

## Reconnecting Eurasia: The Belt and Road Initiative, the Trans-Caspian Middle Corridor, and the Development Road Project

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**Abstract:** Global trade corridors function not only as logistical routes but also as key drivers of economic development and geopolitical influence. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has amplified the significance of the Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor, which connects China to Europe through Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus, and Türkiye. Offering faster transit than the Northern and Southern routes, the corridor nonetheless faces challenges such as fragmented regulations, limited customs coordination, and infrastructure constraints. Türkiye views the Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor as a strategic priority, leveraging it to enhance trade, attract investment, and strengthen cultural ties with Turkic states. In parallel, the Development Road Project—linking Iraq's Grand Faw Port to Türkiye—aims to provide a cost-effective alternative to the Suez Canal, with projected economic benefits exceeding \$50 billion and significant job creation. Together, these initiatives reflect Türkiye's ambition to transform its geopolitical location into a hub for regional integration and global connectivity.

**Key Words:** Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor, Development Road Project, Geopolitical Risks, Regional Connectivity

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Trade corridors are not merely logistical pathways for the movement of goods; they are powerful drivers of regional development and strategic influence. For this reason, countries consider active participation in such corridors a core economic and geopolitical priority (İTO, 2024). However, these routes are highly vulnerable to geopolitical risks and uncertainties, which can disrupt the smooth flow of trade. Recent disruptions have demonstrated the dangers of overdependence on single chokepoints, causing delays, higher costs, and supply chain bottlenecks. Consequently, interest in alternative land-based routes has intensified. Ultimately, the reliability, cost-effectiveness, and overall appeal of each corridor are shaped by the geopolitical dynamics that surround them, making corridor development both an economic opportunity and a strategic challenge.

In 2013, the Government of China launched a global infrastructure development strategy known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), often referred to as the New Silk Road, a name that underscores its symbolic connection to the historical Silk Road trade routes linking Asia, Europe, and Africa. The English translation of the initiative has evolved through three stages: Silk Road Economic Belt in September 2013, One Belt One Road (OBOR) in 2014, and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2015 (Dave and Kobayashi, 2018).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is centered on five key areas of international cooperation, commonly referred to as the "Five Connectivities" (Wu Tong):

(i) policy coordination, (ii) trade and investment facilitation, (iii) infrastructure connectivity, (iv) financial integration, and (v) cultural exchange, aimed at strengthening collaboration among participating countries (Hussain, 2021; United Nations, 2025).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aims to enhance connectivity between China and regions across Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. The initiative encompasses more than 65 countries, representing over 62 percent of the global population, accounting for one-third of global GDP, and facilitating the logistics of one-quarter of the world's goods and services, with an estimated cost exceeding \$1 trillion (Bird et al., 2020; Asiagreen, 2025).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) encompasses the collaborative construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) (United Nations, 2025). The BRI is composed of six economic corridors, four (China-Indochina Economic Corridor, China-Myanmar-Bangladesh-India Corridor (BCIM), China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor) of which are part of the Maritime Silk Road (MSR), while two (the China-Mongolia-Russia Corridor and the New Eurasian Land Bridge) are part of the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) (see Figure 1) (Hussain, 2021).

Figure 1: The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)



Source: Asiagreen, 2025

Operationally, Xinjiang occupies a pivotal position within the BRI, hosting three of its six economic corridors: the New Eurasian Land Bridge, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and the China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor. The latter originates in Xinjiang (Northwest China) and traverses the Central Asian states, passing through Iran, the Gulf, and the Arabian Peninsula, before reaching Turkey (Hussain, 2021). While China's eastern coast has historically benefited from maritime access and global trade, the Belt and Road Initiative now seeks to link inland cities, such as those in Xinjiang, to intercontinental trading routes, thereby enhancing their strategic and economic significance (Asiagreen, 2025).

The Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) with a central objective of creating incentives and trade outlets for the less-developed Xinjiang region, positioning it as a gateway for transport and trade corridors through Central Asia to European and other international markets (Dave and Kobayashi, 2018). To support this goal, China has made substantial investments in transport and trade infrastructure across its western regions, both to boost economic modernization and to strengthen security. This approach builds upon earlier initiatives, such as Zhu Rongji's "Develop the West" program in the early 2000s, which also emphasized cooperation with neighboring Central Asian countries on border security—an effort critical to the securitization of Xinjiang (Dave and Kobayashi, 2018).

The Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) offers significant advantages for participating countries by addressing long-standing infrastructure gaps, enhancing transport connectivity, boosting trade, strengthening supply chains, creating employment, and fostering economic growth (Holmes, 2018; Bird et al., 2020). Central Asian countries, in particular, benefit from strategic transit routes, improved links within the region and to global markets, opportunities to export natural resources, and the potential to earn transit fees (Dave and Kobayashi, 2018). According to Bird et al. (2020), the Belt and Road Initiative is projected to generate aggregate real income gains ranging from approximately 2

percent to 12 percent of regional income. China's rapid and low-cost financing and construction of large-scale infrastructure projects, coupled with a "win-win" development approach, makes the initiative especially attractive to local elites and governments. By filling critical gaps in transport and energy networks, China also assumes a greater role in regional development and security, as seen in countries like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Dave and Kobayashi, 2018).

## 2. THE TRANS-CASPIAN EAST-WEST-MIDDLE CORRIDOR

The BRI influences Central Asia primarily through three major corridors: the New Eurasian Land Bridge (the Northern Corridor), running northward from Urumqi through Astana to Moscow; the China–Central Asia–West Asia Corridor (the Middle Corridor), extending from Urumqi to Almaty and Tashkent before branching toward Aktau as well as Ashgabat, Tehran, and Ankara; and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (the Southern Corridor), linking Urumqi to Almaty, Islamabad, and the port of Gwadar (Bird et al., 2020).

Among the trade routes linking Europe and Asia, the Middle Corridor offers the fastest transit. While the Northern Corridor connects China to Europe through Russia with an average travel time of about 20 days, and the Southern Corridor relies on maritime transport requiring roughly 30 days, the Middle Corridor links China to Europe via Türkiye and can be completed in approximately 15 days (ITO, 2024).

Each corridor is also shaped by distinct geopolitical risks and uncertainties. The Northern Corridor, which historically carried the majority of overland freight from China to Europe via Russia and the Trans-Siberian Railway, has become an unreliable route for the BRI. Severe winter conditions, regional political tensions, and particularly Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent international sanctions have disrupted this corridor, leading to a sharp decline in traffic and forcing shifts in regional and global trade patterns (Akçay and Changgang, 2023; OECD, 2023). Recent events such as the 2021 Suez Canal blockage and the ongoing Red Sea crisis have significantly disrupted the Southern Corridor, highlighting the vulnerability of maritime routes to geopolitical tensions and unexpected shocks (ITO, 2024). The Middle Corridor, while faster and increasingly important, is not immune to risks either, as it passes through regions marked by political volatility, regulatory inconsistencies, and unresolved territorial disputes. The ongoing conflict between Israel and Iran poses serious challenges for

the stability and functionality of the Middle Corridor.

Recently, Turkey proposed an alternative route (The Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor) for the Middle Corridor, as it seeks to avoid full dependence on Moscow or Tehran for strategic transportation corridors that serve as gateways to the wider Asian market. The Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor Initiative constitutes a multimodal transport route linking Europe and China. It traverses Georgia and Azerbaijan before crossing the Caspian Sea and continues through Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, ultimately reaching China via integrated rail and road networks (see Figure 2). Along this route, the ports of Baku/Alat in Azerbaijan, Aktau and Kuryk in Kazakhstan, and Turkmenbashi in Turkmenistan serve as the principal hubs of multimodal transport within the Caspian transit corridor (MFA, 2025; Hussain, 2021).

Figure 2: The Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor



Source: MFA, 2025.

In this context, the Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of Türkiye and the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Harmonization of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road with the Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor Initiative was signed in Antalya on 14 November 2015, during the G20 Leaders' Summit. Within this framework, the inaugural working group meeting with the People's Republic of China took place in Beijing on 6 November 2024. (Dış İşleri Bakanlığı; Hussain, 2021). One of the key motivations for aligning the Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor with China's Belt and Road Initiative is to secure financing for Türkiye's projects. While various funding sources have been utilized, the overarching objective has been to leverage China as the primary source of investment (Akçay and Changgang, 2023).

Countries involved in the Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor Initiative continue to enhance their infrastructure to maximize the corridor's capacity

and efficiency. Completed projects include the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars Railway (30 October 2017), the Marmaray Tunnel (29 October 2013), the Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge (26 August 2016), the Eurasia Tunnel (20 December 2016), the Çanakkale Bridge (8 March 2022), and İstanbul Airport (29 October 2018) (İTO,2024; MFA, 2025).

