



Agency for State Support to
Non-governmental Organizations
of the Republic of Azerbaijan



"Caucasus Research Center"
Public Union

THE BACKBONE OF THE MIDDLE CORRIDOR – AZERBAIJAN

*This visual material has been prepared within the framework
of the project "The Backbone of the Middle Corridor -
Azerbaijan," implemented by the "Caucasus Research
Center" Public Union with the financial support of the State
Support Agency for Non-Governmental Organizations of the
Republic of Azerbaijan.*

Baku 2024

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Introduction

The Middle Corridor project is a large-scale trade and transportation initiative that begins in China and extends to Europe, developed as part of China's "Belt and Road" initiative. This corridor serves as an alternative to land and sea routes between China and Europe, offering a faster, more economical trade route between Europe and Asia. It is 2,000 kilometers shorter than the Northern Corridor, more favorable in terms of climate conditions, and reduces transportation time by one-third (15 days) compared to sea routes.

The main route of the Middle Corridor is as follows:

The corridor starts in western China.

- **Central Asia Passage:** It passes through Central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.
- **Caspian Sea:** It connects to Azerbaijan via maritime transport across the Caspian Sea.
- **South Caucasus:** It continues through Azerbaijan and Georgia.
- **Through Turkey to Europe:** From Georgia, it enters Turkey and reaches Europe.

The purpose of this route is to make trade between China and Europe shorter and faster, and to reduce dependence on existing sea routes. Another advantage of the Middle Corridor is that the route follows a different direction than the China-Russia line. This allows for greater flexibility in relations between countries.



Figure 1

The Middle Corridor splits in Turkistan into two routes: North and South. The Northern route includes China-Kazakhstan-Caspian Sea-Azerbaijan, while the Southern route includes China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Caspian Sea-Azerbaijan. These routes converge near Azerbaijan and connect through the Middle Corridor to Europe via Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey-Bulgaria-Serbia-Hungary. In addition, the Middle Corridor has the potential to expand, covering various countries. The Lapis Lazuli route, considered the South Asian extension of the corridor, includes Turkmenistan and Afghanistan. Discussions are underway to extend this route to cover Pakistan and India, as it is one of the most important routes opening Afghanistan to the world.

The Middle Corridor also holds strategic importance for Turkey. As a country that acts as a bridge between Asia and Europe and is located on these trade routes, Turkey is one of the key actors in the project. Infrastructure investments such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and the Marmaray project are significant contributions to realizing this corridor.

At the same time, the Middle Corridor project is a major initiative aimed at diversifying and accelerating trade routes between Asia and Europe. When we look at the export dynamics of the countries situated at the center of the Middle Corridor—Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan—the total volume in 2021 was \$22.9 billion. The largest share of this amount was \$7.9 billion for Turkey, followed by Kazakhstan in third place with \$6.1 billion, Azerbaijan with \$3.5 billion, and Uzbekistan with \$3.4 billion. For Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, these figures were \$1 billion and \$712 million, respectively. The increase in the economic potential of Middle Corridor countries will contribute to the growth of current freight transport. When examining the export partners of these countries, we see that 85% of Kazakhstan’s exports are directed to Uzbekistan and Turkey, while 79% of Azerbaijan’s exports go to Turkey, whereas Turkey’s exports are more evenly distributed. In this context, Georgia’s largest export partner is Azerbaijan, while Kyrgyzstan’s is Kazakhstan. Uzbekistan, like Turkey, has a balanced export dynamic. These figures help us better understand the trade relations within the Middle Corridor, as well as offer insight into which countries are growing more and provide a general outlook on future prospects. Although these figures show that these countries have developed trade relations mainly with selected route countries, they also indicate that these figures remain low as a share of the countries’ total exports.

With a trade volume exceeding \$500 billion, the growing interest in the Middle Corridor, and the “Turan Corridor” concept, which surpasses \$1.5 trillion, the potential of the Turkic world, particularly in Central Asia and the Caucasus region, is signifi-

cant. In recent years, the volume of cargo transported via the Middle Corridor has steadily increased. In particular, during the first seven months of 2024, 1.4 million tons of cargo were transported through the Turkmenbashi port on the Caspian Sea, an increase of 100,000 tons compared to the previous year. Efforts to expand the port's capacity continue, and this corridor is becoming a crucial player in Europe-Asia trade. Additionally, regular container shipments are carried out from the port to the Baku Port, and shipments to Kazakhstan's Aktau Port are also planned.

When we look at TEU (twenty-foot equivalent unit), another unit of measurement used in transportation, the cargo capacity of the Middle Corridor is estimated at approximately 200,000 TEU. The amount of cargo transported increased from around 18,000 TEU in 2018 to 26,000 TEU in 2019, representing a 70% increase. In 2021, an additional 25% increase was observed, with 33,267 TEU transported via the central corridor. This rapid growth continued after 2022, as evidenced by the 19% increase in TEU transported during January-March 2022, totaling 5,847 TEU compared to the same period the previous year.

The initiation of regular transportation, starting with the first export train from Turkey to China in 2020, further enhanced the strategic significance of the Middle Corridor, and freight volumes along this route continue to grow rapidly. By 2030, it is expected that the volume of transported goods will triple, with the amount of freight growing significantly.

In the 2040 Vision of the Turkic World, clear goals for the Middle Corridor have already been set by all member countries:

Transform the Trans-Caspian International East-West Middle Corridor into the shortest and safest transportation link between East and West, and integrate member states into regional and global supply and value chains through this corridor.

Harmonize transport policies and technical standards for cargo in relation to the Trans-Caspian International East-West Middle Corridor.

Support the digitalization of transport networks between member states.

Revitalize the Silk Road through customs cooperation under the “Caravanserai” project, which aims to simplify and harmonize border crossing procedures and facilitate customs and administrative procedures to fully utilize the potential of the International East-West Middle Corridor.

According to initiatives of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), which expects cargo capacity to reach 10 million tons by 2025, member countries’ transport ministers signed a “Joint Cooperation Protocol” under the framework of cooperation on the Middle Corridor.

A Memorandum of Understanding was signed to establish Sister Port links between the ports of Baku, Aktau, and Samsun.

The signing of the “International Combined Freight Transportation Agreement” between member countries, which will significantly promote Caspian Sea crossings.

The decision to support Azerbaijan’s efforts to integrate the Zangezur Corridor, which will create a seamless road connection between Turkey and the Turkic world via the Caspian crossing,

into the International East-West Middle Corridor along the Georgia route.

Turkey, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the OECD, the World Bank, and organizations like AmCham contribute to the improvements necessary for the more efficient operation of the Middle Corridor. They are working to reduce service and transit costs for Europe-Asia trade. In addition to connecting Europe's consumer markets, the corridor also plays a role in delivering energy resources to global markets.

In this strategic role of the Middle Corridor, Azerbaijan is positioned at the center both geographically and economically, and is considered the backbone of the route. Azerbaijan's location on the western shores of the Caspian Sea, at the crossroads of Central Asia and the Caucasus, makes it an integral part of the Middle Corridor. As a hub for both land and maritime routes, the country provides an efficient transit passage from Asia to Europe. Furthermore, Azerbaijan's rich energy resources, particularly natural gas and oil, highlight the corridor's importance in terms of energy security.

This study aims to comprehensively examine Azerbaijan's role in the Middle Corridor and analyze how the country contributes to the corridor both economically and geopolitically. Understanding Azerbaijan's critical role in this strategic corridor is essential for appreciating its impact on regional cooperation, international energy strategies, global trade, and energy dynamics.

Geopolitical Elements of the Middle Corridor

Creating an Alternative to the Russian Northern Corridor: The Middle Corridor serves as an alternative route for trade between China and Europe, instead of the Northern Corridor through Russia. This has the potential to weaken Russia's dominant position in the region. It also reduces China's strategic dependency on Moscow, ensuring that China is not tied to a single route.

Strategic Role of Turkey: Turkey, located at the heart of the Middle Corridor, acts as a bridge between Asia and Europe. This project increases Turkey's geopolitical and economic influence in the region. Turkey has become a critical actor enhancing the corridor's effectiveness through infrastructure projects like the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, Marmaray, and Istanbul Airport. Turkey's role in this project is crucial for energy security, diversifying trade flows, and strengthening its strategic impact in Eurasia. With this project, Turkey transitions from being a transit country to a trade and energy hub.

Increasing Importance of Central Asia: Central Asian countries like Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are significant waypoints in this project. The Middle Corridor addresses these countries' landlocked issue and provides direct access to global trade networks. This enables these countries to economically develop and gain a stronger international presence. China

aims to increase its economic influence and strengthen its strategic presence in these countries through its investments.

South Caucasus and Caspian Sea Crossing: One of the most critical points of the Middle Corridor is the crossing between the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea. Azerbaijan and Georgia play vital roles in this section of the corridor. Transportation via the Caspian Sea ensures a fast and efficient connection between Asia and Europe.

Relations with the European Union: The European Union views the Middle Corridor as a strategic alternative for trade with China. This corridor is crucial for diversifying energy and trade supply routes for the EU. Additionally, the EU may use this corridor to reduce its dependence on Russia for energy and trade. The Middle Corridor could create a new area of cooperation between the West and the East, allowing direct economic links with Asia.

