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THE MIDDLE CORRIDOR AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF REGIONAL COOPERATION IN CENTRAL ASIA: A GEOECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. This article examines the Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route) through a geoeconomic lens, highlighting its role as a driver of regional transformation in Central Asia. Amid the restructuring of Eurasian trade routes triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical tensions, and sanctions regimes, the corridor has emerged as a strategic alternative to established transport routes, extending from China through Kazakhstan, across the Caspian Sea, to the South Caucasus, Türkiye, and European markets.

Moving beyond conventional treatments of the corridor as merely a transport route, the study conceptualizes it as a multidimensional platform for economic integration, institutional coordination, and regional connectivity, combining geoeconomic theory with New Regionalism approaches. Employing a qualitative research design that integrates systematic literature review, document analysis, comparative analysis, and descriptive statistics drawn from international institutions sources, the study traces the corridor’s evolution and evaluates its impact on regional cooperation among the five Central Asian states.

The analysis reveals a pronounced asymmetry in export linkages between Central Asia and the South Caucasus: Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan demonstrate the largest absolute export volumes in the region, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan show a higher relative orientation of their export flows toward regional markets despite significantly smaller overall volumes of foreign trade. Among the South Caucasus countries, Georgia occupies the most prominent position due to its strategic role as a transit hub. The study concludes that the Middle Corridor’s long-term effectiveness depends not merely on infrastructure expansion but on deepening institutional coordination, trade facilitation, and cross-border cooperation, positioning the corridor as a catalyst for a more integrated Central Asian geoeconomic architecture.

Keywords: Middle corridor, Central Asian connectivity, geopolitical competition, sanctions, diversification

Introduction

The transformation of global trade and transport architecture in recent years has substantially altered the geopolitical and geoeconomic configuration of Eurasia. A confluence of global disruptions-the COVID-19 pandemic, escalating geopolitical tensions, sanctions regimes, and the ongoing restructuring of global

supply chains-has revealed structural vulnerabilities in conventional transport corridors linking Europe and Asia. These developments have accelerated international efforts to diversify logistics networks and enhance the resilience of transcontinental transport systems. As a result, connectivity has assumed a central position in contemporary international economic relations, and transport infrastructure has evolved beyond its traditional role as an economic asset to become a strategic instrument for regional development, geopolitical influence, and economic security.

Within this context, the Middle Corridor-formally designated the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route -has emerged as one of the most strategically significant transport initiatives connecting East Asia, the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and Europe [1]. Extending from China through Kazakhstan, across the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye, and ultimately to European markets, the corridor constitutes a viable alternative to established northern and southern transport routes. Its growing prominence reflects mounting demand for diversified trade corridors capable of sustaining uninterrupted flows of goods while mitigating geopolitical and logistical risk.

For Central Asia, the development of the Middle Corridor extends considerably beyond the mere expansion of international transport infrastructure. It creates new opportunities to consolidate regional cooperation, advance economic diversification, attract foreign direct investment, enhance logistics connectivity, and integrate regional markets into global value chains. The corridor thereby reinforces the strategic significance of the Central Asian states within the evolving architecture of Eurasian connectivity, while fostering closer coordination among regional governments in transport policy, customs administration, digitalization, and infrastructure planning.

Notable shifts in intraregional relations among the Central Asian states have also marked recent years. Following an extended period in which political disagreements and limited institutional engagement constrained regional cooperation, the region has witnessed renewed momentum toward dialogue and pragmatic collaboration. Intensified political engagement among the five Central Asian republics has been accompanied by expanding cooperation in trade, transport, energy, border management, and investment. Within this framework, the Middle Corridor functions not merely as a logistics initiative but also as a catalyst for deepening regional economic integration and institutional cooperation.

The conceptualization of transport corridors has likewise undergone considerable theoretical evolution. Earlier scholarship tended to characterize transport corridors primarily as physical infrastructure facilitating the movement of goods and services. Contemporary research, by contrast, increasingly conceptualizes economic corridors as multidimensional systems integrating transport infrastructure, trade facilitation, institutional coordination, investment flows, digital connectivity, and regional governance. Within the geoeconomic framework, transport corridors operate as strategic instruments through which states pursue economic competitiveness, diversify their external economic relations, and strengthen their positions within the global economy.

The body of literature addressing the Middle Corridor has expanded considerably in recent years. International organizations, including the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, EBRD, the OECD, have produced extensive analytical assessments of the corridor's infrastructure capacity, logistics performance, investment requirements, and trade potential. Academic scholarship has likewise increasingly situated the Middle Corridor within the broader context of Eurasian connectivity, China's Belt and Road Initiative, and European transport diversification strategies. Nevertheless, the preponderance of this literature remains oriented toward the technical, logistical, and infrastructural dimensions of corridor development.

Among these assessments, the World Bank emphasizes that the Middle Corridor should be developed not only as a transport route but also as an integrated economic corridor. The report identifies cross-border institutional coordination, logistics efficiency, simplified customs procedures, digitalization, and targeted infrastructure investment as key conditions for increasing the corridor's competitiveness. It estimates that appropriate policy reforms and investments could triple freight volumes by 2030 compared with 2021 and halve transport time. These findings demonstrate that the Middle Corridor has the potential to strengthen economic interdependence and regional connectivity in Central Asia [2]. The World Bank's approach is particularly significant because it shifts the understanding of the Middle Corridor from a conventional transport route toward a broader mechanism of regional economic integration. The emphasis on institutional coordination, digitalization, and harmonization of procedures suggests that the corridor can become a platform for strengthening cooperation among Central Asian states. Therefore, its long-term effectiveness should be assessed not only by freight volumes and transport efficiency but also by its capacity to foster sustained regional cooperation and economic interdependence.