The Agreement on the Türkiye–Georgia–Azerbaijan–Turkmenistan–Afghanistan Transit Transport Corridor (Lapis Lazuli Corridor), one of the passages of the Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor, was signed during the “Ministerial Conference of the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan” (RECCA) held in Ashgabat on 14–15 November 2017. Under the framework of the Organization of Turkic States, including Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, the Agreement on International Combined Freight Transport among member countries was signed in Samarkand on 11 November 2022. In addition, a Memorandum of Understanding was concluded between the ports of Baku, Aktau, and Samsun to establish a sister-port relationship. Furthermore, the Caravanserai Project was launched to promote inter-customs cooperation and facilitate smoother logistics across the corridor (MFA, 2025).

Ongoing initiatives aimed at further strengthening the corridor comprise the three-level subsea tunnel project, the Filyos (Zonguldak) project, the construction of Çandarlı (İzmir) and Mersin ports, the Edirne–Kars High-Speed Rail project, and the Connections Railway project (İTO,2024; MFA, 2025). The stakeholders of the Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor intend to utilize the ports of Baku in Azerbaijan, Turkmenbashi in Turkmenistan, and Aktau in Kazakhstan for maritime transport, while also prioritizing the construction of Alat port in Azerbaijan and Kuryk port in Kazakhstan (Akçay and Changgang, 2023).

One of the ongoing projects related to the Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor is the Zangezur Road. As an alternative to the existing Baku–Tbilisi–Kars route, the Zangezur Road is expected to become a key passage for the Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor. The Zangezur Road will shorten the distance between Azerbaijan and Turkey by providing a direct connection from the Port of Baku to Turkey. Upon completion of the Zangezur Road Project, direct transportation between Azerbaijan and Türkiye will be possible via Nakhchivan through both land and rail networks. Currently, the land route from Baku to Türkiye via Iran measures approximately 1,200 km, while the railway via Georgia covers about 850 km. The

Zangezur Corridor will reduce this distance to roughly 540 km, significantly enhancing the efficiency of transit between the two countries (İTO, 2024).

The Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor faces several structural and operational challenges that limit its attractiveness relative to alternative routes. Crossing multiple land and maritime borders, it is subject to divergent regulations, laws, and permit requirements, yet lacks a single coordinating authority. Limited demand for goods from Central Asia and the Caucasus has confined the corridor primarily to East–West transit, with regional and West–East trade remaining minimal. Cumbersome customs procedures, deficient border capacity, and unharmonized licenses contribute to delays, congestion, and unpredictable transit times. Although Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Türkiye have invested in modernizing road, rail, and maritime infrastructure, persistent bottlenecks at border points and seaports—exacerbated by insufficient container and vessel fleet capacity, low port automation, and inadequate multimodal facilities—continue to reduce the efficiency and competitiveness of the route (OECD, 2023).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has shifted freight traffic from the Northern Corridor to The Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor, highlighting its potential as an alternative transit route. Realizing this potential depends on overcoming structural disadvantages inherent in its multimodal nature and leveraging the corridor to foster economic and regional integration across Asia, Europe, and the South Caucasus. The Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor's capacity and competitiveness can be enhanced through regional trade facilitation reforms and stronger coordination among governments along the route. Key measures include harmonizing and digitalizing transit and border documents, improving customs capacity, and aligning national infrastructure plans with regional strategies. The corridor's development requires both national initiatives and multilateral cooperation to integrate markets in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, consistent with European standards (OECD, 2023).

The Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor initiative, a 6,500-kilometer transport and trade route spanning Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus, and Türkiye, aims to enhance regional connectivity, reduce vulnerabilities to geopolitical disruptions, and foster sustainable, competitive transport networks through multilateral agreements and infrastructure investments (Guliyev, 2025). By advancing export-

oriented trade and infrastructure development, the corridor offers significant economic opportunities for participating countries, particularly through the establishment of logistics hubs and free trade zones at key ports along the route (Hussain, 2021; MFA, 2025). Growing trade between Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Europe is a major driver of demand, with World Bank (2023) projections indicating a 37 percent increase in trade among Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Kazakhstan, and a 28 percent increase in trade between these states and the EU by 2030. Beyond its economic potential, the corridor is also expected to strengthen cultural ties among the Central Asian Turkic states, further deepening regional cooperation (Akçay and Changgang, 2023).

For Türkiye, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor offer extensive economic, strategic, and cultural benefits. These initiatives support Türkiye's goals of promoting free movement of goods and passengers, strengthening cultural ties with Turkic states, and linking Europe with Asia while attracting foreign investment, creating employment, and achieving economies of scale. They also enhance Türkiye's export potential by significantly reducing shipping times between China and Türkiye, positioning the country as a global logistics hub and regional transit leader. Beyond trade, the BRI and the Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor fosters capital inflows, energy transport opportunities, and closer economic ties with China and Central Asian states. Additionally, Türkiye stands to benefit from Chinese investment in its industrial and railway sectors, improved multilateral cooperation in Central Asia and the Caucasus, and alignment with international infrastructure standards, all of which reinforce its national interests and regional influence (Akçay and Changgang, 2023).