Energy Geopolitics: The Middle Corridor is also significant for energy transit. Oil and natural gas from energy-rich countries like Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan are delivered to Europe via the Middle Corridor. This is strategically important for diversifying Europe's energy supply. Turkey's transformation into an energy transit point is a key factor in shaping energy security and distribution networks.

Risks and Opportunities

Russia's Reaction: Russia may view the Middle Corridor as a threat to its geopolitical interests and could apply various political and economic pressures against the project. Moscow might attempt to obstruct the development of the Middle Corridor to prevent the weakening of its control over trade routes.

China's Influence and Strategic Competition: While China sees the Middle Corridor as a critical tool for its economic expansion, the project could complicate its relations with Turkey, the European Union, and Central Asian countries. Despite cooperating with these regions, China may seek to exert increasing influence over local economies, requiring a balance in long-term relations.

The Middle Corridor, while providing a strategic alternative for global trade and energy flows between Asia and Europe, is also a project with significant geopolitical implications. It supports the economic development of the countries it traverses and creates new dynamics in the global balance of power. However, regional risks, great power competition, and political tensions remain crucial factors that could impact the long-term success of the project.

Financial Resources of the Middle Corridor

The financial resources for the Middle Corridor come from the governments of the supporting countries, international development banks, private sector investments, and funding provided under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The implementation of this project requires large-scale infrastructure investments, which are funded from various sources.

Chinese Financial Sources: As the Middle Corridor is part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China provides significant financial support for the project. The Chinese government and state banks finance the project through institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund.

- **Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB):** This international financial institution, established under Chinese leadership, offers extensive resources for financing infrastructure projects. AIIB plays a crucial role in funding projects like the Middle Corridor.

- **Silk Road Fund:** Established in 2014, this fund is used to support China's infrastructure projects under the BRI. It contributes to financing projects along the Middle Corridor.

International Development Banks: Many countries along the Middle Corridor also receive funds from international financial institutions such as the World Bank, European Investment Bank (EIB), and Asian Development Bank (ADB) to support the

project. These banks can provide large-scale loans and grants for infrastructure projects to stimulate regional development.

- **World Bank:** The World Bank contributes to the realization of the Middle Corridor by financing major infrastructure projects, particularly in Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Central Asian countries.

- **European Investment Bank (EIB):** The EIB, which contributes to infrastructure projects in the European Union, provides financial support for infrastructure work in countries such as Turkey and Georgia.

National Government Resources: Countries located along the Middle Corridor invest in the project through their national budgets and government-supported funds. For example:

- **Turkey:** Turkey has made significant investments in projects like Marmaray, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, and Istanbul Airport. These projects are funded through Turkey's national budget as well as contributions from domestic and foreign investors.

- **Azerbaijan:** Azerbaijan invests in the corridor through both state funds and the State Oil Fund. Additionally, substantial investments are made in ports and infrastructure projects required for the Caspian Sea crossing.

- **Kazakhstan and Other Central Asian Countries:** Countries like Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan contribute to infrastructure projects with direct investments from China and their national funds.

Private Sector and Foreign Investments: The private sector plays a crucial role in funding the Middle Corridor. Large in-

ternational construction and logistics companies invest directly in infrastructure projects. Additionally, companies from China, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia invest in projects such as railways, ports, and energy pipelines. The private sector's interest in these projects is high due to the development opportunities, particularly in logistics, energy, and construction sectors.

Multilateral Cooperation and Consortia: The Middle Corridor is financed through joint investments from many countries and companies. Consortia formed in this context share the financial burden of projects and diversify investments. These collaborations are significant for efficient use of financial resources and reducing political risks.

Grants and Technical Assistance: International organizations also offer technical assistance and grant programs for countries along the Middle Corridor. Notably, the European Union contributes to the project's implementation by providing technical advice, training, and grant support for infrastructure projects in Turkey and the South Caucasus countries.

In summary, the financial resources for the Middle Corridor are supported by a broad network of funding sources, including China's BRI funds, international development banks, regional government resources, and private sector investments. This diversity enhances the project's sustainability and promotes cooperation among participating countries and institutions. The success of the Middle Corridor depends on the effective management of these financial resources and the timely completion of projects.

Agreements Among Countries of the Middle Corridor

There are various bilateral and multilateral agreements among the countries along the Middle Corridor. In 2013, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed establishing sister port relationships between the ports of Aktau, Baku, and Samsun. These collaborations facilitate initiatives such as technical visits between ports, enhancing trade relations, and creating integrated software systems for cargo transportation between the ports. In 2019, Kazakhstan's port of Kurik was added to this agreement, and Turkmenistan's port of Turkmenbashi was invited to join the sister ports process.

Additionally, on November 12, 2021, during the 8th Turkic Council Summit, Mersin Port, Evrensel Logistics Services (Tashkent), Axtaçı (Andijan), and Termez Kar participated in the sister ports process aimed at revitalizing the Middle Corridor and the historical Silk Road.

In March 2022, the Ministers of Economy from Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Turkey signed a declaration to enhance the transit potential of the Trans-Caspian East-West Middle Corridor. On August 2, 2022, the first meeting of the foreign affairs, trade, and transport ministers of Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkey took place in Tashkent, resulting in the signing of the Tashkent Declaration. Key agenda items included steps to develop the Middle Corridor. One of the significant agreements among the Turkic Council countries was the completion of internal proce-

dures for the “Protocol on the Establishment of a Simplified Customs Corridor Between the Governments of the Member States of the Turkic Council,” which was adopted during the 9th Summit of the Turkic Council in Samarkand on November 11, 2022. The “Agreement on the Creation of a Customs Corridor” was signed, facilitating the exchange of information about the movement of goods and vehicles between customs authorities of the Turkic Council member states and implementing facilitative measures for agreed essential goods.

On November 14, 2015, during the G20 Summit, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Turkey and China to align their views on the Silk Road and the Middle Corridor initiative. Additionally, Turkey signed bilateral International Combined Cargo Transport (ICCT) agreements with Azerbaijan, China, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan between 2015 and 2022 to comprehensively address transportation issues along the route.

China's Role and Position in the Middle Corridor

The Middle Corridor is part of China's "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI), aimed at enhancing its influence on the global economy and trade. Therefore, China plays an active role both financially and strategically in the formation and implementation of the Middle Corridor.

1. Strategic Importance of the Middle Corridor: The Middle Corridor presents a significant opportunity for China as it seeks alternative routes to the European market. Traditionally, trade between China and Europe has been conducted primarily via maritime routes. However, the Middle Corridor offers China a shorter, faster, and potentially less costly land-based trade route.

- **Alternative to Russia:** China's reliance on the Northern Corridor through Russia carries both political and economic risks. The Middle Corridor reduces this risk by providing China with an alternative route to reach Europe bypassing Russia.

- **China's Economic Goals Towards the West:** China views the Middle Corridor as an opportunity to gain easier access to large markets like the European Union and to increase its trade volume with Europe. This corridor is part of China's strategy to expand its global trade network and diversify its trade.

2. Economic Investments and Infrastructure Financing: China makes significant investments to realize the Middle Corridor. These investments not only strengthen economic ties with the

implementing countries but also increase China's strategic influence in the region.

- **Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Silk Road Fund:** China provides substantial loans and financial support for infrastructure projects along the Middle Corridor through these funds. China's contribution is particularly evident in railway, road, and port projects.

- **Investments in Central Asia and the Caucasus:** China invests heavily in infrastructure projects in Central Asian and Caucasus countries such as Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan. These investments include developing railway and road networks, modernizing ports, and strengthening energy infrastructure. Such investments contribute both to the region's economic development and to China's strategy for accessing Europe.

3. Access to Energy and Raw Materials: China places great importance on the Middle Corridor for accessing the rich energy and raw material resources of the countries along the corridor. Countries like Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan are rich in oil, natural gas, and various raw materials. The Middle Corridor enables faster and safer transportation of these resources to China.

- **Energy Needs:** China's rapidly growing economy constantly requires new energy sources. Energy pipelines along the Middle Corridor allow for the transport of natural gas and oil from the Caspian Sea to China, enhancing China's energy security.

4. Geopolitical Impacts and China's Role in the Region: By implementing the Middle Corridor, China aims to strengthen its relationships with Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Turkey.

Establishing economic connections and contributing to the development of these countries through infrastructure projects will enhance China's soft power. At the same time, Beijing aims to expand its strategic influence in these countries, increasing its global leverage.

- **Regional Cooperation and Growing Influence:** China seeks to enhance its political and economic influence in the Middle Corridor countries through infrastructure projects and trade agreements. These collaborations increase China's competitiveness in the region and help balance its relations with the West.

- **Competition and Cooperation with Russia:** While China seeks to reduce its dependence on Russia through the Middle Corridor, it also focuses on maintaining strategic relations with Russia. China balances its policies by continuing cooperation with Russia while developing alternative routes like the Middle Corridor.

5. Logistics and Transportation Networks: The Middle Corridor is directly linked to China's strategy of diversifying its global trade networks. China's investments in this project enable faster, cheaper, and safer trade routes from Asia to Europe.

