

A Countermeasure Study on the Safety Situation of Wakhan Corridor Border Between China and Afghanistan*

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, "three evil forces" represented by "East Turkistan" violations have made a large number of terrorist crimes in Xinjiang and Afghanistan, leading to a deterioration of the security situation in both countries. In Wakhan Corridor and its surrounding areas, the "East Turkistan" engaged in split activities and inputted weapons through the Corridor. America's "double standard" on counter-terrorism has led to instability in Afghanistan and Xinjiang. To maintain the safety of the China-Afghanistan border, it is needed to crack down on the "East Turkistan" with military struggle and diplomatic mediation. In the meantime, more attentions should be devoted to economic development and drugs control in this area, and building a community of shared future between China and Central Asian countries, to maintain regional harmony and border peace.

Keywords: *Wakhan Corridor, China-Afghanistan border security, "East Turkistan".*

1. INTRODUCTION

Although the shared borders between China and Afghanistan are only 92.45 kilometers, the Wakhan Corridor, which connects the two countries, is the geographical key on the south line of the Silk Road. It is a channel for the exchange of Chinese civilization with Central Asian civilization, Persian civilization, Indian civilization and European civilization. Due to the high cold and water shortage in most areas of Wakhan Corridor, the Wakhan Valley in Afghanistan in the west is the most barren area in the world, where people live in extreme poverty and are plagued by terrorism and drug problems.

Since the 1990s, it has become an important channel for the "three evil forces" in Central Asia to penetrate into Xinjiang, and an important source of social instability in this area. Strengthening the social governance cooperation between China and Afghanistan, especially the surrounding areas of the Wakhan Corridor, has become an important

condition for maintaining the security and stability of this region and promoting the implementation of the Belt and Road Strategy.

2. THE GEOGRAPHICAL ENVIRONMENT OF WAKHAN CORRIDOR AND ITS IMPACT ON SECURITY CONDITION AROUND CHINA-AFGHANISTAN BORDER

Wakhan Corridor is located on the southern edge of Pamir Plateau (formerly known as Scallion Ridge in ancient China), adjacent Tajikistan and Pakistan, the upper reaches of Amu Darya River in Afghanistan to the West and Tajik Autonomous County in Xinjiang to the East. Wakhan Corridor is about 400 kilometers long, of which 300 kilometers in Afghanistan and 100 kilometers in Xinjiang. It is the shortest channel connecting Tarim Basin and Amu Darya basin with about only 15-75 kilometers wide. Its northern and southern marginal areas belong to Tajikistan and Pakistan, with an average altitude of more than 4000 meters. Except from May to September in every year, the mountain corridor is covered by heavy snow. The terrain here

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is complex and the climate is harsh. It is mostly a desolate plateau inaccessible to people. Historically, this area was under the jurisdiction of Chinese dynasties such as Han, Tang, Yuan and Qing Dynasties. It is the south route of the ancient Silk Road. When the eminent monk FA Xian (法显) of the Eastern Jin Dynasty and the eminent monk Xuanzang (玄奘) of the Tang Dynasty went west to acquire Buddhist scriptures, they passed by the Wakhan Corridor, and from which the Italian traveler Marco Polo also entered China. It can be seen that its natural conditions are still available for human passage with some difficulty. In 1895, when Britain and Russia competed for Afghanistan during the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, they divided China's Scallion Ridge region and signed the "Agreement on the Pamirs' Sphere of Influence", giving the Wakhan Corridor of China to the Kingdom of Afghanistan as a buffer zone for the British and Russian spheres of influence. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese and Afghan governments held talks on the border issue. In November 1963, the two countries signed a border treaty, which divided the common border, including the Wakhan Corridor.

The residents living on the Afghan side of the Wakhan Corridor now are mainly Tajiks and a small number of Kyrgyz, with a total population of 12000 people. However, their cultural traditions are different from their main ethnic groups. They have unique customs and speak Eastern Farsi, living mainly on nomadism with no local government and hospitals, and their living conditions are extremely laggard and difficult. Opium is mainly used to treat injuries. During the rule of the Taliban regime, Wakhan Corridor was controlled by the Northern Alliance and far away from the war. In that period, there was no refugee problem. The Chinese side of the Wakhan Corridor is a desert area unsuitable for human habitation, which has been under military control for a long time. Therefore, it is not easy for Afghan refugees or "East Turkistan" terrorists to enter Xinjiang China directly through the border. However, what can't be ignored is that there are many terrorist organizations such as the "Islamic state" (IS), Al Qaeda, the Islamic Jihad Movement, the "UIM" and the "East Islamic Movement" in the Waziristan Fergana region west of the Wakhan Corridor and across many countries. These violent terrorist forces often flee and commit crimes among countries in Central Asia and even South Asia; cross-border terrorist crimes makes this region become the most rampant district in the world. Various religious fundamentalism and extremism

