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**THE MIDDLE CORRIDOR OF EURASIA: TRANSNATIONAL  
CONNECTIVITY AND REGIONAL CHALLENGES**

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# THE MIDDLE CORRIDOR OF EURASIA: TRANSNATIONAL CONNECTIVITY AND REGIONAL CHALLENGES

## Abstract

Russia's war in Ukraine has disrupted transcontinental trade routes and affected China's exports to the EU in particular. In 2022-2023, China was the EU's largest import partner, accounting for 21.3 percent of total EU imports. Between January 2023 and December 2024, EU imports from China decreased by 4.9 percent, and the EU exports to China decreased by 12.5 percent (Eurostat, 2025). Even though the overall volume of trade was up 1.4 percent year-on-year in the first four months of 2025, it is still quite far from realizing its full potential. The United States has displaced China as the EU largest trading partner, and the change is not easy to reverse. China-EU shipments through the Eurasian Northern Corridor, which runs through Russia, decreased by 40 percent in less than a year (Avdaliani, 2023).

The Eurasian Middle Corridor, also known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), is well positioned to become a key trade link between China and Europe. However, its development depends on overcoming a host of strategic challenges, which include both geopolitical and logistical hurdles. The Middle Corridor is multi-modal, as it depends on rail, road, and maritime transport, and requires significant investments in deep sea-port and trans-Caspian ferry capacities. The problems of tariff coordination, infrastructure development and a common vision for the Middle Corridor's growth and utilization stall international collaboration. Several countries that are of key importance to the long-term success of the project are at odds with each other, while others compete for the attention of big players. The concrete branches of the Middle Corridor that are being proposed as key conduits for the expansion of the east-west trade are hotly disputed between such regional powers as Turkey, Iran and Russia.

The paper will look at geopolitical factors influencing development of the Middle Corridor, also known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), and its integration into China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). We will address the question of China's interest in the corridor, which intensified with the start of Russia-Ukraine war and imposition of Western sanctions on Russia. We will also look at Russia's own projects of building up its international connectivity and using it for geopolitical leverage in the region through the assessment of a complex situation around the so-called Zangezur corridor in Armenia.

**Keywords:** Middle Corridor; Belt and Road Initiative; China; Iran; Turkey; Russia; South Caucasus

## THE IRAN-TURKEY CORRIDOR

Partnerships based on geoeconomics are a standing feature of world politics. However, the very essence of geoeconomics remains a less than perfectly understood matter. It should be noted in this regard that geoeconomic power is not just the feature of a country's economic strength based on existing financial and trade relationships (cf. Clayton, Maggiori, & Schreger, 2024). It may be caused by several factors, and manifested through a variety of means.

First, and quite apart from the existing and already accumulated economic strength, geoeconomics is equally based on the strategic advantage of a geographic location, specifically, a

location at the intersection of major transportation or trade routes or a location of control over a crucial point of access to a regional or global transportation network. This way, even an economically modest power may be able to punch significantly above its weight by virtue of being able to influence the behavior of economically stronger actors or acquire transportation rents from other actors' trade. The power of a logistical control relates to a state or non-state actor's ability to manage and direct the flow of resources, people, money or information within a political or economic system that extends far beyond the controller's immediate location. This power is quintessentially geoeconomic in nature.

Second, geoeconomic power may take a virtual, as well as real, form by influencing expectations. The value-generating (here) and value-suppressing (elsewhere) capacity of logistics is based on its dynamic character, i.e. its ability to transform and reshape existing patterns of trade and finance by introducing both actual and potential, realistically projected "differentiation into global space in ways that enable and establish the conditions for the accumulation of capital" (Neilson, 2012, p. 334). Thus, the announcement of potential big changes in transportation routes may have a very real economic effect even before the actual change starts taking place. A public discussion of future reshaping of transportation flows may precede practical actions by states and markets that could either precipitate contemplated changes or thwart them, should opposition to the proposed plans arise.