- **Rail and Road Networks:** China plays a significant role in developing railway networks along the Middle Corridor. These networks support trade routes from China to Turkey and Europe. Rail transport offers a faster and more cost-effective alternative to maritime and road transport. China's investments in rail and logistics infrastructure aim to improve trade efficiency.

6. Trade Volume and Economic Growth: The Middle Corridor is a crucial tool for China in achieving its export goals. Eu-

rope is one of China's largest trading partners, and the Middle Corridor provides faster and more reliable access to this market. This trade route not only contributes to China's economic growth but also deepens economic relations with European countries.

China's position and significance in the Middle Corridor play a crucial role in global trade and geopolitical balance. The corridor allows China to reach the European market more quickly and safely, while also enhancing its economic and political influence in the region. China's investments in this project aim to safeguard its economic interests and gain a strategic advantage in global trade. As a result, China places great importance on the development of the Middle Corridor, making it a cornerstone of its global strategy.

The Middle Corridor and Russia

The Middle Corridor is a trade and transportation route that serves Russia's geopolitical and economic interests. Russia's view of this project can be assessed within a complex framework that includes both strategic rivalry and cooperation opportunities.

Alternative to Russia Created by the Middle Corridor: The Middle Corridor is designed as an alternative route to Russia's controlled Northern Corridor. Traditionally, much of the trade between China and Europe has passed through Russia by rail and road, but the Middle Corridor offers a bypass route. This situation has the potential to weaken Russia's dominance over trade routes in the region.

- **Weakening of the Northern Corridor:** While the Northern Corridor handles a significant portion of trade between China and Europe, the Middle Corridor could take a portion of this trade. The Middle Corridor's shorter and faster route could shift trade volume to this corridor, negatively impacting Russia's economic interests and geopolitical influence.

- **Impact on Russia's Energy Policy:** Russia plays a crucial role in exporting energy to Europe. However, the Middle Corridor has the potential to break Russia's energy monopoly by delivering energy resources from the Caspian Sea to Turkey and Europe. This could reduce Russia's energy leverage over Europe.

Russia's Reaction and Strategy: Russia acknowledges that the Middle Corridor directly threatens its interests, but its response may vary depending on the situation.

- **Competitive Strategies:** Russia develops strategies that highlight the advantages of the Northern Corridor over the Middle Corridor. These strategies include improving infrastructure, modernizing railway networks, and shortening transportation times. Additionally, Russia offers alternative routes like the Northern Sea Route to maintain a larger share of trade between Europe and Asia.

- **Geopolitical Pressures:** Russia may apply indirect political and economic pressures against the development of the Middle Corridor. It might use its political influence over Central Asian countries to ensure their continued dependence on Russia. Russia could also employ problems such as transit through the Caspian Sea and political instability in the South Caucasus to obstruct the Middle Corridor.

Russia and Its Influence in Central Asia: A significant portion of the Middle Corridor passes through Central Asian countries, which have historically been within Russia's sphere of influence. Russia uses various means to maintain its economic and political influence in these countries.

- **Economic Dependence:** Central Asian countries are economically dependent on Russia to a large extent. Russia may use this dependence to maintain its influence over the Middle Corridor. Notably, major transit countries like Kazakhstan need to balance their relations with Russia.

- **Security Cooperation:** Russia maintains its influence in Central Asia through structures like the Collective Security Trea-

ty Organization (CSTO). Russia aims to preserve its military and political influence in the region through these security collaborations, which could be critical for the security and stability of the Middle Corridor.

Turkey-Russia Relations: Turkey plays a key role in the development of the Middle Corridor. However, the relationship between Turkey and Russia is another significant factor affecting the project's approach.

- **Dynamics of Cooperation and Competition:** While Turkey and Russia cooperate on energy, trade, and security issues, they also compete in various regions. Although the Middle Corridor increases Turkey's influence in Eurasia, it might conflict with Russia's interests. However, due to the pragmatic nature of their relationship, Russia might also seek cooperation with Turkey on the Middle Corridor.

- **Energy Cooperation:** Energy projects between Russia and Turkey (e.g., the TurkStream gas pipeline) strengthen economic relations between the two countries. In this context, Russia might aim to limit the potential threat posed by the Middle Corridor by continuing cooperation with Turkey.

Geopolitical Balance and Relations with Russia: Central Asia has historically been within Russia's sphere of influence, and the Middle Corridor project could affect these countries' relations with Russia. Central Asian countries need to maintain political and economic ties with Russia. Russia does not want to lose influence over these countries and may develop various strategies to limit the impact of the Middle Corridor in the region. However,

Central Asian countries are taking steps to reduce their economic dependence on Russia by increasing trade with China.

- **Increased Cooperation with China:** Central Asian countries benefit from China's investments under the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI), accelerating their economic growth. This cooperation contributes to infrastructure development and an increase in trade volume in the region.

Security and Stability Issues: Central Asia faces various security and stability challenges. These issues pose risks that could impact the operation of the Middle Corridor. Border disputes, ethnic tensions, and the presence of radical groups complicate the security environment in the region. Ensuring stability in Central Asian countries is a crucial matter for security cooperation. Russia and China are developing various cooperation mechanisms to address security issues in the region.

The Role and Importance of Central Asia in the Project

Central Asia is a strategically vital region at the heart of the Middle Corridor. Due to its geographic position, energy and raw material resources, developing infrastructure projects, and strong economic ties with China, Central Asian countries play a key role in this corridor. Furthermore, the security and stability of this region are crucial for the successful operation of the project. The role of Central Asia in this project will be one of the factors determining the future geopolitical and economic impact of the corridor.

Kazakhstan's Role As a country bordering the Caspian Sea, Kazakhstan is one of the main countries in the Middle Corridor. Kazakhstan is indispensable not only for the Middle Corridor but also for other routes in transporting cargo from China to Europe. Kazakhstan is in a position to ensure the direct delivery of goods from China to the Caspian Sea and to minimize transportation times. Transport policies and practices in Kazakhstan are managed by various departments under the Ministry of Industry and Infrastructure Development, including the “Road Committee,” “Civil Aviation Committee,” and “Transport Committee.” Strengthening transport infrastructure is also supported through state programs, such as the “Kazakhstan 2030 Strategy” (1997), “Kazakhstan 2050 Strategy” (2012), “Nurlı Jol” State Program (2014), and the “Third Modernization and 100 Concrete Steps National Program” (2015). The “Nurlı Jol” State Program aims to

modernize the country's road and railway networks, while other programs focus on the development of international cargo transportation according to Article 2, Clauses 6 and 11 of the Railway Transportation Law No. 266. Overall, the goal is to ensure the seamless and uninterrupted movement of goods and services between Asia and Europe through Kazakhstan, with a priority placed on the Middle Corridor.

Kyrgyzstan's Role With three-quarters of Kyrgyzstan's territory covered by mountains, the development of road transport infrastructure is prioritized, while railway infrastructure remains limited. Therefore, the "Kyrgyzstan 2014-2020 Railway Transport Development Strategy" focuses on connecting the country's railway network to international networks and developing and implementing investment programs and projects aimed at advancing Kyrgyzstan's railway transport. Kyrgyzstan seeks to improve its transport capacity and gain commercial and economic benefits from infrastructure investments within the framework of both the Kyrgyz-Chinese cooperation (KYG) and the Middle Corridor. The various opportunities provided to carriers transiting through Kyrgyzstan to China make it attractive for road transport. Additionally, the construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway is frequently discussed for facilitating the transport of goods from China to Central Asian countries, particularly Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. This railway, which is one of the most significant railway projects between China and Kyrgyzstan, spans 523 kilometers, with 213 kilometers in China, 260 kilometers in Kyrgyzstan (through approximately 90 tunnels), and 50 kilometers in Uzbekistan. Starting from China's Kashgar railway terminal, the line passes through Kyrgyzstan's Naryn and Osh regions

and reaches Uzbekistan's Andijan city. This railway is expected to facilitate not only shipments from Kyrgyzstan to China's western regions but also provide faster access for China to Central Asian markets, significantly boosting trade relations between China and Central Asian countries. The technical-economic justification for this railway is expected to be completed by 2022, with construction slated to finish and become operational in 2023.

Infrastructure Projects and Developments Many projects related to the integration process within the Middle Corridor have already been completed, with several ongoing. For instance, the completion of the Jezkazgan-Beyneu line, which connects eastern and western Kazakhstan and enables trains from China to reach the Caspian Sea seamlessly, facilitates faster transit through Kazakhstan. Significant investments are being made by Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan in their Caspian Sea ports to facilitate transit and enhance existing potential. In this context, Azerbaijan opened an expanded port in Alat, located 65 kilometers from Baku, in 2015.