prevail in this region, which leads to the development of various religious fundamentalism and extremism. From the 1970s to 1980s, the United States deliberately supported a number of terrorist organizations to counter the Soviet Union's southward strategy. "Terrorist forces like Osama bin Laden have developed their skills due to the training plan of the CIA." [1] After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Osama bin Laden left Afghanistan and returned to Saudi Arabia, but was deprived of citizenship by the Saudi government because of the rising contradiction between Osama bin Laden and the Saudi royal family who allowed the US troops to attack Iraq. Osama bin Laden returned to Afghanistan in May 1996 to rebuild Al Qaeda. In 1997, Hasan Mahsum, a violent terrorist in Xinjiang, China, fled to Afghanistan, and gathered a small number of separatists to form the "East Turkistan Islamic Movement" (i.e. "East Islamic Movement"), received terrorist training in Al Qaeda, and even participated in actual combat in Afghanistan, Kashmir and Chechnya to improve their psychological quality and combat ability, and returned to Xinjiang China to engage in violent terrorist activities lately. The passage for the "East Iran movement" terrorists to enter and leave Xinjiang is the edge of the Wakhan Corridor mostly. This place is far away from the battlefield of Afghanistan. There is basically no threat of mines and no political power to control it. It is relatively safe for terrorists. Although the Wakhan Corridor will not become a necessary place for the Silk Road Economic Belt and the new Eurasian Continental Bridge due to its high poverty and complex terrain, and the Hongqilap port and Kalasu port on its bilateral edge have replaced the position of the economic, trade and cultural exchange channel of the Wakhan Corridor, its geographical location, the fragmented society with vacant political power. The historical factors of the Southern Silk Road provide natural shelter for terrorists to commit cross-border crimes in this region. Although the ancient road of Scallion Ridge has been abandoned for long period, there are seven channels along the China-Afghanistan border. The mountains are covered by heavy snow in October every year and could not pass through until the next May. However, even during the period of heavy snow closure, people can still pass by horse or camel. In recent years, violent terrorists and drug smugglers have often ventured through these depopulated zone passes, and extremist forces smuggled weapons into Xinjiang mainly through this corridor. "According to the accounts of many 'East Turkistan' elements

captured by us, most of their people and weapons and ammunition in their hands were transported in from the Wakhan Corridor." [2] This shows that the extremist forces active in and around the Wakhan Corridor are the biggest threat to the security of the China -Afghanistan border.

3. THE BORDER SECURITY OF WAKHAN CORRIDOR DURING THE PERIOD OF AMERICAN ARMY CONTROL OVER AFGHANISTAN

In 1979, the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan. The United States, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and other countries supported and assisted the Afghan rebels to form the Afghan Mujahideen Islamic Alliance. After the defeat of the Soviet army in 1989, Afghanistan was torn apart and plunged into civil war. During this period, the Islamic fundamentalist organization Taliban rose and grew rapidly. Quickly, Taliban seized power, established a state of political and religious unity and implemented extreme policies. After Osama bin Laden returned to Afghanistan in 1996, he turned Afghanistan into a terrorist base under the protection of the Taliban regime. In September 2001, Al Qaeda launched the "9.11" terrorist attacks, which triggered a large-scale retaliation by the United States. The U.S. military invaded Afghanistan and supported the Northern Alliance to launch attacks on the Taliban. In December 2001, the Taliban regime was overthrown.