A 2024 analysis by a Dutch think tank discussed a potential for the Russian-Iranian-Turkish economic partnership, perhaps even a new economic alliance in South Caucasus (Eurasianet, 2024, Mar 06). Key selling features for such an alliance are economic interdependence and geography. The three countries are logistical hubs and, acting together, could enable new routes for the east-west trade through the existing and proposed connections to the China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor.

Turkey has long been an advocate of the increased economic cooperation with energy-rich economies of the region, eyeing Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan specifically in a bet to reduce its energy reliance on Russia's energy imports. At present, Russia supplies near 40 percent of Turkey's natural gas consumption and about 70 percent of Turkey's crude oil imports (Oxford Analytica, 2025). In March 2025, Turkey began importing natural gas from Turkmenistan via Iran. Additionally, imports from Azerbaijan and Iran have increased, too, with an unprecedented 30 percent surge in Turkey's gas imports from Iran in 2024 (Tehran Times, 2025). It is worth noting that five years before China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was launched, Turkey had hosted the First International Silk Road Forum (Antalya, 2008) and introduced a Silk Road Customs Cooperation Initiative of its own.

Iran benefits from its trade with Russia and Turkey already. In 2024, Iran's trade turnover with Russia, boosted by agricultural and military exports, grew by more than 16 percent. The launch of a free trade agreement between Iran and the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2025 is expected to further facilitate trade by reducing tariffs on approximately 90 percent of goods. While Iran is the third-largest gas supplier to Turkey and, last year (2024), Turkey was Iran's third-largest trade partner overall, Tehran also imports gas from Russia. In early 2025, Russia signed a strategic partnership treaty with Tehran and followed with an agreement to supply 55 billion cubic metres of gas annually. Infrastructure projects like the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) give a new momentum to collaboration between Iran, Russia, India, and other regional partners.

The war in Ukraine disrupted an important trade route that formed key part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. As automotive and railroad transportation connecting East Asia to

Europe via Russia became no longer viable, the search for an alternative has once more focused international attention on what used to be the old Silk Road routes. With instability in and around the Gulf, Iraq and Syria, and the ongoing war in Gaza, the Iran-Turkey connection may well emerge like a life line for not just regional, but global trade, while Russia is keen to attach itself to both countries for a number of political, military, geostrategic and geoeconomic reasons. Sanctions avoidance is but one of them.

### CHINA'S INTERESTS

The Iran-Turkey link is of acute interest to China. While the China-EU railway express route via Kazakhstan and Russia was launched in 2016, Turkey saw the first Chinese train bound to Europe three years later, in late 2019 (International Railway Journal, 2019). The road system that would link China to Europe through Central Asia via either Turkey or the Iran-Turkey link is important because it allows China to diversify its trade routes and avoid once-sided dependence on a singularly important transit country (Russia). The first China Railway Express train to reach Turkey in 2019 originated in Xian, bypassed Russia and travelled through Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia on its way to Ankara, Istanbul and, eventually, Prague (pic. 1). Thanks to the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway line and the completion of the Marmaray tunnel under the Bosphorus, the travel time between China and Turkey has been reduced from a month to just 12 days.



Picture 1. The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route. *Source: Abbasova and Allison, 2025.*

The route that runs from China through Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey, before continuing further to the EU countries, received the name of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR). The Kazakhstan-Azerbaijan connection has to traverse the Caspian sea, which slows the traffic down and makes the whole project reliant on multimodal means of transportation. The route was initiated in 2013 during the second International Transport and Logistics Business Forum "New Silk Road" in Astana, Kazakhstan. Since 2022, it gained in prominence as an alternative to traditional routes through Russia and the Suez Canal.