Uzbekistan's Role In Uzbekistan, transportation operations previously managed by various ministries have been consolidated under the Ministry of Transport since February 1, 2019. Notable state programs for developing Uzbekistan's transport infrastructure include the "Complex Program for Improving Transport Infrastructure and Diversifying Foreign Trade Routes for 2018-2022" and the "Strategy for Developing Uzbekistan's Transport System until 2035." These documents and the Ministry of Transport's work aim to increase the country's participation in new transport corridors and logistics center networks. A significant project in Uzbekistan related to the Middle Corridor is the on-

going construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway. Uzbekistan is a key market along the Middle Corridor route, and its geographic location, population, and economic size make it important for the corridor. Although the Middle Corridor is not explicitly mentioned in current development plans and strategy documents, Uzbekistan continues to engage in various cooperation processes with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and China. Significant steps are expected during Uzbekistan's chairmanship of the EAEU to enhance the functionality of the Middle Corridor. Attention is also given to modernizing transport services within the country. For example, meetings on meeting Turkey's requirements for transit carrier documentation and transitioning relevant documents to an electronic environment demonstrate Uzbekistan's commitment to enhancing the efficiency of the Middle Corridor in practice.

Turkmenistan's Role Turkmenistan holds a strategic role as a key transit country in the Middle Corridor. The Turkmenbashi port on the Caspian Sea coast acts as a critical node in the regional transport network. The Turkmenbashi port is a significant trade gateway connecting Azerbaijan's Baku port and, in the future, Kazakhstan's Aktau port. This port is situated on the Europe-Caucasus-Asia trade routes, receiving thousands of ships annually and serving as a major point of transit across the Caspian Sea. The port's ability to shorten distances and travel times through Caspian Sea transport is enhanced by ongoing investments aimed at increasing its cargo handling capacity. This strategic role enhances Turkmenistan's importance in regional trade and global logistics, making it an indispensable element of the Middle Corridor within the framework of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The Caspian Sea Factor in the Corridor Route

The Caspian Sea is a strategic transit hub in the Middle Corridor, which is a crucial segment of the trade routes from China to Europe. The Caspian Sea plays a significant role in the transportation of goods and services, particularly from Central Asia through the Caucasus and Turkey to Europe. Its strategic position is vital for the region's geopolitics, energy resources, and transportation routes. Here are key aspects of the Caspian Sea's role and importance in the Middle Corridor route:

Geographical Location and Trade Connections

- **Geographic Position:** The Caspian Sea is situated at a point where land and rail networks intersect with maritime routes on the Middle Corridor. This geographic location makes the Caspian Sea a critical junction connecting Central Asia and the Caucasus.

- **Rail Transport from China to Central Asia:** Trade goods from China reach the Caspian Sea through Kazakhstan or Turkmenistan and are then transported by sea to Azerbaijan. From Azerbaijan, goods continue through Georgia and Turkey to Europe. The Caspian Sea is crucial in this passage, providing the maritime link necessary to complete the overland routes.

Ports and Transportation

- **Key Ports:** On the eastern coast of the Caspian Sea, Kazakhstan's Aktau Port and Turkmenistan's Turkmenbashi Port, as

well as Azerbaijan's Baku Port on the western coast, are major commercial hubs. These ports are designed to accelerate cargo transit and facilitate smooth trade.

Energy Corridor and Natural Resources

- **Energy Resources:** The Caspian Sea is significant for its rich oil and natural gas reserves beneath its waters. These resources are vital for countries like Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan, serving as a major revenue source. The extraction and transportation of these resources are integral to energy trade on the Middle Corridor.

- **Pipeline Infrastructure:** Pipelines around the Caspian Sea play a crucial role in transporting energy resources to major markets in Europe and China. Projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) Oil Pipeline and the Southern Gas Corridor enhance the Caspian Sea's role in energy transit, facilitating the flow of energy along the Middle Corridor.

Transportation and Logistics Challenges

- **Maritime Transportation and Customs Issues:** Maritime transportation in the Caspian Sea is directly related to the capacity of regional ports and the efficiency of customs procedures. Despite modernization and infrastructure improvements, logistical challenges in maritime trade persist.

- **Coordination of Different Transport Modes:** The Caspian Sea serves as a transition point between maritime and land transport networks. Efficient integration of sea freight with land transport, including quick loading and unloading of cargo and in-

tegration with subsequent transport networks, is crucial for the efficiency of the Middle Corridor.

Geopolitical and Legal Disputes

- **Legal Status Issues:** The legal status of the Caspian Sea has been a contentious issue among the five bordering countries. Although the 2018 Caspian Sea Convention made significant strides in addressing this, some disputes remain. These legal uncertainties can impact maritime trade and energy projects.

- **Geopolitical Competition:** Competition among Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan over access to and transportation of energy resources around the Caspian Sea can create challenges for project development and trade efficiency on the Middle Corridor.

Bridge Between China and Europe

- **Alternative Transport Route:** The Caspian Sea offers an alternative route for China's trade with Europe, bypassing Russia. This presents a significant advantage for China and Europe in diversifying trade routes and reducing dependence on Russian corridors.

- **Role in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI):** The Caspian Sea plays a key role in expanding trade networks and accelerating shipments to Europe within the framework of China's BRI. Investments in port infrastructure and regional transport processes are made to support this initiative.

The Caspian Sea is a critical component in the operation and success of the Middle Corridor. Its geographical location and energy resources make it a strategic transit point for trade routes

between China and Europe. However, overcoming challenges related to maritime transportation, legal status, and geopolitical competition is essential for realizing the full potential of the Middle Corridor. In this context, the Caspian Sea stands out as a key element of the Middle Corridor route, offering both opportunities and challenges.

Iran's Role in the Middle Corridor

Iran is a significant geopolitical actor along the Middle Corridor, linking Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and the Middle East. Its strategic position makes it a vital transit country for trade, energy, and geopolitics along the route from China to Europe. Here's a detailed overview of Iran's role and influence in the Middle Corridor:

Geographical and Transit Significance

Transit Country: Iran's location serves as a natural bridge between Central Asia, Turkey, and the South Caucasus. This makes it a critical transit point for goods moving from China through Central Asia to Turkey and Europe. The China-Kazakhstan-Iran-Turkey route, bypassing the Caspian Sea, has become a significant trade corridor.

Energy Resources and Trade

Energy Reserves: Iran holds some of the world's largest oil and gas reserves, making it a strategic player in energy trade along the Middle Corridor. It can connect energy pipelines from Central Asia to markets in China and Europe.

Pipeline Infrastructure: Iran's existing energy pipelines, such as the Iran-Turkey gas pipeline, are crucial for transporting energy to Europe. This can enhance and diversify the energy transportation capacity of the Middle Corridor.

Foreign Policy and Economic Sanctions

Impact of Sanctions: U.S. sanctions have complicated Iran's participation in international trade, but Iran is seeking to mitigate these effects through alliances with China, Russia, and Turkey. However, these sanctions and tensions with the West can negatively impact trade activities on the Middle Corridor.

Strategic Partnerships: Iran is focusing on strengthening strategic partnerships with Russia and China, particularly in energy and infrastructure projects. This collaboration can boost Iran's influence along the Middle Corridor.

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Strategic Importance: Within China's BRI framework, Iran is positioned as a key stop along both land and maritime routes. China values Iran's strategic position and invests in infrastructure projects to enhance its integration into the Middle Corridor.

Infrastructure Investments: Chinese investments in Iran's ports, railways, and highways can facilitate transit through Iran and increase trade volume along the Middle Corridor. Strong trade relations between China and Iran can further enhance the corridor's diversification.

Regional Politics and Influence

Regional Cooperation: Iran can leverage its historical and cultural ties with Turkey to enhance cooperation on trade routes. Joint projects in road and rail infrastructure could strengthen the Iran route within the Middle Corridor.

Influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia: By increasing its political and economic influence in the Caucasus and Central

Asia, Iran can foster cooperation with countries along the corridor. Strengthening relationships in these regions can enhance Iran's active role in the Middle Corridor.

In summary, Iran's role in the Middle Corridor is crucial due to its geographical location, energy resources, and strategic partnerships. Its ability to offer alternative transit routes and support energy trade makes it a key player in this initiative. Cooperation with China and Russia, along with regional partnerships, will continue to shape Iran's impact on the Middle Corridor's development and success.

Azerbaijan's Role in the Middle Corridor

Azerbaijan plays a crucial role as the main strategic pillar of the Middle Corridor. The country's geographic location, infrastructure projects, and international relations significantly enhance its importance within this corridor. Let's explore Azerbaijan's role in more detail:

Geographic Location and Connections

Strategic Position: Azerbaijan is located in the South Caucasus and on the western shore of the Caspian Sea. This geographic position allows Azerbaijan to act as a bridge between Central Asia and Europe. The country shares borders with both Georgia and Armenia, making it a key transit point between the Caucasus region, Central Asia, Russia, Iran, and Turkey.

Major Routes

Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) Railway: This railway line starts from Baku, Azerbaijan's capital, passes through Georgia, and reaches Turkey. The BTK railway facilitates the transportation of goods from China and Central Asia to Turkey and Europe, supporting the road transportation within the Middle Corridor. Expanding and upgrading this project strengthens Azerbaijan's role in the corridor.

Land Routes: Azerbaijan connects with Turkey, Georgia, and Central Asia via international land routes such as the E-60 high-

way. These highways play a significant role in the land transport of the Middle Corridor.

Railway and Logistics

Railway Network: Baku is connected to international railway networks, ensuring the transport of goods from Central Asia to Europe. Azerbaijan's railway network links with Turkey through Georgia, integrating land and rail transport within the Middle Corridor and facilitating the rapid movement of goods.