Despite growing research on the topic, there has been little focus on how the Middle Corridor drives regional change within Central Asia. Most studies do not examine how the corridor affects cooperation among Central Asian states, changes regional governance, increases economic ties, or shapes a new regional geoeconomic structure. There are also few theoretical studies that combine geoeconomic perspectives with regional cooperation theories.

This study aims to address these gaps by examining the Middle Corridor from a geoeconomic perspective and assessing how it shapes regional cooperation in Central Asia. Instead of seeing the corridor solely as a transport route between Europe and Asia, the study views it as a platform for economic integration, institutional coordination, and regional connectivity.

The goal of this study is to examine how the Middle Corridor is reshaping regional cooperation in Central Asia from a geoeconomic perspective. The research examines how the corridor has developed, the main economic and institutional factors driving its growth, its effects on cooperation among Central Asian states, and the opportunities and challenges for its future expansion.

What makes this study new is its combined approach, bringing together theories of geoeconomics, regional cooperation, and connectivity to explain how the Middle Corridor is changing the region today. By linking transport studies with international political economy and regional integration research, this article offers a fuller picture of how transport corridors are shaping Central Asia's future in the wider Eurasian context.

Description of Materials and Methods

This study uses a qualitative research design with descriptive and comparative analyses to examine how the Middle Corridor is changing regional cooperation in Central Asia from a geoeconomic perspective. Since the topic is complex, the methods include ideas from international relations, regional studies, transport economics, and geoeconomics. This approach provides a detailed view of both the economic and institutional aspects of the Middle Corridor.

In addition, it uses a geoeconomic approach, viewing transport corridors as more than infrastructure. They are also strategic tools that shape regional integration, economic connections, and international competitiveness. The research also uses New Regionalism theory, which emphasizes the role of infrastructure, cross-border cooperation, and collaboration between institutions in regional development. These theories help explain how transport projects can influence regional cooperation beyond traditional geopolitical perspectives.

To achieve the research goal, several methods were used. First, a systematic literature review identified key theories and recent debates on transport corridors, regional cooperation, connectivity, and geoeconomics. The review included journal articles, academic books, policy papers, and reports from international organizations, focusing on recent studies about the Middle Corridor, regional connectivity, and Central Asia's evolving role in Eurasian transport networks.

Second, the study uses document analysis to review strategic and regulatory materials about the Middle Corridor and regional cooperation. These materials include official policy documents, transport strategies, cooperation initiatives, and reports from organizations such as the OECD, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, and the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route Association. This analysis helped assess current policy priorities, institutional structures, and development trends linked to the corridor.

Third, a comparative analysis was used to examine how the Middle Corridor has developed compared to other major Eurasian transport routes. This helped identify what makes the corridor unique, its strengths, current infrastructure challenges, and its role in regional economic cooperation. It also highlighted factors that affect its long-term sustainability and competitiveness. Data came from international organizations and national statistical agencies. The empirical material includes indicators such as freight transport volumes, container traffic, logistics performance, transit times, trade flows, infrastructure development, and regional economic cooperation. Statistical information from the OECD,

World Bank, ADB, UNESCAP, International Transport Forum (ITF), Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, and other official institutions was analyzed to identify recent trends and assess the corridor's development.

The study uses only publicly available secondary data. It does not include surveys, interviews, or experiments. Instead, it relies on official international databases, policy reports, and academic publications to ensure the findings are reliable, transparent, and comparable.

The collected materials were analyzed using qualitative content analysis and comparative interpretation. This approach helps identify the main drivers, opportunities, and challenges related to the Middle Corridor, and evaluates its role in changing regional cooperation in Central Asia. By combining theory and evidence, the study provides a clear picture of how transport links are shaping new trends in regional economic cooperation and geoeconomic development.

Results

The results demonstrate that export interdependence between the South Caucasus and Central Asia is highly asymmetric. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan possess the greatest absolute export potential in Central Asia, while Georgia occupies the leading position among the South Caucasus countries. At the same time, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan demonstrate a higher relative orientation of their export flows toward regional markets despite significantly smaller overall volumes of foreign trade. These findings suggest that the Middle Corridor should be viewed not only as a transit route but also as an instrument for expanding intra-regional trade, diversifying exports, and gradually forming a more integrated geoeconomic system.

Discussion

These empirical patterns raise a broader question concerning the conditions under which connectivity can translate into meaningful regional economic integration. This question is particularly relevant to Pomfret's analysis of Central Asia's growing economic and geopolitical importance amid the development of new trade routes and infrastructure networks. He emphasizes that improved connectivity, trade facilitation, and economic diversification can strengthen the region's integration into global markets, while institutional barriers and limited regional cooperation remain significant challenges. These findings are particularly relevant to the Middle Corridor, whose long-term effectiveness depends not only on infrastructure development but also on deeper economic cooperation and institutional coordination among the Central Asian states [3].