Because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and subsequent western sanctions on Russia and Belarus, transporting goods across Russia has become more difficult. The Russia-centred Northern Corridor experienced a significant decline in cargo volumes in 2023, with westbound

shipments decreasing by 51 percent and eastbound cargo declining by 44 percent compared to the previous year (Colibasanu, 2024). Although trade volumes rebounded in 2024, transportation routes bypassing Russia have significantly gained in prominence as a result of the war in Ukraine and war-related instability along the Russia-EU border. As a result, Kazakhstan reported a 63 percent increase in freight volume along the corridor in 2024, while Azerbaijan's authorities cited a 5.7 percent increase (bne IntelliNews, 2025, May 5).

In 2022, the Transcaspian International Transport Route, also known as the “Middle Corridor,” expanded further with the addition of the Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan conduit, which increased its throughput capacity and shortened travel time (Chang, 2024, Jan 16). Soon enough, Iran offered to build a transit-trade spur to the conduit that would allow transportation of Chinese goods directly to the Persian Gulf or Arabian Sea by land, rather than by the sea route. During the 22nd Meeting of the Council of Heads of Government of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Bishkek in October 2023, Iran and Kyrgyzstan agreed to connect their respective railway systems to the Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan route, thus launching a Middle Corridor expansion further south (Iran Press, 2023, Oct 28). By the end of 2023, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran and Turkey agreed to form a new international multimodal transport corridor linking China to Europe.



Picture 2. The China-Iran rail route. *Source:* Economist.com

In parallel, an agreement on creation of a new transport corridor running from Russia to Kyrgyzstan via Turkmen and Uzbek territory was signed in Tashkent, Uzbekistan (New Silkroad Discovery, 2023, November 2). The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) railway was opened in December 2024 in implementation of China's BRI plans. The CKU routes promises to become a competitor to the existing Middle Corridor routes via Kazakhstan as a more direct path to Europe. Iran has registered its interest in building a spur from the CKU railway into its territory. Most recently, in March 2025, a new rail service linking China and Poland was launched in Kazakhstan. Starting in the PRC, the route passes through Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Iran, and Turkey, continues through the South East Europe and ends in Poland.

Should all of these plans come to fruition, China will get a new and stable transcontinental system of cargo transportation by train. It will help it enhance its existing capacities and allow rerouting some of the cargo currently carried by sea toward a safer and faster land-based rail transportation. It will connect China (Kashgar) through Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to Iran, enabling new ways of reaching the Persian Gulf and Europe. Both Russia and Iran will be directly connected not only to China but to the flow of global East-West trade, which will help them withstand western sanctions with a higher degree of efficiency.

A full-fledged free trade agreement between Iran and the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union that has come into force in May 2025 permits both countries to reap substantial benefits from new geopolitics of transregional connectivity. The agreement should enable Iran's trade with EAEU to more than triple to \$18-20 billion in five to seven years (Interfax, 2025, Mar 17). The export and import tariffs for near 90 percent of the goods traded between Iran and the EAEU will be cut to zero. Iran's access to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan via the proposed China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan–Iran (CKUI) railway will not only facilitate the EAEU-Iran trade, but help to solve a number of Iran's strategic tasks, while promoting and entrenching further expansion of China's regional dominance.

China's economic expansion into West Asia and the Persian Gulf subregion intensifies with the launch of new and ambitious railroad projects each serving as yet another stepping stone for the truly global reach of the BRI initiative. China's geopolitical interests that these efforts advance and facilitate are, first, to overcome western sanctions against Xinjiang, which becomes a BRI hub for trade and cooperation with Central Asia, Pakistan, Iran and as far west as the UAE, Iraq and Turkey. Secondly, there is a need to fight Trump's trade war, and one way to fight it is by diminishing PRC's dependence on the US and other western markets, while building alternative export platforms in Eurasia, South East and West Asia. Finally, there are long-term plans for the eventual displacement of the USA as a dominant power in the oil-rich Middle East.