Caspian Sea

Maritime Transport: The Port of Baku, located on the western shore of the Caspian Sea, plays a vital role in transporting goods from Central Asia to Europe. Maritime transport via the Caspian Sea supports the Middle Corridor's sea transport, and increasing the port's capacity enhances trade volume.

Energy Transport and Pipelines

Energy Projects: Azerbaijan plays a strategic role in energy transport. Energy projects such as the Shah Deniz gas field are crucial for the export of natural gas and oil to Europe. Projects like Shah Deniz-2 and the Southern Gas Corridor enable Azerbaijan to deliver energy resources to European markets. Pipelines such as BTC (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan) and TANAP (Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline) support Azerbaijan's energy exports and strengthen the energy transport capacity of the Middle Corridor.

Geopolitics and International Relations

Regional Strategic Role: As the largest country in the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan shapes the economic and political dynam-

ics of the region. Its borders with Georgia and Armenia are significant in Azerbaijan's regional security and trade strategies. Azerbaijan's strategic position makes it a central player in international trade and energy transport.

The enhancement of Azerbaijan's role in the Middle Corridor is facilitated by its geographic location, infrastructure projects, and international relations. The country's strategic position and expanded transport and energy networks are key factors in the development and success of the Middle Corridor.



Figure 2

Azerbaijan's Role in Energy Security and International Cooperation

Azerbaijan is developing various international collaborations to ensure energy security and diversify energy transport routes. This strategy allows the country to use its energy resources more effectively in international markets.

Azerbaijan participates in various international organizations and platforms to support the Middle Corridor and enhance its international connections. The country is actively involved in regional organizations such as the Turkic Council and GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova). These organizations provide platforms that support Azerbaijan's regional and international strategies.

Azerbaijan also participates in international platforms like the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). These platforms play a crucial role in strengthening Azerbaijan's international relations and supporting the Middle Corridor's operations.

Regional and International Security

Azerbaijan is a key player in regional security dynamics, which affects the functioning of the Middle Corridor and the country's international relations. The security of energy pipelines is crucial at both national and international levels. Protecting energy infrastructure depends on the effectiveness of security measures and international cooperation. Azerbaijan is developing various strategies to protect its energy infrastructure.

Azerbaijan is enhancing its involvement in international security agreements and collaborations, which support regional and international security. The security and stability of the Middle Corridor are crucial to the country's regional and international influence. Factors such as border security, terrorism and extremist threats, energy security, political and social stability, and international cooperation shape Azerbaijan's security strategies and its role in the Middle Corridor. Security and stability have a direct impact on the efficiency of the Middle Corridor and

the country's international relations, so Azerbaijan supports regional and international security by developing strategies related to these factors.

On November 25, 2022, during the international conference titled “Along the Middle Corridor: Geopolitics, Security, and Economics” held at ADA University in Baku, President Ilham Aliyev emphasized regional and international security issues: “To implement a large-scale project like the Middle Corridor, issues of security and economic capability must certainly be discussed. Without security and economic potential, it will not be possible to achieve the goal of fully operationalizing the Middle Corridor, which will benefit all the countries in the region. Indeed, stability is one of the key elements for the implementation of any large-scale project. Azerbaijan has had stability for many years, and it is one of the main factors in our economic development. Now, Azerbaijan's role in the international arena has also been shaped by our domestic policy. A strong economy, political and economic stability, and the predictability of our government's policy—all these factors have led to the current reality of establishing bridges and closer relations with as many countries as possible. Therefore, political stability, security, and the economy are all very important. Moreover, the internal efforts of each country that is part of the Middle Corridor are also significant. In other words, the level of fulfillment of their ‘homework’ to create physical transport and logistics infrastructure is also important.”

When reviewing Azerbaijan's relevant legislation and strategic documents related to the transport sector, various strategic plans can be seen. These include the “Azerbaijan 2020: Vision for the Future Development Concept” (2012), the Program for the

Development of Maritime Affairs for 2016-2020 (2016), the Strategic Roadmap for Logistics and Trade Development (2016), and the State Program for Socio-Economic Development. The Economic Development of Azerbaijan's Regions for 2019-2023 can also be mentioned. While Azerbaijan aims to develop its transport sector within the framework of these rules and programs, it gives special importance to the Middle Corridor, recognizing that expanding and strengthening transport corridors passing through the region contributes to the development of transport infrastructure and economic growth.

The Key Gate of the Middle Corridor: The Zangezur Corridor

Another significant transport route along the Middle Corridor is the Zangezur Corridor. The Zangezur Corridor is a roughly 43-kilometer route under construction in the Zangezur region that will connect Azerbaijan with Nakhchivan. Following Azerbaijan's victory over Armenia in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, a clause for establishing a new transport connection between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan was included in the agreement signed between the parties. Thus, it will become possible for Azerbaijan to reach Nakhchivan by land and subsequently connect to Turkey via this route. In this context, the line from Horadiz to the Armenian border in Azerbaijan's West will be renewed by Azerbaijan, and a 166-kilometer road will be constructed from Horadiz to Ordubad district in Nakhchivan. Infrastructure work on the remaining approximately 43 kilometers in the Zangezur district is also expected to complete the Zangezur Corridor. Upon completion of the construction process, the Zangezur Corridor will connect Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan by land and will provide an import-

ant alternative route for the passage from Azerbaijan to Turkey along the Middle Corridor route. Similarly, plans include the construction of roads in railway routes, and the Ahmedbeyli-Horadiz-Mincivan-Aghbend road project, which will reach Zangezur, has also begun. These projects will facilitate Armenia's access to international transport corridors and Middle Corridor countries. The planned opening of an international airport around Zangilan in 2022 will also strengthen the Zangezur Corridor's position. Similarly, the construction of an international airport in Lachin in 2024 is envisaged since the Zangezur Corridor's railway and road connections pass through Zangilan district. At the same time, the construction of a multi-lane road between Zangilan-Qubadli and Qubadli-Lachin routes has begun, and upon completion, these districts will be connected to the eastern parts of Zangezur. Within the railway network, work continues on the 100-kilometer Horadiz and Aghbend line, with the 60-kilometer line expected to be completed and put into use next year. Connecting Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan via the Zangezur Corridor aims to contribute to transport development by including increased cargo transport from the eastern part of the Caspian Sea. On the other hand, the Barda-Aghdam road will connect the liberated Aghdam with the main road of the district, while the Kəlbəcər-Lachin road construction will facilitate the connection between Eastern Zangezur and the Western part of the Karabakh region. Work is also ongoing on the construction of the four-lane road between Fuzuli and Shusha, as well as on the Horadiz-Aghbend and Aghdam-Fuzuli roads.

Among the important projects underway is the Toğanalı-Kəlbəcər road, and after the completion of the 12-kilometer tunnel,

this route will replace the Murovdag pass. All these developments can be considered integral parts of the Zangezur Corridor.

By valuing the potential of the Middle Corridor, Azerbaijan plans to make significant contributions to the development of infrastructure. This is reflected in the “Action Plan for Increasing the Transit Potential of International Transport Corridors Crossing the Territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Promoting Transit Cargo Transportation for 2024–2026.” The State Customs Committee has already started implementing measures for digitizing transit transport along the corridor and creating a comprehensive transit portal. All these actions are expected to lead to more efficient use of the corridor’s potential, increased cargo volumes, and greater revenue from transit transport in the near future.

Benefits of the Middle Corridor for Georgia and Armenia

The Middle Corridor offers a range of economic and strategic benefits for both Georgia and Armenia. This route can help both countries enhance their regional and international connections, create economic opportunities, and increase their strategic significance. The key benefits of the Middle Corridor for Georgia and Armenia are as follows:

Benefits for Georgia

Economic Development and Trade: By being located on the Middle Corridor, Georgia can become a crucial logistics and transport hub. Through transit traffic via ports such as Batumi and Poti, Georgia can gain economic benefits.

Infrastructure Investments: Investments in the Middle Corridor drive the development of Georgia's infrastructure. This contributes to modernizing the country's transport and logistics infrastructure and creates opportunities for attracting foreign investments.

Geopolitical and Strategic Importance: As an important part of the Middle Corridor, Georgia transforms into a strategic transit point by linking road and rail routes between Asia and Europe. This enhances the country's regional strategic importance.

Strengthening International Diplomatic Relations: Georgia can strengthen its international diplomatic relations within the

framework of the Middle Corridor. Its role in this route enhances the country's strategic position in the international arena.

Economic Diversification: By benefiting from trade flows on the Middle Corridor, Georgia achieves economic diversification. This strengthens the country's economic structure and provides growth opportunities in various sectors. Georgia also improves its energy security and expands access to energy resources through energy projects and resource transfers along the Middle Corridor.

Benefits for Armenia

Economic Development and Trade Opportunities: The Middle Corridor provides Armenia with better access to trade routes between Asia and Europe. This strengthens the country's logistics and transport sectors and increases trade volume. Projects along the Middle Corridor support the development of Armenia's infrastructure. These investments modernize the country's transport networks and logistics centers.