From our perspective, Pomfret's findings suggest that connectivity alone cannot guarantee the long-term success of the Middle Corridor. While the development of transport infrastructure creates new opportunities for trade and investment, its strategic potential can be fully realized only through stronger institutional coordination and regional cooperation. In this regard, the Middle Corridor should be viewed not simply as a transit route, but as a mechanism capable of contributing to the transformation of Central Asia into a more interconnected and economically integrated region.

Vasa and Barkanyi examine the geopolitical and geoeconomic significance of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, commonly referred to as the Middle Corridor, within the changing Eurasian transport architecture. The authors argue that the disruption of the traditional Asia–Europe trade route through Russia has increased the strategic importance of the Middle Corridor as an alternative transcontinental route. At the same time, they emphasize that the corridor’s current capacity remains considerably lower than that of the Northern Route, indicating the need for substantial investment in transport infrastructure, logistics management, and trade facilitation [4]. According to the authors, the economic effectiveness of transport corridors depends not only on physical infrastructure but also on cross-border cooperation, coordinated management, and the reduction of logistical barriers. In this regard, the Middle Corridor is viewed as part of a broader network of Asian economic corridors that contributes to connectivity, trade expansion, and regional economic development.

Their findings demonstrate that the corridor’s effectiveness depends on the combination of infrastructure development, trade facilitation, institutional coordination, and cross-border cooperation. This perspective suggests that the development of the Middle Corridor may contribute to deeper economic interdependence among Central Asian states and create new incentives for regional policy coordination.

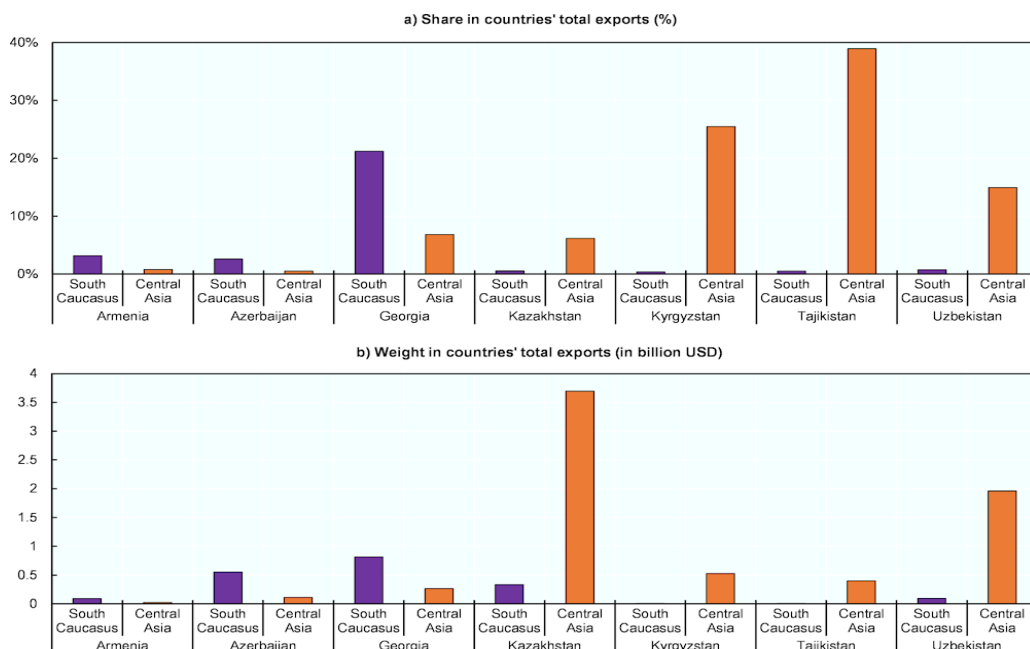


Figure 1- https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/realising-the-potential-of-the-middle-corridor_635ad854-en/full-report/component-5.html#title-5ed3c03734

According to the upper panel, the highest shares of exports directed toward Central Asia are observed in Tajikistan, at approximately 39%, Kyrgyzstan, at around 25%, Uzbekistan, at approximately 15%, and Georgia, at around 7%. These figures indicate that regional markets play a substantial role in the external trade structure of several Central Asian countries. This is particularly evident in the cases of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, whose economies are more strongly oriented toward neighboring markets due to limited export diversification and geographical dependence on regional transport connections.

At the same time, the share of exports from the South Caucasus countries directed toward Central Asia remains relatively limited in relation to their total national exports. For Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, the corresponding indicators are approximately 1%, 1%, and 6–7%, respectively. This suggests that Central Asia has not yet become a primary export destination for the South Caucasus countries. Their trade flows remain largely oriented toward broader external markets, including European, Russian, Turkish, and Middle Eastern destinations. Nevertheless, Georgia's relatively higher indicator compared with Armenia and Azerbaijan may be associated with its transit function and active participation in multimodal transport routes connecting Central Asia with European markets.

The lower panel demonstrates more substantial differences in the absolute volumes of exports. The highest indicator is recorded by Kazakhstan, whose exports to Central Asia amount to approximately USD 3.7 billion. This confirms Kazakhstan's leading role as the largest export and logistics hub in Central Asia. Uzbekistan also demonstrates a significant figure, amounting to approximately USD 2 billion. Consequently, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan possess the greatest potential for developing regional supply chains, expanding mutual trade, and strengthening transport and logistics services within the framework of the Middle Corridor.