As several authors note, China, no less than Russia, Kazakhstan, or Turkey, sees the Middle Corridor as a strategic tool with a potential to shape new geopolitical and geoeconomic dynamics to its advantage. All of these countries are not merely responding to geopolitical shifts but are actively using the corridor to redefine their roles in a multipolar world. By diversifying trade routes and reducing dependency on maritime routes with chokepoints like the Suez Canal, these nations are using the TCC [i.e., the Middle Corridor – *Authors*] to project influence and gain strategic leverage in the region (Rentschler et al., 2025).

There are many signs that indicate that a number of geopolitical vectors in China's foreign policy strategy converge on the Caspian-Persian Gulf region. Last year (December 2024) the main gateway of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the Khunjerab port in Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, started operating year-round. The Khunjerab railway will eventually provide a direct rail link from western China to the China-controlled Gwadar Port in Pakistan. In March 2025 Iran expressed interest in linking its port of Chabahar to Pakistan's Gwadar and invited Chinese investment in the project. In May 2025 representatives of China, Kazakhstan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Turkey have signed an agreement to develop rail on China – Iran – Europe route. However, several problems need to be addressed to ensure successful implementation of all regional initiatives. International tensions that have recently increased in the area is a cause of concern.

## TRANSCAUCASIAN TENSIONS



The main trunk of the Middle Corridor channels trade flows through Central Asia, across the Caspian Sea and via the volatile Caucasus region. The southern offshoot of the east-west corridor, also known as the Southern Corridor of Eurasia, may use Turkmenistan's ports or avoid the Caspian sea routes altogether. In contradistinction to the multimodal nature of the Middle Corridor, the Southern Corridor does not require transshipment. The whole route, from the Khorgos Gateway on China-Kazakhstan border and through Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Iran, is land-based and does not require sea crossing, which makes it more efficient.

Notably, the Southern Corridor does not need to traverse the Transcaucasian states of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia. This is of essence, since the precarious situation on the Azeri-Armenian border cannot but affect both the prospects for efficient and uninterrupted east-west transportation and the broader situation in the region, which is largely defined by the state of relations between these two countries, as well as between Azerbaijan's supporter Turkey and Armenia's key backer Iran.

On September 19, 2023, Azerbaijan launched a large-scale military offensive against Armenian separatist exclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. Within 24 hours, the self-proclaimed republic ceased to exist. Faced with the prospect of rule by Azerbaijan and fearing ethnic cleansing, nearly the entire Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh, or more than 99 percent of its population, fled to Armenia in one week.

Azerbaijan's claim to Nagorno-Karabakh is based on the Soviet legacy. The region was given to the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic in 1923 under the condition of autonomy. Same time, the Nakhichevan region, previously claimed by Armenia, was established as yet another autonomous republic under Azerbaijan's tutelage.

Amid Soviet dissolution in 1991, Azerbaijan opted to annul Karabakh's autonomy, following which the region declared independence. Since then, Armenia and Azerbaijan fought three wars over this area, with Russia brokering cease-fire in two of them. After the decisive defeat of the Armenia-backed Karabakh forces in 2023, Azerbaijan's President Aliyev's resorted to coercive diplomacy against Armenia proper, threatening a full land blockade unless the country opens free access to the Nakhichevan exclave through its territory.

The Azeri demand of a de-facto suspension of Armenia's sovereign rights over the so-called "Zangezur corridor" has been opposed by both Armenia and Iran, yet endorsed by Turkey. Azerbaijan and Turkey are united by common Muslim heritage and religion, close ethnic and linguistic ties, and shared animosity toward Armenia. Both countries' leaders describe the relationship between their nations as "one nation, two states." As Azerbaijan's main backer, Turkey has no diplomatic relations with Armenia. The Turkish-Armenian border was sealed in 93 and has remained shut ever since.