Geopolitical and Strategic Gains: Armenia becomes a strategic hub due to its location on the Middle Corridor. This increases the country's regional geopolitical importance and allows it to play a more influential role in international relations. Through the Middle Corridor, Armenia can strengthen its regional and international diplomatic relations, enhancing its strategic position in the global arena.

Economic Diversification and Sustainable Development: The Middle Corridor increases Armenia's trade and investment diversification. This strengthens the country's economic structure and helps achieve sustainable development goals. Armenia also improves its energy security through energy projects and resource

transfers along the Middle Corridor. This enhances the country's access to energy resources and increases energy diversity.

Overall, the Middle Corridor offers economic, geopolitical, and strategic benefits for both Georgia and Armenia. While Georgia leverages logistics and trade opportunities to support its economic development, Armenia gains advantages in strategic and diplomatic relations. Both countries can strengthen regional and global economic integration by utilizing the opportunities provided by the Middle Corridor.

Turkey's Strategic Role in the Middle Corridor

Turkey's strategic role in the Middle Corridor is quite clear within the context of its geographic location, economic potential, and international relations. As a significant part of the Middle Corridor, Turkey plays a key role in the road, rail, and maritime connections of this route.

The main points that help in comprehensively understanding Turkey's strategic role in the Middle Corridor are as follows:

Strategic Importance of Geography: Turkey's geographic position and connections significantly impact the strategic importance and operation of the Middle Corridor. Within this framework, Turkey's geographical advantages, infrastructure projects, and international relations can be examined in detail. Turkey acts as a bridge between Asia and Europe. This location makes Turkey a critical transit point for land and maritime routes in the Middle Corridor. The Bosphorus connects the sea route between Asia and Europe, enhancing the significance of the Middle Corridor in the region. Due to its geographical location on the Middle Corridor, Turkey also functions as a regional hub. This central position allows Turkey to play a major role in trade routes between Asia and Europe.

South-Eastern European and Middle Eastern Connections: Turkey's southeastern neighbors, including Syria, Iraq, and Iran, extend Turkey's connections in the Middle Corridor and

facilitate transit between the Middle East and Central Asia. Turkey supports the expansion of the Middle Corridor into Europe through land and maritime connections with Southeastern European countries. These connections strengthen the entry point of the Middle Corridor into Europe.

Infrastructure Projects and Transport Connections: The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway Project, carried out jointly with Azerbaijan and Georgia, provides a crucial link for land transport on the Middle Corridor. Starting from Turkey's Kars Province and extending through Georgia and Azerbaijan, this railway line facilitates the delivery of cargo from Central Asia to Turkey and Europe.

The Marmaray Project in Istanbul strengthens the railway connection between Asia and Europe. This project ensures the rapid and efficient transportation of cargo and passengers, facilitating transit in the Middle Corridor.

Turkey provides overland connections from Asia to Europe via the Trans-Eurasian Corridor. This corridor plays a significant role in transporting cargo from Central Asia to Turkey and Europe. The country also connects with other countries in the Middle Corridor through international road networks such as E80 and E90. These roads support logistics flow in the Middle Corridor and create favorable conditions for trade.

Turkey's Bosphorus Strait connects the sea route between Asia and Europe and plays a vital role in maritime connections in the Middle Corridor. The Bosphorus provides access from the Black Sea to the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas, reinforcing the connections of the Middle Corridor in this region. Turkey's major

ports, especially Istanbul, Izmir, Mersin, Samsun, and Trabzon, are key maritime centers in the Middle Corridor. These ports facilitate the transportation of cargo from Asia to Europe.

International Relations and Collaborations: Turkey strengthens its strategic role in the Middle Corridor within the framework of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI enhances Turkey's role in trade routes between Asia and Europe and supports economic connections. Within the BRI framework, Turkey strengthens its relations with China through logistics centers and infrastructure projects on the Middle Corridor.

Turkey plays a key role in energy transfer along the Middle Corridor with energy projects such as the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) Oil Pipeline. These projects ensure the flow of energy from Azerbaijan to Europe.

Turkey enhances the efficiency of the corridor through trade agreements and economic cooperation in the Middle Corridor. These agreements strengthen Turkey's economic role in the Corridor.

Border Security and Infrastructure Management: Turkey ensures the stability of the route by increasing security measures in the border regions of the Middle Corridor. Border security supports the uninterrupted continuation of international trade and transportation.

Turkey's customs management increases trade efficiency in the Middle Corridor. Customs procedures and regulations ensure the swift and secure transport of cargo.

Turkey enhances the efficiency of the corridor by improving transportation infrastructure in the Middle Corridor. Investments in roads, railways, and ports ensure the rapid and secure transportation of cargo. The country also improves the efficiency of the route with logistics and distribution centers in the Middle Corridor. These centers facilitate the management and transportation of cargo.

Turkey's geographic position and connections in the Middle Corridor enhance its strategic role in this route. Turkey increases the effectiveness of the Middle Corridor with its bridge function between Asia and Europe, railway and road projects, maritime connections, international cooperation, and infrastructure investments. This strategic positioning and connections strengthen Turkey's role in the Corridor and highlight its significance as a key actor in trade and energy flows between Asia and Europe.

Turkey's Economic and Trade Potential: Turkey's geographic position, infrastructure projects, and international relations are crucial for the efficiency of the Middle Corridor and regional economic growth. Turkey ensures efficient cargo transport with logistics centers in the Middle Corridor. These centers enhance trade efficiency through storage, distribution, and management services.

Turkey's strategic location in the Middle Corridor supports the country's economic growth. This growth is achieved through increased trade, development of logistics activities, and increased interest from international investors. Turkey promotes regional economic development through development projects along the Middle Corridor. These projects include infrastructure investments, trade agreements, and logistics centers.

Energy Transfer and Resources: Turkey diversifies its energy resources through energy projects in the Middle Corridor and ensures access to international markets. Energy investments increase the country's economic potential. The country becomes one of the regional energy hubs through investments in energy infrastructure. These investments improve the efficiency of energy transfer and support energy flows in the Middle Corridor.

Trade and Investment Opportunities: Turkey increases trade volume in the Middle Corridor through free trade agreements and economic cooperation. These agreements expand Turkey's trade routes and economic connections. The country strengthens economic relations between Asia and Europe by increasing trade volume in the Middle Corridor. This trade contributes to Turkey's economic development.

Turkey attracts international investors with investment incentives and economic zone projects in the Middle Corridor. These incentives improve the investment environment and support economic growth. The country promotes regional development through large-scale investment projects in the Middle Corridor. These projects include investments in logistics, energy, and industry.

Trade Routes and Economic Impacts: Turkey ensures the rapid and efficient transportation of cargo from Asia to Europe through road and rail transport in the Middle Corridor. This transportation supports the development of international trade. Turkey's maritime connections integrate the sea route from Asia to Europe. These connections allow for increased trade in the Middle Corridor.

Economic activities in the Middle Corridor increase workforce and employment opportunities. Logistics centers, energy projects, and trade growth contribute to the local workforce. Turkey's investments and trade activities in the Middle Corridor promote regional development. This development includes infrastructure projects, economic growth, and social development.

Economic and Commercial Collaborations: Turkey strengthens economic relations through regional cooperation and joint projects in the Middle Corridor. These projects include Turkey's collaboration with Central Asian and European countries. Turkey promotes regional development through economic zone projects in the Middle Corridor. These projects include infrastructure investments and economic cooperation.

International Collaborations: Turkey transports natural gas from Azerbaijan to Europe through the Southern Gas Corridor project. This project increases Turkey's energy transportation capabilities and supports energy flows in the Middle Corridor. The Southern Gas Corridor strengthens Turkey's investments and strategic collaborations in energy projects. These projects enhance regional energy security and promote energy trade. Turkey promotes strategic collaboration by participating in international forums and meetings related to the Middle Corridor. These forums contribute to the development of economic and commercial relations.

Collaboration with the European Union: Turkey strengthens trade relations in the Middle Corridor through the Customs Union and other trade agreements with the European Union. These agreements increase the efficiency of Turkey's trade with Europe. Cooperation with the EU supports Turkey's investment

in infrastructure projects and logistics centers in the Middle Corridor. These collaborations improve economic and commercial relations.

Collaboration with Central Asian Countries: Turkey strengthens economic relations in the Middle Corridor through trade and investment agreements with Central Asian countries. These agreements facilitate trade flows between Asia and Europe. Turkey supports economic development in these regions through joint logistics and infrastructure projects with Central Asian countries. These projects enhance the efficiency of the Middle Corridor.

Border Security and Management Strategies: Turkey ensures the stability of the route by increasing security measures in border regions of the Middle Corridor. Security projects support the uninterrupted continuation of trade and transportation. Turkey increases trade efficiency in the Middle Corridor through border management and customs reforms. These reforms ensure the swift and secure passage of cargo.

Technological and Digital Infrastructure: Turkey develops digital logistics systems and technological infrastructure in the Middle Corridor. These systems facilitate the monitoring and management of cargo. Turkey optimizes transportation in the Middle Corridor with smart transport solutions and technological innovations. These solutions increase efficiency and reduce operational costs.