Among the South Caucasus countries, Georgia records the largest absolute export volume, at approximately USD 0.8 billion. The corresponding indicators for Azerbaijan and Armenia are considerably lower, amounting to approximately USD 0.5 billion and USD 0.1 billion, respectively. Thus, Georgia occupies the most prominent position within the system of export linkages between the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Its importance is determined not only by the volume of trade but also by its role as a transport and logistics intermediary connecting the Caspian Sea, Central Asia, and European markets.

A comparison of the two panels leads to an important conclusion: a high share of regional exports does not necessarily correspond to a high absolute volume of trade. For example, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan demonstrate a relatively high dependence on Central Asian markets, while their absolute export volumes remain limited. By contrast, Kazakhstan is characterized by a substantial export volume, making it a key economic hub of the region despite the relatively moderate share of regional exports in its overall foreign trade structure. This distinction between relative dependence and the absolute scale of trade is important for assessing the actual potential of regional integration.

Overall, the diagram indicates that export linkages between the South Caucasus and Central Asia are developing unevenly and remain highly concentrated. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Georgia function as the principal nodes of regional economic interaction, whereas Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan occupy more limited positions in terms of absolute trade volumes. This structure creates favourable conditions for the further development of the Middle Corridor, while also highlighting the need to eliminate infrastructural and institutional barriers, expand the range of traded goods, and establish more balanced regional value chains.

This structural pattern in intra-regional trade flows is corroborated by policy-level analysis of the corridor. Kenderdine and Bucskey emphasize that the development of the Middle Corridor requires not only infrastructure investment but also institutional coordination, trade liberalization, transparent regulations, and greater regional economic integration. They argue that the creation of a coordinated transport and trade framework could strengthen connectivity between Central Asia, China, and the European Union, although external demand remains an important constraint. In our view, these findings demonstrate that the long-term success of the Middle Corridor depends on transforming it from a transport route into an integrated regional economic platform. Such transformation requires closer coordination among Central Asian states in the areas of customs procedures, transport regulations, digitalization, investment, and trade facilitation. Greater institutional coherence would not only improve the efficiency and competitiveness of the corridor but also create conditions for strengthening intra-regional trade and reducing dependence on individual external markets. Therefore, the Middle Corridor can be viewed as an important mechanism for both economic diversification and deeper regional cooperation in Central Asia [5].

From our perspective, the Middle Corridor also creates an opportunity for Central Asian states to strengthen their collective bargaining position in the changing Eurasian economic environment. Its development could therefore contribute not only to trade diversification but also to greater strategic autonomy and resilience of the region in the context of geopolitical competition and changing global supply chains.

A significant contribution to the contemporary understanding of the Middle Corridor is provided by Rentschler et al., who examine its development within the broader transformation of Eurasian transport and geopolitical networks. Drawing on qualitative evidence from interviews with logistics companies and political authorities in Central Asia and Europe, the study identifies infrastructure development, standardization and digitalization, institutional cooperation, and stakeholder coordination as critical dimensions shaping the corridor's strategic potential. The findings demonstrate that the Trans-Caspian Corridor has evolved beyond a conventional transport route into an important instrument of geopolitical

and economic diversification, particularly in the context of declining reliance on traditional routes through Russia [6].

From our perspective, this development indicates that the strategic value of the Middle Corridor lies not only in its capacity to redirect trade flows, but also in its potential to strengthen the international connectivity and economic agency of Central Asian states. At the same time, realizing this potential requires sustained institutional coordination, regulatory harmonization, and greater coherence among the participating countries. Thus, the effectiveness of the Middle Corridor should be assessed not solely through the volume of transit flows, but also through its contribution to regional resilience, diversification, and the evolving geopolitical positioning of Central Asia.

This trend toward institutional coordination is also visible at the bilateral level. Cutler provides a broader interpretation of the evolving Kazakhstan-Azerbaijan partnership, viewing it as an important component of the structural reconfiguration of Eurasian connectivity. The author demonstrates that cooperation between the two states is increasingly extending beyond conventional transport infrastructure to encompass port development, digital connectivity, energy transportation, investment, and institutional coordination. In particular, the development of the Aktau–Alat axis illustrates how infrastructure, financial commitments, and regulatory cooperation are gradually creating a more integrated network around the Middle Corridor. This perspective is particularly relevant to understanding the corridor not simply as a transit route between China and Europe, but as an emerging macroregional platform linking transport, energy, digital, and economic networks [7]. The strengthening of Kazakhstan-Azerbaijan cooperation is particularly significant given the limited availability of alternative land routes capable of providing comparable connectivity between Central Asia, the Caspian region, and European markets under the current geopolitical conditions. In this context, the Middle Corridor is increasingly acquiring not only economic but also strategic significance, as its development provides Central Asian states with an additional channel for maintaining international trade and external economic relations amid the disruption and geopolitical risks affecting traditional Eurasian routes. Thus, the emerging Kazakhstan-Azerbaijan axis can be regarded as one of the key regional mechanisms supporting the diversification and resilience of Eurasian connectivity.

These country-level dynamics fit within a broader conceptual framework. Gálvez Nogales conceptualizes economic corridors as integrated development frameworks in which physical connectivity must be complemented by institutional, regulatory, and investment measures. The study emphasizes that the effectiveness of regional corridors depends on the combination of “hard” infrastructure with “soft” interventions, including policy coordination, institutional capacity, investment incentives, and regulatory harmonization. The author also underlines that regional economic corridors can contribute to deeper regional integration by

connecting markets, coordinating national policies, and creating opportunities for investment and sectoral development [8].