Azerbaijan's power in the Caucasus has grown due to a surge in its oil and gas exports. Between 1995 and 2022, Azerbaijan's GDP increased 45 times, and its military budget, 29 times (Bne IntelliNews, 2023, Sep 22). With the launch of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline in 2005, Azerbaijan became an important geopolitical partner of the West. The pipeline, which pumps oil from the Caspian to the Turkish border, cemented the Azeri-Turkish friendship.

BTC pipeline and the South Caucasus gas pipeline (SCGP) brought billions of dollars in foreign direct investment to Azerbaijan and Turkey and are now delivering billions of dollars more in oil and gas revenues to Baku, as well as hundreds of millions annually in transit fees to Ankara. Turkey's strategic location as Asia's gateway to the Mediterranean makes it a sought-

after partner for any country wishing to connect to the Middle Corridor's trade and transportation systems.

Pipeline exports constitute a significant chunk of Azerbaijan's budget revenues. The country's total oil and gas revenues from all sources make approximately 50% of the state budget. In 2024, oil exports grew by 6.2%, reaching 32.5 million tons, while gas exports increased by 5.8%, totaling 25.2 billion cubic meters (Pirimkulov, 2025, Feb 28). Geographic connectivity is of utmost importance, and the fact that Azerbaijan is geographically separated from its main backer Turkey by an essentially hostile Armenia is a source of ongoing tensions.

It is of essence that Azerbaijan is a key partner in China's BRI, particularly for trade routes. In April 2025, China and Azerbaijan formalized their deepening relationship by establishing a comprehensive strategic partnership. This partnership was formalized through a joint statement signed by the heads of state, outlining cooperation in various fields. According to Xi Jinping, China supports Azerbaijan in safeguarding its national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and is ready to carry out in-depth law enforcement and security cooperation with Azerbaijan. The Chinese leader stressed that the Belt and Road cooperation between China and Azerbaijan "has achieved fruitful results, bringing tangible benefits to the people of both countries. It is essential to optimize the top-level design, seek greater synergy of development strategies, improve the cooperation mechanism, deeply explore the potential for cooperation, and further deepen and substantiate Belt and Road cooperation for high-quality development" (People's Republic of China. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025, April 23).

## **RUSSIA'S PRESENCE**

Historically, Russia played a major role in the region. The czardom of Muscovy and the Russian Empire fought twelve wars with the Ottoman Turkey over the right to control the Black Sea bordering areas. The political map of Transcaucasia was shaped by the 1921-23 treaties that the Soviet government signed with the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. The administrative boundaries between the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic and the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic (AzerSSR), both semi-autonomous units of the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic until 1936, were largely determined by the Russian Bolsheviks based on considerations of, first, political and economic expediency, and, distant second, local populations' historical and cultural leanings and ethnicity.

Equally, there were a series of wars between Russia and Persia in XVII-XIX centuries, as well as Russia's military intervention in the Persian Constitutional Revolution in 1909-1911. Following the Russo-Persian war of 1804-1813 and the signing of the Treaty of Gulistan (1813) the Russian Empire got possession the entire area to the north of the river Arax that had previously belonged to Persia. This included territories of modern Abkhazia, Georgia, Dagestan, Nagorno-Karabakh and northern Azerbaijan. The second Russo-Persian war (1826-1828) ended with the Treaty of Turkmenchay that gave Russia the territories of the Erivan and Nakhchivan (Nakhichevan) khanates, or practically all of the East Armenia, leaving the historical West Armenia under the Ottoman rule. The treaty specifically obliged Iran to permit emigration of ethnic Armenians to the lands of their historic settlement within the Russian Empire. This provision played an important role in the unification of the Armenian people and created favorable conditions for the later establishment of the Armenian national statehood.