### 3. DEVELOPMENT ROAD PROJECT

Turkey is also working on another corridor known as the Development Road Project. Aimed at diversifying transportation routes, the project envisions linking the Al-Faw Port, currently under construction in Basra, Iraq, to Türkiye's Ovaköy Border Gate via a dual highway and railway stretching approximately 1,200 kilometers (see Figure 3) (MFA, 2025). The corridor is designed to facilitate the transport of goods from the Gulf countries and Asia to Europe, while also offering potential access to Russia and the Caucasus region (İTO, 2024).

Figure 3: Development Road Project



Source: Akşam, 2024

The Development Road Project aims to provide an alternative to the Suez Canal route, offering a faster and more cost-effective option for global trade (İTO, 2024). Strategically critical for both Türkiye, Iraq, and the broader region, the corridor connects geographies along a north–south axis, with Iraq at its center, while also promoting regional stability and prosperity.

The harmonization of the Middle Corridor with China’s Belt and Road Initiative, combined with its synergy with the Development Road Project, will link an even broader geography. The Development Road is expected to become the shortest and most cost-effective route among international north–south corridors connecting the Far East, South Asia, and the Middle East to Europe. It is projected to play a pivotal role in the transfer of raw materials and goods arriving at the Grand Faw Port in the Persian Gulf from countries such as China and India. From there, cargo handled at Faw Port can reach Europe directly through Türkiye, significantly enhancing regional trade efficiency.

In March 2023, Türkiye and Iraq signed the Ankara Declaration, underscoring their mutual commitment to moving the project forward. The investment value of the Development Road Project is foreseen as US\$ 17 billion (İTO, 2024). The project involves Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Iraq, and Türkiye, with ongoing discussions on financing and operational frameworks (Akşam, 2024). It is projected to generate an economic impact of more than \$50 billion over a ten-year period and to create an average of 63,000 jobs annually. Through this initiative, Türkiye seeks to leverage its geopolitical position to deliver broad-based economic benefits that extend beyond its own interests to those of the wider region (Milliyet, 2025).

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor, and the Development Road Project demonstrates the intersection of infrastructure development, trade facilitation, and geopolitics in Eurasia. While these

initiatives promise economic opportunities, they also face structural and political challenges that limit their effectiveness. The Middle Corridor, for instance, offers faster transit times compared to the Northern and Southern routes, yet fragmented regulations, customs inefficiencies, and inadequate multimodal infrastructure reduce its competitiveness. Overcoming these barriers requires coordinated regional reforms, digitalization of customs procedures, and greater harmonization of trade policies across participating states.

The Development Road Project illustrates another dimension: the creation of alternative north–south connections that could complement east–west routes and mitigate overreliance on maritime chokepoints such as the Suez Canal. Its projected economic impact and employment benefits reflect the potential for regional transformation, particularly if financing and operational frameworks are effectively coordinated among Türkiye, Iraq, and Gulf partners.

Türkiye’s role across both initiatives highlights how states leverage geography to transform geopolitical positioning into economic advantage. By aligning with China’s BRI while simultaneously advancing its own corridor projects, Türkiye seeks not only to integrate into global supply chains but also to emerge as a regional logistics hub linking Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Ultimately, the success of these corridors depends on balancing economic ambitions with geopolitical realities, ensuring that infrastructure development translates into sustainable growth, regional stability, and deeper integration.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

The strategic reconfiguration of Eurasian trade routes highlights the growing importance of alternative transport corridors in an era of geopolitical uncertainty and shifting global supply chains. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor, and the Development Road Project collectively underscore how infrastructure, trade, and geopolitics are increasingly intertwined. While the Middle Corridor offers faster transit and diversification from the Northern and Southern routes, its effectiveness is hindered by fragmented regulations, customs inefficiencies, and capacity limitations. The Development Road, by contrast, presents a new north–south axis that complements east–west routes and seeks to transform Iraq and Türkiye into pivotal hubs of connectivity. For Türkiye, both corridors represent more than logistical projects;

they are instruments for enhancing economic competitiveness, deepening ties with Central Asia, and cementing its role as a regional and global transit leader. Realizing this potential, however, requires greater regional coordination, harmonization of standards, and sustained political will to overcome structural and operational challenges. If successful, these initiatives will not only reshape Eurasian trade but also contribute to regional stability, prosperity, and integration.

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