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# ENHANCING COMMUNICATION AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING ALONG THE MIDDLE CORRIDOR

**TRANSPORT CORRIDORS OF CENTRAL ASIA – FACING THE  
CHALLENGES OF CONFRONTATIONAL GLOBALIZATION**

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# TRANSPORT CORRIDORS OF CENTRAL ASIA – FACING THE CHALLENGES OF CONFRONTATIONAL GLOBALIZATION

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## Introduction

Soon after the collapse of the USSR, as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan gained state independence, the Central Asian region that unites them became the object of geopolitical research (e. g., Banuazizi, Weiner, eds., 1994; Ferdinand, ed., 1994; Fuller, 1990; Mesbahi, ed., 1994).

The special interest in the Central Asian region came primarily due to the fact that Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have rich oil and gas deposits (e.g., Babak, 2006; Kamenev, 2003; Kenisarin, 2004). At the same time, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are rich in hydro resources (e.g., Kurtov, 2004; Niyazi, 2003).

The West's interests in Central Asia were primarily manifested in the realization of opportunities for transporting resources, and above all, oil and gas, from this region to the West. In this context, an approach to the restoration of the historical "Great Silk Road" was formed (e.g., Elisseeff, ed. 2000; Liu, 1998). This approach was not only (and not so much) symbolic in nature, as it created the possibility of transport links between Europe and Asia bypassing the land transport route passing through Russia (e.g., Gegeshidze, 1999; Shevardnadze, 1999). The idea of recreating the "Great Silk Road" was implemented in two projects – TRACECA and INOGATE, initiated in the mid-1990s. As a result, the corresponding transport corridor was put into operation (Asadov, 2000; Rondeli, 2002; Starr, Cornell, eds., 2005; Stauffer, 2000). Here, we note that both projects, TRACECA and INOGATE, implied the creation of transport and energy corridors linking Europe with Central Asia, but these corridors did not reach China (Gogolashvili, 2017).

In 2021, the EU launched the Global Gateway Strategy as "a new European strategy to boost smart, clean and secure connections in the digital, energy and transport sectors, and to strengthen health, education and research systems around the world" (EU, n.d.).

The issue of transport corridors has become particularly relevant since the COVID-19 outbreak and since the start of Russia's war in Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The economic sanctions imposed by the West on Russia have affected both the economy as a whole, and the oil and gas sector of Central Asian countries in particular (Hess, 2024). Changing geopolitics directly impact Central Asia (Cornell, eds., 2023).

The essence of the problem is that the pandemic, the aforementioned war, and the economic sanctions fundamentally influenced the nature of globalization that had been established for decades, and led to a change in the world order (e.g., Brandon, 2024; Dynkin, Telegin, 2021; Flockhart, 2023; Huang, 2021; Lehne, 202).

The purpose of this study is to assess the role of transport corridors in Central Asia in the context of the transformation of the world order, which is mainly determined by the nature of globalization processes (e.g., Amadi, 2020).

At the outset, at least briefly, it is necessary to characterize the main changes occurring in globalization processes.

## **On Confrontational Globalization and Economic Security**

The rapid spread of the coronavirus worldwide meant that the only way to combat it was to shut down the functioning of many sectors of the economy, which caused a rupture in global supply chains (Rickards, 2022). This, in turn, contributed to the perception that the COVID-19 pandemic had triggered a process of deglobalization that could ultimately lead to isolationism (Derviş, Strauss, 2020). At the same time, it was obvious that post-pandemic economic development in the context of deglobalization, not to mention isolationism, was fundamentally impossible (Fung, 2020).

When discussing the possibility of deglobalization, it is necessary to note that with the modern development of transport and communication systems, the completion of globalization as such is fundamentally impossible, as evidenced by the stability (even in the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic) of the illegal global economy (e.g., drug trafficking, arms trafficking, etc.) (Papava, 2022b). It is the illegal global economy that is Russia's main "ally" (Papava, 2023) in circumventing the economic sanctions (e.g., Atasuntsev, 2023; Berman, 2023; Deen, 2023; Euronews, 2023; Feldstein, 2024; Race, 2024; Rajoli, 2024), that were imposed by the West on it due to the outbreak of war in Ukraine (BBC, 2024).

