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# The Role of the Middle Corridor in Eurasian Connectivity

*Melina Torús*

That part of the world that is still commonly referred to as “Eurasia” is characterized by its vast continental landmass, great diversity of natural and strategic resources, varied geography, and significant proportion of the global population. These features make it a prosperous area for trade and logistics. Large industrial centers and urban logistics hubs connect national, regional, and global markets. The Eurasian neighborhood is also home to major global and regional powers, including China, Russia, Iran, the European Union, and Türkiye, all of which have significant economic influence. In this context, connectivity has become a strategic resource and a foreign policy instrument.

Multimodal corridors, which integrate various modes of transport

such as rail, road and sea, are much more than mere transit routes. Growing competition between major powers and the vulnerability of supply chains have also marked a transition in international order, highlighting the importance of Eurasian corridors and alternative routes for global trade. Participation in and control of transport corridors can therefore become instruments of national power and influence.

Historically, the Eurasian region has been connected by trade routes such as the Silk Road. However, these were nothing like the integrated transport corridors seen today. In addition to technological advances in transport, there is a greater degree of institutionalization today, which in turn strengthens cooperation between states. Faced with the challenge of connecting

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the vast Eurasian landmass, multiple corridors have emerged over time, each offering different geopolitical advantages, challenges and vulnerabilities. Initiatives such as the Northern Corridor, the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA), and the Middle Corridor are emerging in the region in response to the growing need for resilient and reliable supply chains and alternative trade routes in a context of international geopolitical tensions.

Against this backdrop, the Middle Corridor is establishing itself as a viable alternative for trade between Asia and Europe. It offers multimodal transport options, diversifying routes and reducing reliance on corridors that are more vulnerable to geopolitical tensions.

Since its launch in 2013, the Middle Corridor has established itself as a vital multimodal route connecting China and Central Asia with the Caucasus and Europe. It integrates road, rail, port, and digital infrastructure. As well as facilitating intercontinental trade,

this corridor enables countries such as Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Kazakhstan to establish themselves as strategic logistics hubs and expand their influence in regional trade flows.

Since its inception, progress has been made in legal harmonization, infrastructure modernization—especially to reduce bottlenecks—and the digitalization of processes along the corridor. In 2025, for example, the focus was on

railway modernization, customs digitalization, and port expansion, reflecting a joint effort by intra- and extra-regional actors to strengthen the corridor’s efficiency and resilience. These advances are taking place amid increased interest in the Middle Corridor, accentuated by geopolitical tensions in neighboring theaters, as reflected by the increased volume of cargo transported. To this end, regional cooperation is essential to ensure that this route is more resilient, reliable and attractive for international trade.

This paper examines the role of the Middle Corridor in the context of supply chain reconfiguration and the key interests of those involved, such as Azerbaijan,

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Kazakhstan, Türkiye, the European Union, the United States, and China.

The article is organized into five main sections. It begins by defining multimodal corridors and examining the importance of hard and soft infrastructure, as well as connectivity as a foreign policy tool. Then it analyses Eurasian corridors, identifying the chief land and multimodal routes, their history, and the associated advantages and challenges. Examples include the Northern Corridor, TRACECA, and the INSTC. Special emphasis is placed on the Middle Corridor, describing recent developments, infrastructure investments, and technological and operational advances that consolidate its operation. Moreover, the article addresses the interests of the involved parties, distinguishing between transit countries, users, and extra-regional actors. It focuses particularly on China, the European Union, Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and the United States, and includes initiatives such as the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) in the South Caucasus. Finally, it concludes by emphasizing the advantages that

corridors offer for economic integration, regional cooperation, and diversifying trade routes. It also highlights the opportunities that corridors provide for intra- and extra-regional actors within the Eurasian geopolitical context.

### *Transport Corridors*

Although most global trade is carried out by sea, many states lack direct access to open waters. In this context, land-based transport corridors play a pivotal role in connecting production centers with ports and markets, thereby promoting trade flows that contribute to broader processes of regional integration, development, and economic cooperation. Beyond their physical dimension, corridors offer varying levels of connectivity by integrating infrastructure, logistics services and regulatory frameworks at global, regional, and national levels. In an increasingly interconnected global context, facilitating connectivity flows is becoming ever more important.

In this regard, a central concept for transport corridors is

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multimodality, whereby different modes of transport are integrated along the same route. This involves coordinating roads, rail, air, and sea transport, thereby improving the efficiency of corridors by optimizing routes, reducing logistics costs and decreasing transit times. For example, this can be achieved through the digitization of customs processes.