Table-1. Types of Economic Corridor- <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/8bab6e41-f54e-4133-9c73-2a108450f30f/content>.

Dimensions	Types of corridors	Application to the Middle Corridor
Geographic scope	Urban; subnational; transnational/regional	Transnational/regional
Sectoral scope	Monosectoral; multisectoral	Multisectoral
Development driver	Public-led; donor/IFI-led; private-led; PPP/multistakeholder	Multistakeholder / PPP

Based on this classification, the Middle Corridor can be considered a transnational, multisectoral, and multistakeholder economic corridor. Its development combines transport infrastructure with trade, investment, digital connectivity, and institutional cooperation, which makes it an important platform for regional economic integration.

These findings are particularly relevant to the Middle Corridor, as its long-term effectiveness cannot be measured solely by transport capacity or transit volumes. In our view, the corridor's economic potential will increasingly depend on its ability to generate wider regional effects through the integration of trade, logistics, investment, agriculture, and other productive sectors. Therefore, the Middle Corridor should be approached as a multidimensional economic development platform in which transport connectivity serves as a foundation for broader regional economic integration.

Beyond this economic framing, the corridor also carries a geopolitical dimension. Kurečić conceptualizes Central Asia as a strategic arena shaped by overlapping geostrategic and geoeconomic interests of major powers, particularly Russia, China, and the United States. The study emphasizes that the region's energy resources, transport infrastructure, and geographical position have historically contributed to intensified external competition and the formation of competing spheres of influence. At the same time, the limited capacity of Central Asian states to counter external pressures has encouraged them to pursue balancing strategies aimed at preserving their autonomy [9].

This perspective remains relevant to the contemporary development of the Middle Corridor, as the restructuring of Eurasian transport and energy networks has created a new dimension of geopolitical competition in the region. In this context, the Middle Corridor can be viewed not only as an economic and transport project but also as an instrument through which Central Asian states seek to diversify their external connectivity and reduce excessive dependence on any single geopolitical actor. Thus, the evolution of the corridor reflects a broader transformation of the "New Great Game", in which competition over energy resources is increasingly complemented by competition over connectivity, infrastructure, logistics, and access to international markets.

This geopolitical framing is echoed in a contemporary assessment of geoeconomic rivalry in Central Asia by Turtugulova et al., who examine the contrasting forms of economic engagement pursued by China and the United States and their implications for Kazakhstan. The findings demonstrate that China’s Belt and Road Initiative has strengthened regional connectivity through the development of transport corridors, energy infrastructure, and logistics networks, thereby creating cumulative forms of economic interdependence. At the same time, the study emphasizes that U.S. engagement, although more selective in terms of investment and institutional instruments, may contribute to expanding the range of strategic alternatives available to Central Asian states [10]. In this context, Kazakhstan’s hedging strategy can be understood as a mechanism for managing asymmetric dependencies while preserving policy flexibility amid competing external influences. These findings are particularly relevant to the development of the Middle Corridor, which provides Kazakhstan with an additional channel for diversifying trade and transport connections and reducing excessive dependence on any single route or external partner. From our perspective, the strategic importance of the Middle Corridor therefore lies not only in its capacity to redirect trade flows, but also in its ability to expand Kazakhstan’s strategic choices and strengthen its resilience within an increasingly competitive geoeconomic environment.

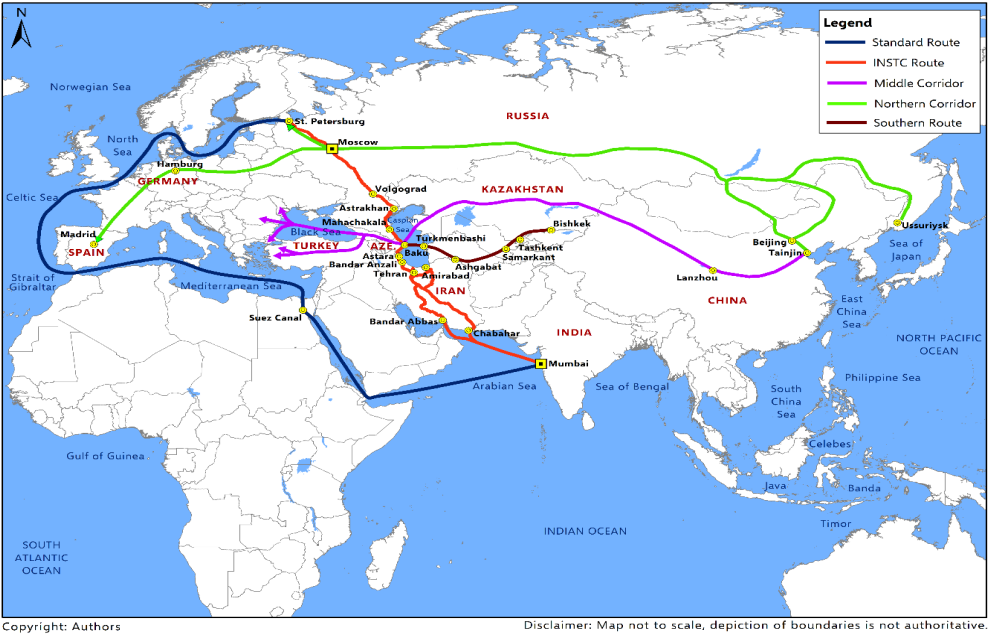


Figure 2 - NSTC, Middle Corridor, Northern Route, and Standard Route (by Wani A. The Middle Corridor: Reviving Connectivity for EU-Central Asia Trade and India’s Strategic Imperative. New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation, 2024.)