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not the globalization process itself that ended, but the type of globalization to which everyone had become accustomed and adapted to in one way or another (Pisani-Ferry, 2021). In particular, it was the process of hyper-globalization (Rodrik, 2011, 2021, 2022), which was most consistent with the unipolar world order that emerged after the collapse of the USSR, that ended.

Due to disruptions in global supply chains in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, hyperglobalization has given way to turbulent globalization (Papava, 2022d). Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic created the impression of the beginning of a process of deglobalization, although, in reality, this process is more correctly described as pseudo-deglobalization (Papava, 2021).

With the start of Russia's war in Ukraine and the introduction of economic sanctions against Russia by the West, turbulent globalization has given way to confrontational globalization (Papava, 2022a), which reflects the division of countries into three groups – countries that have imposed sanctions against Russia, countries that support Russia, the so-called neutral countries, and non-allied countries.

When talking about the future of globalization, the idea that the future will bring a so-called "better globalization" (Rodrik, 2022), or a new and improved "wave" of globalization (El-Erian, 2020) is usually discussed. However, no clarification is made about what is meant by such assessments of the future of globalization.

In our opinion, confrontational globalization will most likely be replaced by "globalization with economic security," since, against the backdrop of the pandemic and Russia's war in Ukraine, the need to overcome issues related to economic security is becoming increasingly urgent (e.g., Hillman, 2025). To achieve this, special attention should be paid to the creation of more resilient global supply chains (Marin, 2021; Zeihan, 2022), which ultimately involves the creation of a network of sustainable economic corridors (Aydinly, 2025; Azhgaliyeva, et al., eds., 2024; Papava, 2021; WB, 2023a).

## **About the Transport Corridors of Central Asia**

In the context of confrontational globalization, there is also the so-called war of transport and trade corridors (Colibasanu, 2024), which is a natural state of affairs precisely due to the confrontational nature of the modern world. In particular, there is an intersection of interests of the West, China, Russia and Iran. Of these interests, first of all, it is necessary to consider the role of China in the formation of global transport corridors, based on the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI), formed back in 2013, which covers almost the entire globe (e.g., Ge, 2016).

In the context of Central Asia, the BRI includes the following corridors:

- The Northern Corridor, or New Eurasian Land Bridge, linking China by transcontinental railway with Europe via Kazakhstan, Russia and Belarus;
- The Southern Corridor, linking China with Europe and the Mediterranean via Central Asia, Iran and Turkey;
- The Middle Corridor (also known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route), starting from China and crossing Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan and Georgia, which reaches Turkey or the Black Sea.

Since the Middle Corridor has two destinations – Turkey and the Black Sea, then, accordingly, the first option can be conditionally called Middle Corridor A, and the second – Middle Corridor B (Colibasanu, 2024).

After the start of Russia's war in Ukraine and the introduction of economic sanctions against Russia by the West, the Northern Corridor has effectively been blocked.

As for the Southern Corridor, there are some security issues. In particular, in 2022, Russia began actively investing in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which will connect Russia's northern ports, through the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea, with Iran's southern ports and further to India. Consequently, Iran is given a key position, since it is in this country that the Southern Corridor will intersect with INSTC. It is rightly believed that in this case, the so-called informal coalition of China, Iran, and Russia (CIRN) may be strengthened, which is not in the interests of the West (Colibasanu, 2024).

Based on the above, the Middle Corridor, whose workload relative to the Northern Corridor was insignificant, has a certain advantage in establishing transport links between Europe and Asia (Aguiar, 2025). In particular, in 2021, only 8 percent of the volume of cargo that was transported through the Northern Corridor was sent through the Middle Corridor (Pavliashvili, et al., 2024, p. 82).