In this context, infrastructure is one of the key factors in multimodal transport. Hard infrastructure comprises physical networks such as roads, railways, bridges, tunnels and telecommunications systems. In contrast, soft infrastructure comprises intangible elements, including the institutional, regulatory and administrative frameworks that underpin economic and social performance. Therefore, both types of infrastructure are relevant for multimodal transport corridors. While improving physical infrastructure can contribute to connectivity, intangible factors such as harmonizing legal and regulatory frameworks, technical standards and digitization are also necessary.

However, these transport routes are not merely passive means of circulation; they can also be tools through which states can modify their environment and project influence. In this sense, they

can serve as instruments of foreign policy and national power, since controlling key corridors provides strategic advantages in an increasingly unstable international context. They can also project influence beyond a state's borders, which is why connectivity has become a valuable resource in international integration strategies. Countries such as Azerbaijan use connectivity to establish themselves as key logistics hubs, thanks to their geographical location and the level of infrastructure this makes possible.

Therefore, the promotion and control of transport corridors have a strategic function that extends beyond logistics. By becoming an instrument of foreign policy, connectivity operates as a mechanism of influence in a context marked by the search for alternative routes due to geopolitical tensions.

In the Eurasian context, connectivity is a vital capability, given the region's vast size and geopolitical landscape, as well as the impact of economic sanctions and export-import restrictions on the search for alternative transport routes. Therefore, the Middle Corridor must be understood not only in terms of its technical capabilities, but also as a means of exerting influence on the states through which it passes and other powers, such

as the United States, the European Union, and China.

### *Transport Corridors in Eurasia*

Eurasia's unique geography comprises vast territories with significant economic potential for connectivity projects. Accounting for almost 40 percent of the planet's land surface and around 70 percent of the world's population, this continental space significantly broadens the range of options for developing alternative, land-based transport and trade routes. Furthermore, the region is home to major powers such as Russia and China, as well as regional powers such as India and Türkiye. This adds to the region's relevance and reinforces the need to promote connectivity.

Although this region has been connected since ancient times, for example through the Silk Road, or organized around centers of power, such as during the Genghis Khan empire, these forms of connection differ significantly from the current state of Eurasian connectivity, which is defined by economic, logistical, and regulatory integration.

For long periods, exchanges were structured through chains of

intermediation rather than direct links, resulting in slow, fragmented, and limited flows. These were then disrupted by a shift in maritime commerce, in part caused by the spread of Western colonialism. Various initiatives aimed at promoting more direct, efficient and resilient intercontinental trade flows between the continent's major economic centers and improving Eurasian connectivity have emerged in the Eurasian space in recent decades, however. In this context, three major routes have become particularly relevant in shaping contemporary Eurasian trade dynamics.

The *Northern Eurasian Corridor*, also known as the Northern Corridor, connects the ports of the Russian Far East and northeastern China with Europe via various branches of the Trans-Siberian Railway, as well as through Mongolia and Kazakhstan. While rail transport is the backbone of this corridor, road transport plays a complementary role. The latter is particularly important for bilateral trade between Russia and China, facilitating significant volumes of exchange between the two countries.

In recent years, geopolitical tensions, sanctions regimes, and the increased political and military risks associated with traditional

routes have encouraged states to explore more resilient alternatives for transporting goods. In this context, other trade flows are becoming increasingly important.

Another significant initiative is TRACECA. Established in 1993 by the European Union and its partners with the aim of developing trade between Europe, the Caucasus, and Asia. Initially, it was considered a secondary alternative to traditional routes passing through Russia, due to limited coordination between participating countries and the absence of unified transit rules. However, the 2022 geopolitical crisis prompted renewed interest in ensuring the continuity of regional trade, establishing TRACECA as a strategic option that aligns European and regional interests.

Despite significant advances in digitization and infrastructure development, TRACECA still faces several systemic constraints that make it less competitive than alternative Eurasian routes. These include bureaucratic and regulatory obstacles, fragmented digital

information systems and certain operational and infrastructure limitations. These issues demonstrate that, while TRACECA has gained relevance, improving its governance and efficiency is essential for it to fulfil its role as a regional connectivity hub capable of complementing and consolidating trade flows between Europe and Asia.

Lastly, the *International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)*. It was established in 2000 by Russia, Iran, and India. Azerbaijan, Belarus, with the Central Asian countries later joining. Spanning over 7,000 kilometers, the corridor connects Russian ports with the Gulf region and the Indian Ocean. It offers an alternative land and sea route, facilitating trade between Europe and Asia.

Its main advantages include reduced delivery times for goods and the ability to avoid traditional bottlenecks, such as those in the Suez Canal, providing a more efficient and resilient alternative route. However, the corridor faces significant challenges, including infrastructure deficiencies, geopolitical

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tensions arising from sanctions on Iran and episodes of regional instability. Nevertheless, its development remains strategically important for the participating states, as it provides an additional route for diversifying trade and strengthening connectivity between Europe and Asia.