In World War II, the USSR occupied northern Iran, which it controlled until the end of 1946. After the end of the Soviet Union, Russia supported Armenia, while also courting the oil-



rich Azerbaijan. When, in 1993-94, Armenia had gained control of Karabakh and occupied 20 percent of Azerbaijan's geographic area, Russia brokered a cease-fire, and Karabakh became an ostensibly independent, yet closely tied to Armenia, statelet under the name of Artsakh. When, in 2020, Azerbaijan won back the districts it lost to Armenia and re-established control over a smaller part of Nagorno-Karabakh proper, Russia had once again negotiated a cease-fire and dispatched around 2,000 peacemakers in the region.

Russia's historical role in the region has been based predominantly on its military might and the provision of security. With the start of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022 Moscow had to divert its attention to other things to the apparent neglect of its security obligations in Transcaucasia. Characteristically, one of the Russian peacemakers' key tasks was to ensure continuation of the supply route from Armenia to Karabakh through the so-called Lachin corridor. However, by the end of 2022 Azerbaijan cut off the supply route and imposed a blockade on Karabakh, which the Russian force failed to prevent or remove. Even more conspicuously, Russia failed to stop the Azeri military offensive in September 2023, notwithstanding the fact that it occurred in violation of the ceasefire agreement and led to the exodus of more than 100,000 ethnic Armenians.

The collapse of the Russian support has contributed to the sound defeat of Armenian forces and effectively ended Russia's role as a regional arbiter. It is now perceived as just one of potentially several intermediaries, none of whom can impose its will on both sides. Not one analyst has opined that the failure of Russia's peacekeepers to stop the Azerbaijan's assault on Nagorno-Karabakh has jeopardized Russia's long-term presence in the South Caucasus (Atasuntsev, 2023). The perceptions on the Armenian side are quite strong. In February 2025, the Armenian government announced that it was freezing its participation in the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) due to the organization's failure to protect Armenia from Azerbaijani attacks.

However, Russia still tries to be regionally relevant. Over the last ten years or so, Russia has seemingly adopted a strategy of playing both sides to the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict against each other with a view to manipulate their behaviour in a way most conducive to Moscow's long-term interests. The strategy's main goals are to get geopolitical concessions on the ground and to shape the politics of alliances in the region.

The example of Russia's proposal to grant Azerbaijan access to the Zangezur corridor under the exclusive control and supervision of the Russian FSB border forces is quite illustrative in this regard. In spite of repeated criticism of this idea by Iran, Moscow continues to stand by the idea of "unblocking communications" between Armenia and Azerbaijan on the terms that essentially approximate Azerbaijani position for as long as the provision of security within the corridor will be left to the Russian forces. This was the essence of Foreign Minister Lavrov's statements during his May 2025 visit to Yerevan, which has also focused on the continued existence of the Russian military base in Armenia and the delimitation of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border.

## **TURKEY'S REGIONAL FOOTPRINT**

Turkey is keenly aware in the geopolitical value of the Middle Corridor and participated in the launch of the TITR Coordination Center in June 2024. If this new platform works as planned, transit times between Europe and Asia could be reduced to just 15 days. It is of note that neither Russia nor Iran play any role in the Coordination Center's activities, which is indicative

that no imminent extension of the Middle Corridor through these countries' transportation systems is being planned. Of course, Turkey can still be open to an idea of linking its transportation networks with those of Russia and Iran by means of creation of a separate "close circuit" system that could play, at best, an auxiliary role to the existing Middle Corridor. However, any tripartite partnership between Russia, Iran and Turkey must be premised on significant warming of Turkish-Iranian relations. In spite of recently demonstrated signs of deepening cooperation (Jalilov, 2024, Jan 25), a host of unresolved issues pertaining to an uneasy truce in Transcaucasia still mars the relationship of the two West Asian giants.

