

Türkiye's Middle Corridor and China's BRI: Identification and Assessment

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ABSTRACT *China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Türkiye's Middle Corridor (MC) are two ambitious initiatives that foster trans-continental integration. These two grand schemes have been developed independently of one another. Nonetheless, they have the common objective of connecting Europe and Asia as well as facilitating commercial, economic, political, and socio-cultural interactions between the two continents. While the MC is one of the most important components of the BRI, the alignment of these two projects will offer a range of benefits for Türkiye's MC, especially in finding alternative financing sources. This article aims to examine the history, objectives, and phases of Türkiye's MC. In doing so, it harmonizes the BRI with the MC and examines the opportunities that the integration offers for the region, as well as its inherent risks and challenges. This research is also significant and worthwhile as it provides insights into the compatibility of the BRI and the MC.*

Keywords: Middle Corridor, Belt and Road Initiative, Türkiye-China Relations, Silk Road

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Introduction

The Middle Corridor (MC), officially known as the Trans-Caspian East-West-Central Corridor Initiative, is a project that echoes Türkiye's dream of establishing transport networks with China and Central Asia. While the MC overlaps with the China-Central Asia-West Asia corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it largely concentrates on roads and rail transportation lines. The emergence of the MC, however, did not occur by accident. Following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR), the Caspian region became a new field of struggle for regional powers. The discovery of abundant untapped hydrocarbon resources in the Caspian region further fuelled global powers' interest in the area. As the legal status of the Caspian Sea remain uncertain, the West and Russia started to compete to exercise control over oil and gas riches in the Caspian region. On the one hand, Moscow's objective was to limit gas sales competition by preventing the exploitation and transportation of energy resources from the Caspian region to Europe. On the other hand, the West sought to strengthen the political and economic independence of the Caspian states to neutralize the influence of Russia, Iran, or China in the region. Türkiye also had plans to dominate this region by linking all the Caspian states together via railroad networks. Therefore, the first factor that raised the issue of Trans-Caspian cooperation was the oil and gas reserves owned by the Caspian riparian states.

The most important aspect of the Trans-Caspian cooperation was the transportation of the oil and gas belonging to the Caspian states from the Caspian Sea to Western markets. For this purpose, some states made significant attempts to develop alternative logistics. Kazakhstan, for instance, transferred some of its oil to global markets through Azerbaijan. Türkiye also tried to revive the Trans-Caspian Corridor and the Silk Road in the 1990s. The "Silk Road 2000" conference, which was held in İstanbul in 1997 and was attended by 26 countries, was the first meeting in which Türkiye indicated its interest in integrating the region. Turkish President Süleyman Demirel stated in the conference that the Modern Silk Road Dream would help Türkiye serve as an economic bridge between the West and the East.¹ The meeting culminated in the signing of the Ankara Declaration, and the signatories included Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and the U.S. (as a witness). With this declaration, the parties acknowledged that the construction of the Trans-Caucasus and Trans-Caspian pipelines was significant, and they reached a final decision on the "Caspian-Mediterranean/Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan" pipeline.

However, the MC faced several setbacks before moving in the right direction. The idea of connecting Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye by rail was first discussed in 1993 at the Joint Transportation Commission. Armenia policymakers, nonetheless, lobbied the U.S. government to put pressure on Georgia to abandon

the project.² For this reason, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway project took longer than expected to be implemented. It was not until December 29, 2004, that the first step of the project was taken at the meeting of the Türkiye-Georgia-Azerbaijan joint transport commission in Tbilisi.³ The logistic ties between Türkiye, Georgia, and Azerbaijan grew stronger in the following year. On May 25, 2005, the president of each country signed a trilateral declaration on the Baku-Tbilisi-Ahılkelek-Kars Railway Project, also known as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK). The final agreement for the BTK Railway Project was signed on February 7, 2007, in Tbilisi by the Türkiye's Transport Minister Binali Yıldırım, Georgia's Economy Minister Georgi Arvaladze, and Azerbaijan's Transport Minister Ziya Mammadov.⁴ With the BTK, the Trans-European and Trans-Asian railways network would be merged, and cargo and passengers would be transported to Europe or Asia via Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye. Another transportation network in the MC is the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR). Turkish State Railways became a permanent member of this union in 2018.⁵ Since then, Türkiye has become one of the key stakeholders in the MC with its membership in the TITR.⁶ The TITR is a unifying body that represents the interests of countries and companies that rely on the New Silk Road. The Union aims to manage and coordinate all parties involved in transporting cargo and containers from Asia to Europe.