The proliferation of multimodal corridors in Eurasia reflects the need for alternative and complementary routes that can bypass or mitigate geopolitical and geographical vulnerabilities. Similarly, these corridors can bolster the economies of the states through which they pass by attracting investment and goods. It is in this context that the Middle Corridor emerges, which will be analyzed in the following section.

### *The Middle Corridor*

The Middle Corridor, also known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), was established in 2013 at the Second International Transport and Logistics Business Forum 'New Silk Road' in Astana. Connecting Southeast Asia and China with Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Anatolia, and the European continent, it integrates rail, road, and maritime

transport. By offering a shorter, more efficient route, the corridor enables the diversification of trade routes between Asia and Europe, thereby reducing dependence on routes crossing territories affected by sanctions or geopolitical instability. It is projected to operate as a mechanism capable of protecting supply chains between China and Europe from possible disruptions.

As well as being important for European and Asian economies, the Middle Corridor provides countries such as Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia with an opportunity to open up and expand their markets to global trade and to establish themselves as strategic logistics hubs. Although the corridor has been institutionalized since its establishment, significant progress has been made in recent years in consolidating its operations.

At last year's Tashkent Investors Forum, it was agreed that improving infrastructure would accelerate the development of the corridor. Consequently, investments in the modernization of railways, ports, and digital systems have been encouraged, with a particular focus on coordinating reforms and harmonizing border systems. In Kazakhstan, a dredging project has been launched at the ERSAI industrial port in Kuryk to increase cargo

capacity, consolidate its role as a key transit hub, and enable year-round navigation.

The European Union has reinforced its commitment to the Middle Corridor by investing €12 billion through the Global Gateway initiative, which aims to improve transport connectivity, access to strategic raw materials and digital networks, as well as address the intersection between water, energy, and climate change. This includes plans to modernize transport infrastructure and connections, invest in trade facilitation and customs digitalization, and improve ports, roads, and logistics services.

Digitization advances in Kazakhstan have also contributed to the corridor's efficiency by reducing customs declaration times through the integrated national platform, KEDEN. In Georgia, meanwhile, the modernization of the railway section linking Tbilisi with Makhinjauri on the coast of Adjara has increased freight capacity, reduced operating costs, and shortened transit and transport times.

Azerbaijan has invested heavily in the expansion of the Port of Baku at Alat, with the aim of tripling capacity by 2030. It has also launched a major rail upgrade program, is

working to modernize its Caspian cargo fleet and logistics centers, and reconstruct highways. Lastly, Azerbaijan is in the midst of implementing "single window" systems and digitalizing customs to eliminate bottlenecks, with the aim of reducing delivery times from China to less than a fortnight.

Investments in the hard and soft infrastructure of the Middle Corridor address the need for adaptation in light of increased traffic, reflecting the necessity to promote the consolidation of transport corridors, particularly multimodal ones. In 2024, container traffic totaled 56,500 TEU, while cargo traffic amounted to 3.3 million tons. This sustained increase in cargo volumes establishes the Middle Corridor as a reliable and viable alternative to other Eurasian routes. Beyond investments in physical infrastructure, the evolution of the Corridor has been characterized by enhanced governance, digitalization, and regional coordination.

### *Players and Interests*

The stakeholders involved in the Middle Corridor include transit countries and users, as well as extra-regional actors, such as public bodies, transport

companies, and logistics providers, who are responsible for its governance. This diversity reflects the Middle Corridor's complexity and varied dynamics.

Transit countries are those through which transport routes pass, seeking to capitalize on their geographical position to promote development. An increase in the transit of goods through these states can strengthen their economies. Notable examples in this regard are Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. Azerbaijan's location at the crossroads of Eurasia makes it a vital hub for connectivity, acting as an unavoidable bridge between the Caspian Sea and European markets along the Middle Corridor. In terms of infrastructure, Azerbaijan is connected to the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, linking the country with Georgia and Türkiye and facilitating efficient trade between Asia and Europe. Azerbaijan is also home to the largest port on the Caspian Sea: the port of Alat near Baku (Baku International Sea Port). Integrated into the Alat Free Economic Zone, this port is designed to promote high-value, export-oriented production and attract investment based on innovative technologies, thereby contributing to sustainable economic development.

Azerbaijan is also committed to regional integration with its neighbors. This includes cooperation with both Türkiye and the European Union, as well as with the countries of Central Asia. Baku has joined the C5 leaders' meeting mechanism, at the invitation of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, and one of the central aspects of this platform is connectivity through the Middle Corridor. Cooperation with Central Asia is essential to ensure its operational continuity.

