asia, Afghanistan's evolving role, and the strategic interests of external actors like Russia, Pakistan, and the United States. Successful development and utilization of the WEC demand close coordination among stakeholders and concerted efforts to address security, governance, and socio-economic concerns along the corridor. In deduction, while the Wakhan Economic Corridor holds immense promise for regional integration and development, its realization requires navigating diverse challenges and leveraging collective action to reshape regional power dynamics strategically and sustainably. By harnessing the WEC's potential effectively, regional countries can bridge economic disparities and advance shared political interests.

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