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In summary, Türkiye has played a leading role in harmonizing its transport networks with those of Georgia of Azerbaijan. Türkiye's main objective in establishing the MC is to facilitate the transfer of hydrocarbon resources from the Caspian basin to western countries. This initiative has strengthened the connectivity of the East-West corridor through the construction of transportation routes and energy pipelines. The MC should not be considered a single project; rather, it should be regarded as a fragmented scheme that is based on the idea of extending railway lines from Turkish territories to Central Asia via Transcaucasia. With the MC, Ankara seems prepared to become a major player in Central Asia.

The Project's Purpose

Türkiye's MC is based on the functional use of the existing road and railway routes from China to Türkiye.⁷ Thanks to the MC, Ankara will be able to play an active role in integrating Central Asia and the South Caucasus through global trade and inter-con-

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tinental transportation networks.⁸ Three promising routes facilitate the intercontinental integration of railway networks. The first route aims to connect China with Russia via the Northern Corridor and the Trans-Siberian Railway (TSR). However, the severe winter conditions, the political problems between Russia and Georgia, and the war between Russia and Ukraine show that the Northern Corridor is not a good alternative for China's BRI. Another option is to use the Southern Corridor to establish a link between the MC and the BRI. In this scenario, the route will pass through Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Iran before reaching Türkiye. If China uses the Southern Corridor, then the MC will be less preferred. However, Ankara will not want to fully depend on Moscow or Tehran for strategic transportation corridors, which are the gateway to the entire Asian market. It is, therefore, a strategic goal for the Turkish government to integrate the MC into the BRI.

Türkiye's MC goals are four-fold. Its main objective is to promote the free movement of goods and passengers within the region. Its second objec-

tive is to strengthen cultural ties with all of Central Asia's Turkic states. Its third objective is to connect Europe to Asia. Its last objective includes providing employment opportunities, attracting foreign investments, achieving economies of scale, and making the region an attractive destination for manufacturing and industrialization. More importantly, the MC will help Türkiye cement its position as one of the global leaders in the transit industry. This initiative will also be instrumental in eliminating some security problems in the region. Overall, Ankara considers the MC crucial to its national interests and the prosperity of Turkic states.

Furthermore, Türkiye considers the transportation sector an important source of income due to its geographical location. The Turkish government has carried out several ambitious projects to strengthen the transportation network within the country. According to official data from 2023, the total length of roads in Türkiye was 68,689 kilometers. As of 2019, the total length of state roads was 31,021 kilometers, of which 2,159 kilometers were highways.⁹ Reports published by the State Railways of the Republic of Turkey (TCDD) indicated that as of 2018, the total length of the railway network was 12,740 kilometers, of which 1,213 kilometers were high-speed railway lines.¹⁰ It is, therefore, in Ankara's best interest to cooperate with a global power like China to strengthen its road and rail networks.

In sum, Türkiye's investments in the MC and the strengthening of



its infrastructure can be explained by three main internal and external factors. First, the domestic logistics infrastructure will be completed by integrating the high-speed railways on the East-West axis and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars line. This road will create an alternative transportation route to Iran in the South and Russia in the North. The transportation crises experienced by these countries will be overcome with the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad. Shifting the transportation load to Türkiye will help create the most attractive transportation corridor of the modern silk road in terms of time and cost.¹¹ Most importantly, these projects will strengthen cultural ties between Central Asian Turkic states.

Phases of the MC and Its Harmonization with BRI

The MC is one of the most important components of the historical Silk

Road revitalization project. Türkiye has developed various projects to revitalize the historical Silk Road within the scope of the MC. The Kervansaray Project aims to help simplify border crossings and customs procedures. The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway, the Marmaray, Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge, the Eurasia Tunnel, Çanakkale Bridge, and İstanbul Airport are among the projects that have been completed. Ongoing projects include the three-level subsea tunnel project, the Filyos (Zonguldak) project, Çandarlı (İzmir) and Mersin port construction, and the Edirne-Kars High-Speed Train project. Furthermore, the Türkiye-Georgia-Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan-Afghanistan transportation corridor (Lapis Lazuli) constitutes one of the MC crossings, and it is one of the essential pillars of the project.¹²

The intention of MC stakeholders is to use Azerbaijan's Baku, Turkmenistan's Turkmenbashi, and Ka-

(L-R) Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan Bayramov, Kazakhstan Tleuberdi, Türkiye Çavuşoğlu, and Georgia Khvtisiashvili (Deputy Minister), attend a press conference after their meeting on Trans-Caspian Connectivity in Kazakhstan on November 25, 2022.