Although Kazakhstan does not have direct access to an open sea, its location is key, as it shares borders with China, one of the world's leading economies and a user of the Middle Corridor. In terms of infrastructure, Kazakhstan boasts the longest railway network and two ports on the Caspian Sea. Similarly, the TITR plays a pivotal role in economic diversification by reducing dependence on traditional transport routes and expanding its influence as a connectivity hub in Eurasia.

Meanwhile, Türkiye is strengthening its position as a strategic transit hub by building on its strong economic and cultural ties with Azerbaijan and Central Asia. By acting as a link between Asia and

Europe, it is strengthening its geopolitical position and expanding its sphere of influence in regional trade through its participation in the corridor. Infrastructure such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and the Marmaray tunnel in Istanbul provides direct access to European markets, bypassing traditional northern trade routes. Ankara is thus not only exploiting its cultural proximity to Central Asian and Caucasian states such as Azerbaijan, but also consolidating itself as a solid alternative for trade routes between Asia and Europe, thereby strengthening its strategic autonomy.

In addition to being one of the world's leading economies, China is the Middle Corridor's primary user state. Given its vast economic and industrial capacity, securing alternative routes, especially those located near its borders, is paramount. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the main vehicle through which China is involved in this endeavor, as it seeks to establish alternative international trade routes.

By diversifying trade routes, China aims to boost the efficiency of its exports and strengthen its economic ties with Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and the EU. In this regard, infrastructure

development is key, which is why China has promoted smart logistics centers, railway terminals and digitized customs processes along the corridor. This allows its regions to integrate into global supply chains, strengthening the growth of less developed areas. Similarly, China's investments within the framework of the Middle Corridor are crucial for consolidating this international route.

In order to reduce its dependence on traditional trade routes—especially those that pass through states it has chosen to sanction—the European Union is making an effort to invest in transport infrastructure in the region. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) are also key financial institutions supporting infrastructure improvements in the Middle Corridor.

In addition to the countries that are transit states or users of the corridor, there are also more distant extra-regional actors with interests in this region, which highlights the importance of connectivity in Eurasia. The United States, for example, also seeks to use connectivity as a foreign policy tool to project influence. A recent example of this strategy is TRIPP, which is located in Armenia and

was the result of a deal announced by U.S. President Donald Trump in August 2025 at the White House in the company of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev. TRIPP integrates connectivity into a broader framework of regional stability.

While Armenia is not located along the Middle Corridor route, the implementation of TRIPP would demonstrate America's influence in the region, which is home to other major regional and global actors, including Russia, China, Iran, and Türkiye. Similarly, Armenia's participation in connectivity and logistics initiatives underscores the strategic importance of the South Caucasus in facilitating trade and supply chain connections between Asia and Europe, while bolstering transit opportunities and regional development.

Although the prerequisite negotiations on the terms of TRIPP have still not been finalized, this initiative highlights the need for alternative trade and connectivity routes, as well as reflecting the importance of

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national and regional stability for international trade.

The Middle Corridor unites a variety of interests and stakeholders. While transit states aim to capitalize on their geographical location to enhance their autonomy and regional importance, user states priorities route diversification and supply chain resilience. Similarly, there has been an increase in interest from extra-regional powers, such as the United States, in the region, as evidenced by the implementation of TRIPP.

### *Implications of Viability*

The Middle Corridor is establishing itself as a viable alternative trade route between Asia and Europe. As a foreign policy tool, it is much more than just a

logistics chain; it is also a means of projecting influence and reducing vulnerabilities, while diversifying trade routes and strengthening margins of autonomy. It also promotes regional cooperation.

The growing importance of the

Middle Corridor is reflected in the increased investment in physical and intangible infrastructure, which has boosted freight traffic and reduced transport times. From the perspective of the main players, the corridor offers several advantages. For countries such as Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan, it provides an opportunity to strengthen their position as strategic logistics hubs and to become more deeply integrated into Eurasian trade networks. For the European Union, the Central Corridor helps to diversify its economic ties and expand connectivity options with Asia. China incorporates this route as a flexible addition to its connectivity architecture. Similarly, growing interest from non-regional powers such as the United States highlights the importance of the South Caucasus region for the connectivity of the Eurasian continent, and the significance of regional stability in promoting international trade routes that attract other stakeholders.

In this sense, corridors are more than just transit routes; they can be used by states as a foreign policy tool to improve their economic position, project influence beyond their borders, and get an international status.

The Middle Corridor provides all its stakeholders with an opportunity to promote cooperation and economic development by facilitating market integration, route diversification, and reducing vulnerabilities to global disruptions. Combining physical infrastructure, process digitalization, and regional coordination increases efficiency and consolidates the position of transit countries as strategic hubs. As well as strengthening Eurasian connectivity and supply chain diversity, the Middle Corridor can encourage investment and regional integration, leading to sustainable peace, stability, and security. **BD**

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