On the one hand, Iran and Turkey's joint opposition to Israel's military operation in Gaza objectively draws them together and facilitates an ad-hoc alliance between the two (Reuters, 2024, Jan 24). Turkey's threats of sending its military to protect Palestinians from what President Erdogan calls a genocide at the hands of Israel have caused many to worry of a possibility of direct Turkish-Israeli confrontation (Al Jazeera, 2024, Jul 29). This draws Western attention away from Iran and helps Iran rebuild its international stature. In early 2025, a senior panel of Israeli defense and security advisors warned that, given Turkey's regional ambitions and recent success in sponsoring the regime change in Syria, Turkey might well pose a greater threat to Israel's security than Iran (Soylu, 2025, Jan 07). Turkey has also expressed its concerns about potential US military action against Iran, since such an action would undoubtedly reverberate across the entire region. All of this creates several points of convergence between the two countries' interests.

On the other hand, their positions sharply diverge in the South Caucasus. While Turkey is unequivocal about its support of Azerbaijan, Iran opposes any geopolitical changes in the Caucasus and is ready to do what it takes to prevent the establishment of the Azeri-controlled Zangezur corridor through Armenia (Tabnak, 2025, Feb 3). The corridor from Azerbaijan's mainland to the Azerbaijan's exclave of Nakhichevan would slice through Armenia's historic Syunik province in the immediate vicinity of the Armenia-Iranian border. Baku's insistence on elimination of the Armenian checkpoints and customs controls for the sake of unimpeded flow of goods and people to Nakhichevan and further down to Turkey is tantamount to imposition of de-facto restrictions on Armenia's state sovereignty. If Turkey is clearly supportive of the route that will link it to Azerbaijan and other Turkic-speaking countries in Central Asia, Iran's existing access to Armenia and, through Armenia, to Georgia, Russia and, eventually, the European Union will be cut off. As a result, Iran's regional reach and significance could be severely diminished.

Iran's warming ties with Armenia rest on its desire to preserve a transport connection to Europe through the Armenian territory, as well as on its long-standing fears of pan-Turkism and Azerbaijani nationalism inside its own borders. Azerbaijanis are Iran's largest ethnic minority, numbering between 12 and 23 million, which is about one quarter of Iran's population and more than the whole Azeri population of Azerbaijan. Iran fears Azeri secessionism in its north-west, as well as Azerbaijan's growing presence in the region and its close ties with Israel, as well as Iran's historical rival Turkey.

A murderous attack on Baku's Embassy in Tehran in 2023 led to the unprecedented deterioration of the bilateral relations between Iran and Azerbaijan, with Azerbaijan's President Aliyev describing their state at the time as "at the lowest level ever" (Shaffer, 2023, May 08). Although relations have subsequently thawed up over expansion of the North-South corridor and even progressed through the April 2025 summit in Baku to a joint military drill in Nagorno-Karabakh a month later, significant contradictions and inherent tensions persist.

Iran is staunchly opposed to the Azeri territorial claims against Armenia and all attempts to “alter the region’s geopolitics,” as the Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister chose to describe it (Mamyan, 2025, May 26). Iran views Azerbaijan’s deepening ties with Turkey—and their shared embrace of the pan-Turkic, implicitly irredentist 'One nation, two states' agenda—as a potential threat to the stability of its own multiethnic society. Conversely, Azerbaijan’s mistrust of Iran stems from fears of Shiite fundamentalist subversion via religious and political influence, alongside long-standing ethnonationalist concerns about the alleged repression of Iran’s Azerbaijani minority. Azerbaijan highly values its privileged relationship with Turkey and sees Iran’s strategic competition with Turkey as a factor jeopardizing Baku’s own regional ambitions.

Turkey’s politics and diplomacy are key to the success or failure of the Iranian-Turkish corridor, as well as Russia’s participation in trade and transportation via the Middle Corridor and the fate of the emerging regional partnership generally speaking. By controlling access to the Mediterranean, Turkey holds a strategically advantageous position, with the power to determine whether a transport corridor linking the three states—and offering Russia and Iran access to new trade routes to Europe, Africa, and beyond—succeeds or fails.