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zakhstan's Aktau ports for maritime transport. They also plan to add the construction of Azerbaijan's Alat port and Kazakhstan's Kuryk port to their core goals. To implement these projects, a cooperation protocol was signed between the ministers of transport of the Organization of Turkic States (OIC) countries, which include Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Apart from establishing sister port relations in Baku, Aktau, and Sam-sun, the three countries have continued to develop cooperation with one another to facilitate the Silk Road project.

set to harmonize. At the same time, Türkiye joined the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank to expand the fields of cooperation, have access to credit opportunities and implement joint projects on the regional level.¹³ Also, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan participated in the Belt and Road International Cooperation Forum held in Beijing on May 14-15, 2017. During the forum, Türkiye and China signed cooperation agreements in five areas: "Agreement on International Transport and Coordination Strategy," "Joint Initiative for the Construction of Belt and Road and Strengthening Standard Coop-

Table 1: Agreements and Projects that Shape the Future Direction of the MC

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Completed Agreements/Projects | Ankara Declaration - October 29, 1998 Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline - July 13, 2006 Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway Project - October 30, 2017 Caravanserai (Kervansaray) Project - 2008 Marmaray Project - March 12, 2019 Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge - August 26, 2016 Eurasia Tunnel - December 20, 2016 Istanbul Airport - 2018 Çanakkale Strait Bridge - March 18, 2022 |
| Ongoing Projects | The Three-level Subsea Tunnel Filyos (Zonguldak) Port Çandarlı Port Mersin International Port Edirne-Kars High-Speed Train Project Lapis Lazuli Corridor |

Source: Türkiye's Foreign Ministry and Various News Sources

China and Türkiye signed the "MoU on Aligning the BRI and MC Draft" and the "Türkiye-China Railway Cooperation Agreement Draft" in 2015 during the G20 Leaders' Summit in Antalya. Thanks to the agreements, Türkiye's MC and China's BRI were

eration," "Agreement on Mutual Extradition of Criminals," "Agreement on Transport on International Highways," and "Agreement on the Establishment of Mutual Cultural Centers."¹⁴ One of the essential reasons for the alignment of the MC with

China's BRI is to ensure financing for Türkiye's projects. Although different financing sources were used in the projects, the aim was to benefit from China as the primary source. In the justification part of the MoU in 2015, it is stated that acting in harmony with the People's Republic of China (PRC) can create financing opportunities for the MC and enable Turkish companies to participate in the infrastructure and transportation projects in the BRI.¹⁵

Prospects and Challenges

Türkiye has always shown interest in China's BRI and has tried to make the MC an important alternative to the BRI with its infrastructure investments. Türkiye's geographical location and historical and cultural ties with European, Middle Eastern, and Central Asian countries make Türkiye an important country for China. For Türkiye, attracting foreign investments and tourists through the BRI will help improve relations with China and reduce the trade imbalance.¹⁶

The modern Silk Road project will also play a role in Türkiye achieving its future economic goals. The main contribution of China's BRI is that it will open up Türkiye's markets and increase its export potential. Thanks to these projects, the shipping time between Türkiye and China has decreased from 30 days to 10 days. Not only that, the products delivered from Beijing in two months by sea will now be delivered to İstanbul in

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less than two weeks. These benefits make the project even more important to the Turkish government.

Furthermore, the BRI will also allow Türkiye to strengthen its economic relations with countries such as China, Iran, and Russia as well as boost its interaction with Turkic states such as Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. These Turkic countries gained their independence after the collapse of the USSR, and the modern Silk Road project will allow them to integrate their domestic markets into global markets. Also, the establishment of the Organization of Turkish States (OTS) and the decisions made at the latest summit will play a positive role in the future of the MC. The joint statement published after the proclamation of the OTS included stipulations finalizing the International Combined Freight Transport Agreement between member states, which is a crucial step to facilitate transportation along with the MC.¹⁷ The declaration also provided guidelines for simplifying administrative procedures to utilize the MC as a more efficient and sustain-

able route. A request to encourage more comprehensive cooperation between the sister ports of the OTS was also included.¹⁸ The BRI will not only improve Türkiye's bilateral relations but also provide significant capital flows. Ankara will also have the opportunity to attract Asian capital. Although the modern Silk Road project has a structure that covers trade and commerce, it also has a framework that addresses the transportation of oil and natural gas resources. The fact that this project brings together energy supply and trade makes Türkiye an important regional player in Central Asia.¹⁹ It should also be emphasized that despite the projects and infrastructure investments, there was only a trivial change in the trade between Türkiye and the Turkic republics. Considering Türkiye's exports in the last decade, the growth between Türkiye and Turkic states could not be met the expectations, as can be seen in Table 2.