Turkey's international collaborations and strategies in the Middle Corridor enhance its role and strategic significance in this route. Projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),

Southern Gas Corridor, collaboration with the European Union, and agreements with Central Asian countries improve Turkey's international economic and trade relations. Additionally, Turkey enhances the efficiency and effectiveness of the Middle Corridor through large-scale infrastructure projects, energy strategies, diplomatic relations, border security, and digital infrastructure projects. These strategic approaches strengthen Turkey's regional and global economic role and support trade and investment opportunities in the Middle Corridor.

Risks, Threats, and Opportunities of the Middle Corridor for Turkey

The risks, threats, and opportunities that Turkey faces along the Middle Corridor are critical factors influencing the economic, trade, and strategic significance of this route.

RISKS AND THREATS:

Border Conflicts and Regional Tensions:

Relations with Syria, Iraq, and Iran: Regional conflicts around Turkey, particularly with Syria, Iraq, and Iran, can impact the security and stability of the Middle Corridor. These conflicts may negatively affect trade and transportation.

Russia's Geopolitical Strategies: Russia's geostrategic and energy policies in the Middle Corridor can affect Turkey's role in this route. Russia's influence can pose risks to international relations and energy security.

Terrorist Attacks and Security Threats:

Logistics and Infrastructure Projects: Terrorist attacks and security threats could jeopardize logistics and infrastructure proj-

ects along the Middle Corridor. Such security risks can disrupt transportation and trade.

Currency Exchange Rates and Economic Fluctuations:

Economic Instability: Turkey's currency fluctuations and economic instability can impact trade and investment opportunities along the Middle Corridor. Economic instability may reduce international investors' and trade partners' interest.

Climate Change:

Extreme Weather Events and Natural Disasters: Climate change may affect infrastructure projects and logistics activities along the Middle Corridor. Extreme weather events and natural disasters can negatively impact transportation and infrastructure projects.

Environmental Impacts: The environmental impacts of infrastructure projects and logistics centers can have negative consequences for local communities and ecosystems. This situation may lead to disputes and environmental regulations.

Opportunities:

Strategic Location:

Increased Trade Volume: The strategic location of the Middle Corridor provides Turkey with the opportunity to increase trade volume between Asia and Europe. Turkey can support economic growth by establishing logistics and trade centers along this route.

Investment Opportunities:

Attracting International Investors: Turkey can evaluate investment opportunities in the Middle Corridor. Attractive projects

and infrastructure development can enhance Turkey's economic potential.

Energy and Resource Management:

Energy Security: Turkey plays a significant role in energy transit along the Middle Corridor with projects like TANAP and BTC. These energy corridors enhance Turkey's energy security and regional influence.

Diversification of Energy Resources: Turkey has the opportunity to diversify its energy resources along the Middle Corridor, increasing energy independence and playing a strategic role in international energy trade.

Turkey's risks, threats, and opportunities in the Middle Corridor are crucial factors affecting its strategic role and economic potential. Geopolitical risks, security threats, economic fluctuations, and environmental impacts can influence Turkey's role in the Middle Corridor. However, economic and trade opportunities, energy projects, infrastructure investments, technological advancements, diplomatic cooperation, and improved security can enhance Turkey's strategic significance in this route. Turkey can manage these risks and opportunities in a balanced manner to support the effectiveness and regional development of the Middle Corridor.

Turkey's Ministry of Economy's 2023 Export Strategy and Action Plan, the Treasury and Finance Ministry's 2021-2023 New Economic Program, and the General Directorate of Highways' 2017-2021 Strategic Plan aim to develop regional trade and transportation networks in a comprehensive framework. This indicates that the Middle Corridor is integrated into sectors such as econ-

omy, trade, and transportation, as well as overall development plans. In summary, Turkey, as a country connecting Europe and Asia, has both political and economic advantages in revitalizing the historic Silk Road. Considering this potential, the state places special importance on the development of the Middle Corridor and encourages and supports the countries along this route.

The European Union and the Middle Corridor

The relationship between the European Union (EU) and the Middle Corridor holds significant importance in terms of regional and global trade, energy security, and international cooperation. The economic and strategic opportunities, the EU's role in the Middle Corridor, and their interactions can be summarized as follows:

Economic Relations of the EU and the Middle Corridor:

Facilitating Trade: The Middle Corridor provides a land route between Europe and Asia, facilitating EU access to goods from Asia. Through this route, the EU can enhance trade, boost economic growth, and increase trade volumes. The corridor helps the EU diversify its supply chains, reducing reliance on products from the Far East and offering alternative logistical routes.

Infrastructure and Investments: The EU can invest in infrastructure projects along the Middle Corridor to improve the efficiency of the route. EU-supported projects may include the modernization of railways, logistics centers, and ports. Financial support from the EU plays a crucial role in the development of infrastructure and logistics projects along the Middle Corridor.

Strategic Relations of the EU and the Middle Corridor:

Energy Security: The Middle Corridor plays a vital role in transporting energy resources to Europe. By supporting energy projects along the Middle Corridor, the EU can enhance its ener-

gy security. For example, natural gas from Azerbaijan is crucial in meeting the EU's energy demands. The EU has the opportunity to diversify its energy resources through Middle Corridor projects, which is a key factor in ensuring Europe's energy security.

Geopolitical and Diplomatic Relations: The effectiveness of the Middle Corridor strengthens Europe's strategic position in Asia and the Middle East. Supporting projects along the corridor can promote regional stability and enhance the security of this route. The EU can use the Middle Corridor to strengthen international diplomatic relations, bolstering its global strategic position and supporting international cooperation.

***Impact of the EU and the Middle Corridor
on Trade and Economy:***

Enhanced Trade Efficiency: The Middle Corridor makes trade between Europe and Asia more efficient. Utilizing this route increases the EU's access to Asian markets and expands trade volumes. The corridor reduces logistics costs and enables products to be offered at more competitive prices in the European market, boosting consumer benefits and stimulating economic growth within the EU.

Investment in Regional Development: The Middle Corridor expands the EU's access to new markets. Asian markets allow Europe to diversify its foreign trade and create new economic opportunities. By investing in infrastructure and logistics projects in countries along the Middle Corridor, the EU supports regional development, strengthening its economic interests and strategic significance.

Impact of the EU on Security and Stability:

Supporting Security Cooperation: The EU supports security cooperation along the Middle Corridor, enhancing the route's security. Security cooperation helps regional stability and minimizes potential threats. The EU can develop various strategies to strengthen security in border areas along the corridor, ensuring safe and seamless transit.

Promoting Regional Collaboration: The EU promotes regional cooperation to support the security and stability of the Middle Corridor. This collaboration reduces security threats on regional and international levels. The EU prepares international cooperation and strategies to manage potential crises along the corridor, maintaining the route's efficiency and security.

The EU's role in the Middle Corridor has broad implications for economic, strategic, and security matters. From trade and economic relations to energy security, geopolitical strategies, and security cooperation, the EU's interaction with the Middle Corridor offers significant opportunities and contributions on both regional and global levels. These relations enhance the efficiency and strategic importance of the Middle Corridor, while also strengthening the EU's role in global economic and security policies.

Recent Developments: In light of Russia's military operations in Ukraine, many EU member states and Western transport companies support sanctions against Russia, making this a pertinent issue. It is expected that a portion of the transport load currently handled by the Northern Corridor will shift to the Middle Corridor. The Russia-Ukraine war, with its global economic impact, demonstrates that enhancing the functionality and effi-

ciency of the Middle Corridor benefits the EU. Given these developments, the EU explicitly supports the Middle Corridor as an alternative operational route to the Northern Corridor, aligning with its strategic goals and the objectives of TRACECA.

Threats to the Security and Future of the Middle Corridor

The future of the Middle Corridor is shaped by significant threats and opportunities that impact its efficiency, security, and strategic importance. Here's a summary of the key threats and opportunities:

Threats:

Political and Ethnic Conflicts: Political and ethnic conflicts in regions through which the Middle Corridor passes can threaten the security of the route. For instance, civil unrest in some Central Asian countries or tensions between Georgia and Armenia could create operational difficulties along the route. Political instability in countries along the Middle Corridor can disrupt economic and commercial activities, affecting the route's reliability and efficiency.

Security Threats and Terrorism: Terrorist acts in countries along the Middle Corridor pose significant security risks. Such attacks can disrupt logistics operations and lead to economic losses. Additionally, smuggling and illegal activities in certain areas can threaten border security and the regularity of trade along the route.

Infrastructure and Logistics Problems: Infrastructure deficiencies and inadequacies in some regions of the Middle Corridor can reduce the route's effectiveness and efficiency. Delays in infrastructure projects and rising costs can lead to operational

issues. Logistics problems, especially transit interruptions, can affect trade flows and increase costs.

Environmental and Climate Impacts: Climate change may increase the risk of natural disasters in the regions traversed by the Middle Corridor. This can impact the safety and operational efficiency of the route. Environmental issues, particularly in large infrastructure projects, can affect the sustainability of the projects and their impact on the environment.

Opportunities:

Economic Growth and Trade Enhancement: The Middle Corridor can stimulate economic growth by increasing trade flows between Asia and Europe. It provides an opportunity for diversifying international trade routes. Infrastructure projects along the corridor create significant investments and economic opportunities, contributing to local economies and global economic integration.