The geographical configuration presented in Figure 1 demonstrates the strategic position of the Middle Corridor within the wider Eurasian transport system. Unlike the Northern Corridor, which passes through Russian territory, and the Southern Route, which relies on infrastructure crossing Iran, the Middle Corridor connects China and Europe through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus and Türkiye. Kazakhstan therefore represents a key transit and logistical hub within the corridor, while the Caspian crossing creates an important link between Central Asia and European markets. The spatial configuration of these routes indicates that the development of the Middle Corridor is closely associated with the diversification of Eurasian connectivity and the growing importance of alternative transport networks. At the same time, the map demonstrates that the corridor does not operate in isolation but forms part of a competitive network of Northern, Southern and Trans-Caspian routes, making its efficiency and development increasingly relevant to the changing geopolitical and geoeconomic environment of Eurasia.

Recent research highlights the growing importance of the Middle Corridor as a mechanism for diversifying trade and connectivity between Central Asia and European markets amid the restructuring of Eurasian transport networks. The corridor has acquired particular strategic relevance following the Russia–Ukraine war, sanctions affecting traditional northern routes, and disruptions in other global trade routes. At the same time, its development is influenced by infrastructure constraints, regional instability, and competition among external powers. In this context, the Middle Corridor represents not simply an alternative transport route, but an emerging platform for strengthening economic connectivity and expanding the strategic options available to Central Asian states [11].

This diversification imperative is sharpened by the sanctions environment. Researcher M. Hess argues that the sanctions regime against Russia has had a differentiated impact on the countries of Central Asia. According to Hess, increased controls on sanctions circumvention have placed greater pressure on regional companies involved in trade with Russia, while Western countries have adopted a more pragmatic approach in the energy sector. In particular, the growing imports of Russian natural gas by Central Asian states have not faced comparable sanctions pressure. As Hess emphasizes, the international sanctions regime has therefore contributed to a gradual shift in the balance of interests in regional energy markets away from Russia and toward Central Asian states, despite the continued dependence of some countries in the region on Russian export routes [12].

Building on the discussion of the changing economic and energy dynamics in Central Asia, researcher C. Kunaka examines the role of transport connectivity in shaping the benefits of regional integration. He argues that the economic effects of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) depend largely on the position of individual countries and economic centers within emerging connectivity networks. According to Kunaka, participation in the BRI can create new market opportunities, increase competition, and reduce transport and logistics costs; however, the scale of these benefits varies depending on whether a country functions as a transit hub

facilitating trade flows or as an end node in the network. Therefore, strengthening weak links in transport networks is essential for maximizing the economic benefits of regional connectivity [13]. This approach is particularly relevant to Central Asia, where the effectiveness of emerging transport corridors depends not only on the expansion of infrastructure but also on the region's ability to transform its geographical position into sustainable transit and economic advantages. In this regard, the development of the Middle Corridor can strengthen the role of Central Asian states as key intermediaries in Eurasian trade flows and contribute to greater diversification of their external economic relations.

While Kunaka emphasizes the importance of connectivity and the strategic position of Central Asian states within emerging Eurasian transport networks, S. Lain draws attention to the potential risks associated with excessive connectivity with China. She argues that although the Belt and Road Initiative can stimulate economic development, expand trade opportunities, and improve infrastructure, its long-term success should not result in greater dependence of Central Asian economies on China as a primary market, investor, or source of infrastructure financing. In particular, overreliance on Chinese demand for commodities may reinforce the region's traditional role as a supplier of raw materials, while the growing competitiveness of Chinese industries could place additional pressure on Central Asian producers [14]. This argument is particularly important in the context of the Middle Corridor. The development of alternative transport routes should not merely replace one form of external dependence with another; rather, it should strengthen the economic agency of Central Asian states by diversifying trade partners, investment sources, export markets, and logistics networks. Therefore, the strategic value of the Middle Corridor lies not only in its transit potential but also in its capacity to support a more balanced and diversified model of regional economic connectivity.

Extending this argument, S. Cornell and S. F. Starr shift attention from the risks of external dependence to the internal capacity of Central Asian states to develop effective regional cooperation. They argue that the emergence of new continental trade routes creates favorable conditions for the revival of regional cooperation, as Central Asian countries increasingly need to coordinate their economic, customs, and transport policies in order to benefit fully from expanding transcontinental connectivity [15]. The authors emphasize that the long-term effectiveness of regional cooperation depends not on political declarations or occasional high-level meetings, but on the establishment of strong and sustainable regional institutions. Drawing on the experiences of ASEAN and the Nordic Council, Cornell and Starr demonstrate that institutional capacity, gradual integration, and flexible mechanisms for protecting the interests of participating states are essential for successful regional cooperation.