The growing interest in increasing the Middle Corridor's workload is directly related to the start of Russia's war in Ukraine and the introduction of economic sanctions against Russia by the West (Papava, 2021). In economic terms, this is a manifestation of a positive externality for the realization of the transport potential of Azerbaijan (e.g., WB, 2020) and Georgia (e.g., Charaia, Papava, 2017; Kipiani, 2023; Papava, 2017), due to the introduction of the above-mentioned Western economic sanctions against Russia (Papava, 2022c).

The proper use of Middle Corridor B depends in large part on when and how Russia's war in Ukraine ends, and provided that an open and free Black Sea remains.

Since the real competitor of the Northern and Southern Corridors is the Middle Corridor, naturally, Russia and Iran are most interested in the latter not working at full capacity. At the same time, China's involvement in realizing the Middle Corridor's potential could act as a deterrent to Russia and Iran's attempts to hinder the functioning and development of said Corridor.

It is also necessary to take into account the fact that if, in the more or less foreseeable future, fundamental political changes occur in Russia, and/or if the West also fundamentally changes its attitude towards Russia, then practically nothing will prevent the relatively rapid restoration of the significance of the Northern Corridor.

It should be noted that for India, INSTC is seen as a potential opportunity for its connection not so much with the Southern, but with the Middle Corridor, with Central Asia, the Caspian region and Europe (Wani, 2024a, 2024b).

Among the Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are showing particular interest in INSTC (Das Kundu, 2024). Here, we note that the countries of Central Asia have a significant interest in developing transport corridors in the direction of South Asia (WB, 2011). The construction of the first phase of the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India gas pipeline should also be considered in this context (TAPI) (Kaleji, 2025).

The West's interests in Central Asia's resources, as noted above, were embodied in the above-mentioned TRACECA and INOGATE projects. But when speaking about the West in relation to Central Asia, it seems that the interests of the EU and the US should be considered separately.

For the EU, and for Europe as a whole, there is no doubt about the interest in Central Asian resources (e.g., EBRD, 2023; Engvall, 2025; Mami, 2024; Rizzi, 2024; Urciuolo, 2024; Wani, 2024a, 2024b). Moreover, according to the World Bank's calculations, by 2030, the volume of freight traffic along the Middle Corridor will have increased threefold, and travel time will have been halved (WB, 2023b).

Unlike European countries, the US' position towards Central Asia is currently not as obvious as it seemed in the 1990s.

As is known, the US is particularly interested in the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), which should include an eastern corridor connecting India with the Persian Gulf, and a northern corridor connecting the Persian Gulf with Europe. IMEC has deep historical roots (e.g., Lentin, 2025) and will link India, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel and Europe (WH, 2023). For the US, IMEC is seen as a counterweight to China's BRI (Chambers, 2023). At the same time, as noted above, for India, the opportunity to connect with Central Asia and the Middle Corridor is becoming increasingly attractive (Wani, 2024a, 2024b).

Despite the fact that Central Asia is rich not only in energy resources, but also in critical minerals (such as manganese, chromium, lead, zinc, and titanium), which are of the greatest importance for the development of green technologies (Tussupov, 2024), the level of US interest in this region is clearly insufficient (Durso, 2024; Starr, 2024).

Formally, the official document titled 'United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity' emphasized support for the regional sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of the countries in the region, as well as for promoting the rule of law and encouraging US investment (Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, 2020).

In fairness, it should be recognized that this document was adopted at a time when US troops were still in Afghanistan. The rapid withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan, and their replacement by forces from China, Russia and the Persian Gulf countries, was seen as a decline in US interest in Central Asian countries (Starr, 2024). Despite the repeated visits of the presidents of Russia and China to Central Asian countries, unfortunately, no US President has ever visited this region (Durso, 2024; Starr, 2024).

At the initiative of Kazakhstan, the C5+1 format was created, within the framework of which the presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan could meet together with the President of the United States to discuss pressing problems in Central Asia. It is a sad fact that the only meeting between the President of the United States and the presidents of the five Central Asian countries took place in the C5+1 format only in 2023, during the UN General Assembly (Durso, 2024; Starr, 2024).