Ankara can weigh its options between the interests of the West and the interests of Iran or Russia and potentially gain concessions from each of these parties. It is quite telling that Turkey, albeit a NATO member, has never joined the West in imposing sanctions on Russia. With all the disruptions caused by the war in Ukraine, Turkey is becoming increasingly more important for Russia’s oil and gas shipments. Following the expiration of the transit agreement between Russia and Ukraine at the end of 2024, the TurkStream pipeline has become the primary route for Russian gas to reach Europe. Countries like Hungary and Slovakia have increased their reliance on this corridor, with TurkStream volumes rising by 16% year-on-year in the first quarter of 2025 (Reuters, 2025, May 23). At the same time, Turkey has beefed up its strategic cooperation with Ukraine and plays an important role in enabling NATO’s presence in the Black Sea.

However, Ankara’s balancing act is threatened by Erdogan’s brand of pan-Turkic nationalism. Turkey’s pan-Islamist, neo-Ottoman ideology is culturally-expansionist, militant, nationalistic, implicitly irredentist and indicative of aspirations to regional hegemony. While it may resonate in Baku, it is met with understandable unease in both Moscow and Tehran. Turkey’s encroachments on Russia’s traditional sphere of influence in Central Asia and Transcaucasia may sooner or later bring it into an open conflict with Russia. Similarly, a prospect of Azerbaijan’s new war with Armenia – a war that Turkey would not hesitate to endorse – could jeopardize all prospects of rapprochement with Tehran. Turkey’s power ambitions, more than even Russia’s aspirations of regional influence and control, may undermine existing plans for further expansion of the Middle Corridor and its reliable connection to the North–South Transport Corridor from South Asia to Northern Europe.

## CONCLUSION

China’s approach to the Middle Corridor is fully dictated by its larger ambitions for the advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Representing the Middle Corridor, or TITR, as “an alternative to China’s BRI” (European Capital Insights, 2025, April 21) is plain wrong. In September 2024, China had formally joined Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia as a partner in the Middle Corridor Initiative. It was announced that China Railway Container Transport Corporation (CRTC) would take part in the activities of the Middle Corridor Multimodal joint venture. For China, the Middle Corridor is an integral part of the Belt and Road Initiative.

As a BRI part, the Middle Corridor for PRC is a way to diversify its trade routes and eliminate undue dependence on the transit networks going through Russia. The Middle Corridor enables a better and safer transportation route for Chinese exports traveling to the European Union. By building up on the Middle Corridor base, China will be able to optimize its export deliveries to Europe while also expanding its economic penetration of markets in Central and South Asia, the Caucasus, and the Middle East. Development of the Middle Corridor stimulates new investments in China's western regions, where new transportation hubs and railroad infrastructure appear. This solves a number of tasks in China's domestic and foreign economic policies. It gives a fresh impetus to the development of Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, which promotes its stability and long-term security. It enables further integration of China's comparatively less developed north-western regions into global market economy, while at the same time expanding China's economic reach into the strategically important "heartland" areas of Eurasia.

It is important to underscore that, at the end of the day, the fate of the Middle Corridor will rest on China's willingness to utilize it, rather on any combination of economic forces of other regional powers. Given the complexity of international relations within the region, all worries of Turkey, Russia and Iran establishing a new political and economic bloc in opposition to the West are presently unwarranted. The change toward a greater degree of collaboration between the three states will likely be incremental. This is shown, in particular, by a rather limited scope of the Iranian–Russian Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership that was signed in January 2025 (Smagin, 2025, Jan 21). There is no formal trilateral agreement to institutionalize and drive cooperation with regard to international transportation networks, be it the Middle Corridor or the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). It appears that bilateral negotiations and individual deals of a rather limited nature still prevail and stand a better chance of success in this region. While new transportation trunks and local offshoots of the Middle Corridor may well appear and both Russia and Iran might stand to benefit from these developments, this will not create a new economic alliance in the region or change the substance or direction of the ongoing trade flows between the region and the rest of the world.

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