This institutional dimension is particularly important for the development of the Middle Corridor. Its potential to reduce external dependencies and strengthen the bargaining position of Central Asian states will depend not only on infrastructure development, but also on the region's ability to coordinate transport, customs, trade, and investment policies. Therefore, the Middle Corridor can be

understood not merely as a transit route between China and Europe, but also as a potential instrument for strengthening regional cooperation and the strategic autonomy of Central Asian states.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that the Middle Corridor has evolved beyond its conventional function as a transport route and is increasingly acquiring the characteristics of a multidimensional geoeconomic platform. The restructuring of Eurasian trade routes, geopolitical tensions, sanctions regimes, and disruptions to established supply chains have increased the strategic relevance of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route. For Central Asia, however, its significance extends beyond the diversification of transit routes. The corridor creates opportunities to strengthen economic connectivity, expand access to international markets, diversify external economic relations, and develop new forms of regional cooperation.

The empirical analysis reveals significant asymmetries in the economic position of the Central Asian states within emerging connectivity networks. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan possess the largest absolute export volumes and therefore have substantial potential to function as major economic and logistics nodes. At the same time, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan demonstrate a higher relative orientation of their export flows toward regional markets despite significantly smaller overall volumes of foreign trade. These differences indicate that the benefits generated by the Middle Corridor are unlikely to be distributed evenly across the region. Consequently, its development should be accompanied by policies aimed at integrating less-connected economies into regional value chains and expanding opportunities for intra-regional trade rather than focusing exclusively on aggregate transit volumes.

The study further demonstrates that infrastructure development alone is insufficient to ensure the long-term effectiveness of the corridor. Railways, ports, roads, terminals, and maritime links constitute its physical foundation, but their economic value depends on the quality of “soft” connectivity. Harmonized customs procedures, digitalization, regulatory compatibility, transparent investment frameworks, coordinated border management, and institutional cooperation are essential for reducing transaction costs and improving the competitiveness of the route. The evidence therefore supports the interpretation of the Middle Corridor as both an infrastructural and institutional process.

From a geoeconomic perspective, the development of alternative connectivity enables Central Asian states to transform their geographical position from a structural constraint into a strategic economic asset. Historically, the region’s landlocked geography and dependence on externally controlled transport and energy networks limited its economic autonomy. The Middle Corridor provides an additional channel for accessing international markets and

diversifying trade and transport relations. Its strategic value therefore lies not only in redirecting existing trade flows, but also in expanding the range of economic choices available to Central Asian states and strengthening their resilience to external disruptions.

At the same time, diversification from traditional routes should not lead to a new form of asymmetric dependence. The literature examined in this study highlights the risks associated with excessive reliance on China as a market, investor, and source of infrastructure financing. The strategic importance of the Middle Corridor consequently lies in its capacity to broaden, rather than replace, Central Asia's external economic partnerships. Its development can create greater opportunities for cooperation with China, the South Caucasus, Türkiye, and European markets while allowing Central Asian states to pursue more diversified trade, investment, and logistics strategies.

The findings also support the argument that connectivity can generate functional incentives for regional cooperation. The effective operation of the Middle Corridor requires Central Asian states to coordinate transport policies, customs procedures, border management, digital systems, investment frameworks, and trade facilitation measures. In this sense, regional cooperation is not simply a prerequisite for the corridor's development; connectivity itself can become a driver of cooperation by creating shared economic interests among participating states. This dynamic is particularly consistent with the principles of New Regionalism, which emphasizes functional cooperation, transnational networks, infrastructure, markets, and interactions between state and non-state actors.

Accordingly, the Middle Corridor can be conceptualized as a potential mechanism of functional regionalism in Central Asia. Its development does not necessarily require the creation of a supranational organization or a highly centralized integration structure. Rather, cooperation can emerge gradually around concrete economic functions and shared interests, including transport, trade, logistics, customs, investment, digital connectivity, and regional value chains. This suggests that the transformation of regional cooperation may proceed through practical economic deep cooperation rather than through formal political integration.

Nevertheless, significant constraints remain. Infrastructure bottlenecks, differences in regulatory frameworks, customs and border-management challenges, limited capacity at certain transport nodes, and the uneven economic capabilities of participating states may restrict the corridor's competitiveness. The Caspian Sea crossing also remains a critical component whose efficiency depends on port capacity, maritime logistics, and coordination among transport operators. Addressing these constraints requires coordinated investment, regulatory harmonization, and sustained institutional commitment at both the national and regional levels.

The central argument of the study is therefore that the long-term significance of the Middle Corridor should be assessed not solely through freight volumes or transit revenues, but through its broader capacity to generate regional economic

transformation. Key indicators of its success should include the expansion of intra-regional trade, diversification of exports and investment sources, development of regional value chains, reduction of transit and transaction costs, improvement of customs efficiency, digital integration, and strengthening of institutional cooperation among the Central Asian states. Such an approach allows the corridor to be understood as an emerging component of the region's geoeconomic architecture rather than simply as an alternative transport route.

From this study's perspective, the Middle Corridor offers Central Asian states an opportunity to shift from a transit-centered model to a more value-added regional economic model. Developing logistics services, processing industries, manufacturing, agricultural exports, digital services, and regional distribution centers along the corridor would enable the region's countries to capture a greater share of the value generated by Eurasian connectivity. In this regard, the corridor's ultimate contribution will depend on whether transport connectivity can be linked to domestic production, intra-regional trade, and integration into regional and global value chains.

Overall, the Middle Corridor represents an important opportunity for Central Asia to convert geographical location into economic and strategic advantage. Its development, however, cannot by itself guarantee deeper regional integration. The decisive factor will be the capacity of Central Asian states to translate physical connectivity into institutional coordination, institutional coordination into economic interdependence, and economic interdependence into sustained regional cooperation. If these conditions are progressively achieved, the Middle Corridor may evolve from an alternative Eurasian transport route into a durable foundation for a more interconnected, resilient, diversified, and strategically autonomous Central Asian geoeconomic space.