The increased role of the US in Central Asia is a real challenge for the US Administration, which, in addition to many areas, will directly affect the role of transport and trade corridors in this region (Durso, 2024; Starr, 2024). Any US efforts in this direction (e.g., Daryo, 2024) should be welcomed.

When discussing the transport corridors of Central Asia, it is vital to emphasize the importance of developing these corridors within the region itself. In particular, the Central Asian countries are actively developing intra-regional transport networks. The most significant of these is the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway for multimodal freight transportation (Fazl-e-Haider, 2025). In this context, two additional routes are being developed: in the direction of Europe, and to the South. This will make it possible to connect Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan with Iran. For its part, Kazakhstan, as a country with the largest economy in the region and located in the Middle Corridor, is of considerable interest in the development of transport corridors in the southern direction. The development of a network of transport corridors within Central Asia is intended to strengthen regional trade and economic integration (Omirgazy, 2024).



## **Economic Security and Transport Corridors**

Above, when considering the issue of confrontational globalization, it was emphasized that the need to ensure economic security is becoming increasingly urgent worldwide. In this direction, transport corridors can play a special role, which should ensure the resilience of global supply chains. From this point of view, rethinking the approach to the formation and development prospects of transport corridors is of great importance.

It should be acknowledged that the key characteristic of the approach to transport corridors is their alternative nature, designed to prevent any country or group of countries from establishing a monopoly in providing transport services. This issue becomes particularly critical as the confrontational nature of relations between countries intensifies. The most obvious examples of this are Russia's war in Ukraine, as well as in the Middle East (for example, Rey-Bellet, 2024; International Transport Forum, 2022), and their impact on the development of transport corridors (Colibasanu, 2024).

In other words, the language of "alternativeness" is most suitable for the paradigm of "confrontation." It was noted above that, in our deep conviction, confrontational globalization will be replaced by globalization with economic security. Consequently, the problem of economic security, the importance of which increased during confrontational globalization, will not lose its relevance at the next stage of globalization.

Thus, with the end of confrontational globalization, the language of "alternativeness" should also change. In particular, in our opinion, the language of "harmonizing" transport corridors should be used instead, which will be based on the "complementarity" of these corridors (Papava, Tokmazishvili, 2008). It is precisely complementarity that should become the basis that will ensure the resilience of global supply chains.

Clearly, at this stage, with Russia's war in Ukraine still ongoing, it is still too early to talk about the "harmonization" of transport corridors, but it is necessary to come to the conclusion today that for the future world economy, a language that operates on "complementarity" will be much more acceptable than the language of "alternativeness" of transport corridors.

Naturally, this approach will fully affect the transport corridors of Central Asia.

## **Conclusion**

When addressing the issues surrounding transport corridors, it is essential to consider the nature of the globalization process. With the beginning of Russia's war in Ukraine and the introduction of economic sanctions against Russia by the West, so-called confrontational globalization formed. In such conditions, the resilience of global supply chains is of particular importance, which will largely be determined by a developed network of transport corridors.

The Central Asian countries are interested in developing transport corridors. This primarily concerns the Chinese BRI, as well as INSTC. The BRI's Northern Corridor is blocked due to Russia's war in Ukraine and the West's economic sanctions against Russia. As for the Southern Corridor, Iran's role becomes more significant, as this corridor intersects with the INSTC in Iran itself, conflicting with the interests of the West in the region. As a result, the role of the Middle Corridor grows, which goes against the interests of Russia and Iran. However, they are unlikely to openly oppose China's interests in this matter.

Europe's interest in the Central Corridor is undeniable. However, the United States seems more focused on developing the IMEC transport corridor, and has shown limited interest in Central Asia and its transport routes, a situation that calls for a significant shift in approach.

The Central Asian countries are also interested in developing a transport corridor linking them to South Asia. At the same time, they are intensively developing intraregional transport routes.

Based on the need to ensure the resilience of global supply chains, the transition from an approach of "alternative" transport corridors to an approach of "complementarity" is of great importance.

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