Energy Security and Resource Diversification: The Middle Corridor facilitates the transport of energy resources to Europe, enhancing energy security. The route contributes to diversifying energy sources and improving energy security. Energy projects along the Middle Corridor strengthen regional energy cooperation and make energy transfers more efficient.

Geopolitical and Strategic Advantages: The Middle Corridor promotes regional cooperation and enhances regional stability. Such collaborations support regional security and economic development. The strategic significance of the Middle Corridor plays an important role in international relations and global strategic planning, potentially influencing the global balance of power.

Infrastructure Development and Modernization: Infrastructure projects along the Middle Corridor contribute to the modernization of highways, railways, and logistics centers. These improvements enhance the route's efficiency and effectiveness. Technological innovations used in infrastructure and logistics projects make route management and operations more efficient.

The future of the Middle Corridor will be shaped by various threats and opportunities. Geopolitical tensions, security threats, infrastructure issues, and environmental impacts are potential challenges the route may face. However, opportunities such as economic growth, increased trade, energy security, strategic advantages, and infrastructure development can ensure that the Middle Corridor continues to play a significant role in international trade and regional cooperation. Balancing these threats and opportunities will be crucial for the long-term success and impact of the Middle Corridor.

The Increasing Importance of the Middle Corridor in Global Politics

The Middle Corridor is gaining increasing significance in global politics due to various factors, including potential global tensions, the Russia-Ukraine war, the Taiwan crisis, Europe's desire for greater independence, discussions within the Atlantic alliance, interventions by countries disregarding international law, attacks by various terrorist organizations, and internal instability. These elements contribute to global instability and accelerate the arms race. In the current context, seas have become crucial arenas for competition and conflict. For example, the Houthis, citing Israel's attacks on Gaza, have closed the Red Sea passage with their own attacks. Similarly, piracy off the coast of countries like Somalia poses a significant threat. While the security of trade corridors is vital for countries, affecting transit times and costs directly, states prefer the shortest and least costly routes. Despite 96% of global trade being conducted via sea routes, the unreliability of these routes has pushed countries toward land corridors.

The increasing importance of the Middle Corridor in global politics and Eurasia is significant due to its safety, brevity, and cost-effectiveness, as well as the countries it traverses. The Northern Corridor, which passes through NEBL and Russia, is closed due to sanctions. The CCWAEC, which passes through Iran, is also subject to Western sanctions. Clearly, a large portion of the intersection between Asia and Europe is controlled by Russia and Iran. The only regions unaffected by these two

countries' influence, i.e., not subject to sanctions, are the Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus. In this context, at a time when maritime routes are becoming unreliable, the Turkistan-Caspian Sea-South Caucasus route emerges as the safest corridor between Europe and China. Following the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war in February 2022, the West, which has imposed sanctions on Moscow, has turned to alternative routes. China has also turned to the Middle Corridor as a reliable and stable route in parallel with rising tensions centered on Taiwan and increasing maritime tensions. China's advance along the Middle Corridor has led to increased congestion on this route. Both Turkic states and China seek a seamless Middle Corridor. To this end, technical and economic feasibility studies have begun for the construction of a railway between China, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Once China reaches Turkmenistan and Iran via the Middle Corridor, it will be able to access other parts of the Middle East and the Arab World overland. In this framework, the Middle Corridor presents itself as the most advantageous route in the Asia-Pacific region. In this context, there is a possibility that China, a major supporter of reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, will make significant investments in the Middle Corridor.

In 2020, 350,000 tons of goods were sent from China via the Middle Corridor, and by 2022, this amount had increased to 3.2 million tons. Alongside China, the EU shows particular interest in the South Caucasus-Caspian Sea-Turkistan route. This interest is formed both within the EU and in bilateral relations with regional states. On January 29, 2024, at the EU-Central Asia Transport Connectivity Global Gateway Investors Forum in Brussels, an investment of 10.2 billion USD was pledged for the development of

the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), which connects Europe with Turkistan. This pledge from the EU will enhance the capabilities of the Middle Corridor. The interest from Europe is not limited to the EU alone. Countries like Germany and France are also strengthening their relations with the Caucasus and Turkistan. While the Middle Corridor is a significant factor, the region's underground resources also play a crucial role. The World Bank (WB) published a report in November 2023 titled "Policies and Investments to Triple Travel Time by 2030 and Halve Travel Time." The report identifies the Middle Corridor as a "multimodal transport corridor connecting China with Europe, which has gained significant attention following Russia's aggression against Ukraine." The report discusses increasing the corridor's capacity and emphasizes the need to enhance its efficiency.

Although the Middle Corridor is highlighted as a bridge between Europe and Asia, it is also argued that without improvements, it may not become one of the main routes. On December 13, 2023, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published a report titled "Realizing the Potential of the Middle Corridor." The report indicates that the corridor faces various problems and notes that policies adopted by the countries within this framework will contribute to the corridor's significance.

Additionally, Turkic states (TDT) are undertaking bilateral and multilateral initiatives to enhance the potential of the Middle Corridor. On the other hand, the interest from Europe and China in the corridor raises positive expectations for the future.

Conclusion

The global system and Eurasia are undergoing a transformation. Over the past 35 years, power centers in Eurasia have shifted, and new centers have emerged. Europe, which was once the world's manufacturing hub, has now become a market, as products manufactured in countries like China, India, and Bangladesh are transferred to Europe. To ensure continuous trade between manufacturing centers and markets, various corridors are needed. In an era of increasing tension and conflict, the security and stability of these corridors are as crucial as the corridors themselves. Instability in a corridor can directly impact all centers and even the broader Eurasian geography. Russia is a recent example of this.

The Middle Corridor, which has become one of the main transportation and transit lines among the major powers of Eurasia, facilitates the integration of Eurasia, creates a robust and balanced Asian geography, and accelerates the development of the countries along the route. This enables Eurasian countries to become more familiar with each other by connecting various economies, actors, cultures, and interests. In this context, Eurasia is experiencing a transformation in the international system; the Middle Corridor plays a significant role in this internal transformation process affecting the entire region. Current developments have a significant impact on various routes and corridors.

In the current process, it is possible to discuss various risks, threats, and opportunities for corridors. Firstly, stability within

the country through which the corridor passes and low security threats are expected. Because the inclusion of a country in a corridor prioritizes the security of goods transported with new investments. Major actors like China, Europe, and India need stable corridors where their investments and capitals are not threatened.

In this context, the Middle Corridor stands out. The Middle Corridor generally passes through a geography dominated by Turkish states. The relations between these states, organized through organizations like the Turkic Council (TDT), are effective in removing transportation and customs barriers and harmonizing systems. This creates an environment for cooperation and harmony in the region and helps reduce the costs and duration of the Middle Corridor. As a result, products passing through the Middle Corridor can be transported with minimal issues, safely, at lower costs, and in a shorter time. Investments in the corridor and increased cooperation among countries will fully reveal its potential, opportunities, and significance. The Middle Corridor is emerging as both the most stable and the most attractive in terms of investment compared to other routes. Its potential, along with branches like the Lapis Lazuli route, indicates that investments will bring significant gains in the short, medium, and long term. The characteristics of the Middle Corridor connect a vast Eurasian geography while also facilitating safer trade. This contributes to minimizing the impact of rising global tensions on world trade and the economy. As a result, the increasing importance of the Middle Corridor due to existing tensions is evident. The interest shown by China, the EU, and individual EU countries in the Middle Corridor further supports this. Additionally, the countries along the Middle Corridor

have generally established their stability. However, it is currently very challenging to discuss disputes among states. Bilateral and multilateral relations between countries along the route are strengthened with mutual respect, common interests, and win-win approaches. On the other hand, Azerbaijan has started to ensure peace in the South Caucasus with its victory in the Second Karabakh War.

Furthermore, the countries in the Middle Corridor have a shared interest in enhancing the corridor's potential through their relations with China and Europe and the decisions made within the framework of the Turkic Council (TDT). The Middle Corridor is a crucial transportation route in modern global trade and energy flows. This route creates a strategic link between Asia and Europe and shapes international economic and trade dynamics.

Azerbaijan's role in this corridor is clearly defined by its geographical location and economic resources. Azerbaijan's strategic importance in the Middle Corridor stems from several key factors. Firstly, Azerbaijan's geographical position allows it to be at the crossroads of land and sea routes between Asia and Europe, making it a critical transit point along the west-east axis of the Middle Corridor. As a country with a coastline on the Caspian Sea, it is also a crucial part of regional energy transit routes.

In terms of energy resources, Azerbaijan's rich natural gas and oil reserves highlight the importance of the Middle Corridor for energy security. The country plays a key role in both domestic and international energy projects. Azerbaijan's energy infrastructure and potential contribute to Europe's energy security and enhance regional cooperation.

Consequently, Azerbaijan's strategic role in the Middle Corridor has significant impacts at both regional and global levels. The country's geographical advantages, energy resources, and infrastructure projects increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the Middle Corridor, strengthening its impact on international trade and energy security. Azerbaijan's role in this critical route will continue to be decisive in terms of global economic and strategic dynamics.