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СРЕДИННЫЙ КОРРИДОР КАК ФАКТОР ТРАНСФОРМАЦИИ РЕГИОНАЛЬНОГО СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВА ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ: ГЕОЭКОНОМИЧЕСКИЙ ПОДХОД

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Аннотация. В статье через геоэкономическую призму рассматривается Средний коридор как фактор трансформации регионального сотрудничества в Центральной Азии. На фоне перестройки евразийских

торговых маршрутов, вызванной пандемией COVID-19, геополитической напряжённостью и санкционными режимами, коридор стал стратегической альтернативой устоявшимся транспортным путям, соединяя Китай через Казахстан, Каспийское море, страны Южного Кавказа, Турцию и европейские рынки.

В отличие от традиционного понимания коридора исключительно как транспортного маршрута, исследование концептуализирует его как многомерную платформу экономической интеграции, институциональной координации и региональной связанности, объединяя геоэкономическую теорию с подходами нового регионализма. Использован качественный дизайн исследования, включающий систематический обзор литературы, анализ документов, сравнительный анализ и описательную статистику на основе данных международных институтов; прослежена эволюция коридора и оценено его влияние на региональное сотрудничество между пятью государствами Центральной Азии. Результаты демонстрируют выраженную асимметрию экспортной взаимозависимости между Центральной Азией и Южным Кавказом: Казахстан и Узбекистан характеризуются наиболее значительными абсолютными объемами экспорта в регионе, тогда как Кыргызстан и Таджикистан демонстрируют более высокую относительную ориентацию экспортных потоков на региональные рынки при значительно меньших объемах внешней торговли; среди стран Южного Кавказа наиболее заметную позицию занимает Грузия благодаря своей транзитной роли. Делается вывод, что долгосрочная эффективность Среднего коридора зависит не столько от расширения инфраструктуры, сколько от углубления институциональной координации, содействия торговле и трансграничного сотрудничества, что превращает коридор в катализатор формирования более интегрированной геоэкономической архитектуры Центральной Азии.

Ключевые слова: Средний коридор, связанность Центральной Азии, геополитическая конкуренция, санкции, диверсификация

ОРТА ДӘЛІЗ ЖӘНЕ ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯДАҒЫ АЙМАҚТЫҚ ЫНТЫМАҚТАСТЫҚТЫҢ ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЯСЫ: ГЕОЭКОНОМИКАЛЫҚ ТӘСІЛ

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Аңдатпа. Мақалада Орталық Азиядағы аймақтық ынтымақтастықтың трансформациясының факторы ретінде Орта дәліз геоэкономикалық тұрғыдан қарастырылады. COVID-19 пандемиясы, геосаяси шиеленістің өршуі және санкциялық режимдер салдарынан еуразиялық сауда бағыттарының

қайта құрылымдалуы аясында дәліз қалыптасқан көлік бағыттарына стратегиялық балама ретінде көрінді: ол Қытайдан Қазақстан арқылы, Каспий теңізі бойымен, Оңтүстік Кавказ елдеріне, Түркияға және еуропалық нарықтарға дейін созылады. Дәлізді тек көлік бағыты ретінде түсіндіретін дәстүрлі көзқарастан айырмашылығы, зерттеу оны геоэкономика теориясы мен жаңа регионализм тәсілдерін біріктіре отырып, экономикалық интеграцияның, институционалдық үйлестірудің және аймақтық байланыстылықтың көпөлшемді платформасы ретінде қарастырады. Зерттеуде сапалы зерттеу дизайны қолданылды: жүйелі әдебиеттерге шолу, құжаттарды талдау, салыстырмалы талдау және халықаралық институттардың деректеріне негізделген сипаттамалық статистика; дәліздің эволюциясы қадағаланып, оның Орталық Азияның бес мемлекеті арасындағы аймақтық ынтымақтастыққа ықпалы бағаланды.

Нәтижелер Орталық Азия мен Оңтүстік Кавказ арасындағы экспорттық өзара тәуелділікте айқын асимметрияны көрсетеді: Қазақстан мен Өзбекстан өңірдегі экспорттың ең жоғары абсолюттік көлемдерімен сипатталса, Қырғызстан мен Тәжікстан сыртқы сауда көлемдері айтарлықтай төмен болғанына қарамастан, экспорттық ағындарының өңірлік нарықтарға салыстырмалы түрде жоғары бағдарлануымен ерекшеленеді; Оңтүстік Кавказ елдерінің арасында Грузия транзиттік рөліне байланысты ең айқын позицияны иеленеді. Қорытындыда Орта дәліздің ұзақ мерзімді тиімділігі инфрақұрылымды кеңейтуге ғана емес, институционалдық үйлестіруді, сауданы жеңілдетуді және шекара маңы ынтымақтастығын терендетуге байланысты екені, бұл дәлізді Орталық Азияның неғұрлым интеграцияланған геоэкономикалық архитектурасын қалыптастырудың катализаторына айналдыратыны атап өтіледі.

Тірек сөздер: Орта дәліз, Орталық Азияның байланыстылығы, геосаяси бәсекелестік, санкциялар, әртараптандыру

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