The US forces attempt to restore social order in Afghanistan after the occupation. But the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, hidden in the countryside or mountains areas, control much of the country. Unable to confront the American army, they have continued to launch lots of armed attacks. More than 20,000 American fighters have been killed or wounded in Afghanistan since 2001. After Osama bin Laden was killed by the US troops, the remnants of Al-Qaeda forces declared their allegiance to the Islamic state (IS), and continued to commit terrorist acts around the world. After 20 years of war, the US military has paid a heavy price in Afghanistan: More than 2,300 soldiers were killed, costing more than \$2 trillion. To avoid getting bogged down in Afghanistan battlefield, The U.S. troops have been withdrawing since 2013. Biden administration decided the full withdrawal of U. S. troops from Afghanistan in 2021. Experts generally believe that the US troops has left Afghanistan without eradicating terrorist groups or

achieving peace, leaving a conflict, scarred and suffering country. Afghanistan's security situation will worsen, the Taliban will return to power in Afghanistan and a resurgence of the al-Qaeda threat will appear.

In recent years, the Taliban have publicly stated that no organization or individual is allowed to use Afghan territory to threaten other countries, but the unstable political situation continues to provide new opportunities for the "Three forces" to operate in the region.

Based on the consideration of China's border security, the East Turkistan separatist forces have been growing during the 20-year occupation of Afghanistan by the US troops, and the violent terrorist incidents in Xinjiang have been increasing. In the early days of the US invasion, some "East Turkistan" terrorists who had been hiding in Afghanistan lost their political shelter and sneaked back to Xinjiang via Wakhan Corridor and its surrounding channels. But the US pursues a double standard in the fight against terrorism and secretly: On the one hand, it supported the separatist forces in Central Asia [3], and on the other hand, it fostered the "East Turkistan" terrorist forces to engage in separatist activities against China, leading to a significant deterioration of the security situation in the China-Afghanistan border areas. After 2009, the number of terrorist gangs in Xinjiang has been "more than 100, hovering at a high level. In 2012, there were more than 190 violent terrorist cases in Xinjiang, a significant increase over the previous year" [4]. The Xinhua News Agency reported on July 29, 2014. During 2014 to 2019, Xinjiang broke up 1,588 terrorist groups and captured 12,995 terrorists. The trial found that most of the terrorists who infiltrated from abroad had received training in Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and the Islamic State (IS) in the Middle East or participated in terrorist wars, and some have even received training in Western countries, and the main route back to China is the Wakhan Corridor, and the main route for drugs and weapons is also the Wakhan Corridor. "Instability in Xinjiang is the ideal way for Washington to weaken the increasing cohesion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The more unstable Xinjiang is, the more 'ideal' they will be". [5]

During the American army occupation of Afghanistan, the cultivation and production of narcotics in Afghanistan also "Reached an all-time high", thereby providing more adequate financial support for terrorist organizations. It poses a great

security threat to northwest border region of China. At the same time, the US is also "Repatriating, demobilizing and reintegrating foreign terrorist fighters and their families into society" The US Strategy for Central Asia (2019-2025) published by the US Department of State point out, but how many of these "Repatriated and demobilized" persons are members of the "East Turkistan" terrorist organization? not disclosed. In the view of the United States, Central Asia, as the juncture of Eurasia, is the key hub to control the world islands and the strategic place to maintain American hegemony. Although the US troops have withdrawn from Afghanistan, they are still stationed in other countries in Central Asia. The security pressure on China's northwest border has not eased. And the "East Turkistan" separatist forces trained by the US troops in Afghanistan, still posed a great security threat to northwest border of China.

4. STRENGTHENING CHINA-AFGHANISTAN BORDER SECURITY BY MULTIPLE MEANS

Afghanistan runs through the two major regions of Central Asia and South Asia, and has always been the breeding and gathering place of the "three evil forces". The "Double standard" anti-terrorism policy carried out by the United States in this region has resulted in the extension and even expansion of the "East Turkistan" terrorist forces. The complicated topography, harsh climate and rare human tracks of Wakhan areas have become the areas where East Turkistan terrorists can enter and leave Xinjiang undetected mostly. In order to maintain the stability of china-Afghanistan border and implement the "Belt and Road strategy", diversified security measures, including military struggle and diplomatic mediation, economic development and combating drugs, should be adopted in this region to safeguard regional peace and border security.

First, it is necessary to take military struggle as the main means to firmly control and maintain stability along the border, and stop East Turkistan terrorist forces from crossing the border into and out of Wakhan Corridor. Before the 9·11 incident, Chinese border troops had built roads on the China-Afghanistan border, which created favorable conditions for controlling border terrorism, and at the same time increased their efforts to combat the "East Turkistan" violent terrorist forces inside China, the activities of the East Turkistan Terrorist Forces in Xinjiang have been basically contained.

The US occupation of Afghanistan, a large number of "East Turkistan" terrorists from Wakhan Corridor into the border, the violent terrorist activities in Xinjiang have increased significantly. This shows that the strengthening of military control of Wakhan Corridor is the key to stop the "East Turkistan" terrorists. Through intensive military and civilian patrols and border control, the establishment of modern border defense military systems, such as satellite detection system, information early warning system, emergency control system and rapid support system, can block the border passage of the East Turkistan terrorist forces.

Second, it is needed to make full use of diplomatic means to build a community of destiny between China and the peoples of Central Asia, and rely on all-round cooperation between governments to eliminate the threat of terrorism to the peoples of all countries. Since the establishment of the Shanghai five-power meeting mechanism in 1996, China and Central Asian countries have made great achievements in combating the "three evil forces". Regrettably, Afghanistan has not joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization for various reasons, which is very disadvantageous to the common fight against the "three evil forces". At the same time, the anti-terrorism "Double standards" behavior and the interference of the United States in the internal affairs of Xinjiang under the pretext of "Human rights" should be firmly resisted.

Third, efforts should be made to take economic development as the link to step up bilateral cooperation, improve people's living conditions in the border areas and strengthen the foundation for social harmony and stability. After a long period of war, Afghanistan is today one of the poorest countries in the world. Because of poverty, some militants have developed terrorist organizations to obtain international funding to ease their living conditions. The participation of some Afghan refugees and unemployed youth in terrorist organizations is often an important means of solving their survival problems. Economic backwardness has led to "East Turkistan" forces having space for activities in this area. The implementation of the "Belt and Road" strategy has brought new opportunities for the development of this area. Improving the lives of the people in Xinjiang and Afghanistan will help reduce the breeding ground for violence and terrorism.

Fourth, it's important to work together with other countries to crack down on drug trafficking

and cut off financial sources for violent terrorist organizations. After the death of Osama bin Laden and the fall of the Islamic State (IS), the biggest source of funding for the East Turkistan terrorist group was largely cut off, and drug trafficking became an important source of funding. At present, "drug-terrorism combination" has become the main features of survival forces of the East Turkistan terrorist. It can be said that if we cut off the drug money of the East Turkistan terrorist groups, we will cut off their lifeblood. All countries should strengthen cooperation in combating drugs and jointly combat the forces of violence and terrorism.

Fifth, relevant departments need to strengthen patriotism education in the border areas of Xinjiang, and strengthen the sense of community with a shared future for the Chinese nation among all ethnic groups in Xinjiang. The development of "East Turkistan" terrorist organizations is closely related to the long-term spread of "Pan-Turkism" and "Pan-Islamism" in Xinjiang. To eliminate the bad influence of "Dual-panism", it is necessary to improve people's lives, as well as strengthen patriotic education, to consolidate the consciousness of a shared future for the Chinese nation. People of all ethnic groups should be made aware of the true meaning that "the Han cannot be separated from the ethnic minorities, the ethnic minorities cannot be separated from the Han, and ethnic minorities cannot be separated from each other." [6] To block the social foundation for the development of the East Turkistan violent terrorist organizations in Xinjiang, it is necessary to ensure security and stability in Xinjiang, including the China-Afghanistan border.

5. CONCLUSION

As an important connecting passage between Europe and Asia, Wakhan Corridor historically belongs to Chinese territory, it was ceded to the then Kingdom of Afghanistan as a buffer zone when Britain and Russia divided up the Chinese territory in the course of the struggle for Central Asia.

During the Afghan civil war and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Wakhan Corridor became an important conduit for international terrorist groups to infiltrate the region and for East Turkistan separatists to transport personnel, weapons and drugs. The United States' double standard in combating terrorism in this region is an important factor contributing to the long-term instability in the China-Afghanistan border area.

To maintain peace and tranquility in the border areas between China and Afghanistan, the Chinese government should, together with neighboring countries and with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as the cornerstone, strive to build a community of shared future for Central Asian countries, and make use of military, economic and diplomatic means, strengthen cooperation in counter-terrorism and drug control, jointly promote economic development in this region, eradicate hotbeds created by terrorist organizations and eliminate security threats posed by East Turkistan terrorists in Xinjiang.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Hongming Jiang designed the paper framework and wrote the manuscript. Yamei Xue contributed to revising and editing.

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