first scenario, China's medium and low-technology sectors will be attracted to Türkiye. The second scenario focuses on Türkiye's production and technology development with China and indicates that Türkiye stands out as an ideal candidate for foreign direct investment with its industrial skills and experience. In line with the development plans of Turkish railways, policymakers recommend that Ankara should establish partnerships with Chinese train manufacturers like the China Railway Rolling Stock Corporation (CRRC). With this partnership, the efficiency of the Turkish industry will increase in markets such as Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. The third scenario illustrates how Türkiye will become a logistics center and highlights the importance of increasing multilateral cooperation activities in Central Asia and the Caucasus, where Türkiye has strong cultural and diplomatic connections.

Table 2: Türkiye's Exports to the Turkic Republics between 2010-2019 (Million Dollars)

| Countries | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 |
|--------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Azerbaijan | 1,550 | 2,063 | 2,584 | 2,960 | 2,874 | 1,898 | 1,285 | 1,356 | 1,474 | 1,638 | 2,085 | 2,342 | 2,505 |
| Kazakhstan | 818 | 947 | 1,068 | 1,039 | 977 | 750 | 623 | 746 | 695 | 805 | 985 | 1,288 | 1,606 |
| Türkmenistan | 1,139 | 1,493 | 1,480 | 1,957 | 2,231 | 1,857 | 1,241 | 1,037 | 467 | 691 | 786 | 984 | 1,099 |
| Uzbekistan | 282 | 354 | 449 | 562 | 603 | 488 | 533 | 680 | 951 | 1,135 | 1,154 | 1,841 | 1,877 |
| Kyrgyzstan | 129 | 180 | 257 | 388 | 421 | 294 | 308 | 343 | 377 | 430 | 417 | 749 | 902 |
| Total | 3,921 | 5,039 | 5,840 | 6,908 | 7,107 | 5,289 | 3,992 | 4,164 | 3,965 | 4,700 | 5,427 | 7,204 | 7,989 |

Source: Anadolu Agency and TÜİK

A report titled "Positioning Türkiye in the Belt and Road Initiative" list the benefits of the BRI for Türkiye's economy. The report paints five different scenarios Türkiye can benefit from in the BRI. According to the

The fourth scenario prioritizes Turkish-Chinese cooperation and states how the two nations can integrate their economic policies and market entry strategies. The last scenario highlights the importance of align-

ing Türkiye's physical infrastructure with the technical specifications of international standards.²⁰

Overall, the MC is more advantageous in terms of safety, distance, and cost than other corridors (North and South Corridor) in China's Belt and Road Project. Türkiye has taken necessary steps toward becoming an energy and transportation bridge between Asia and Europe with the TANAP, Turkish Stream, Blue Stream projects, Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, Iran-Türkiye and Iraq-Türkiye pipelines and Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway projects. These benefits make China's cooperation with Türkiye invaluable.

Nonetheless, these projects come with many challenges. While scholars express the challenges of the project, they emphasize the geopolitical, economic, and political challenges. The trade deficit and the ideological divergence between the two countries are among the problems expressed by Turkish academics. Professor Varis Çakan states that the development of friendly relations between Ankara and Beijing is extremely important for the project's success. Çakan explains the problem succinctly:

Although China is a major trading partner of Türkiye, the trade balance is increasingly deteriorating against Türkiye. A similar situation exists in terms of investments. The insurmountable differences between both countries' capital power and commercial capacity make it difficult to

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achieve a fully balanced trade volume. Another important problem between the two countries is that both communities do not know each other well enough and are prejudiced against each other.²¹

Geopolitical risks are also among the challenges that could slow down the implementation of the project. Türkiye is a politically stable country, but over the years, the country has been marred by great turmoil in the Middle East. The Syrian war, the regional unrest in Iraq, and the presence of terrorist organizations (ISIS, YPG, PKK) in the region seriously threaten the stability of the region and Türkiye's security. Such problems in the region pose strategic risks for the BRI and the MC.²² Some Turkish academics have also examined the MC and BRI from the perspective of the Uyghur issue. In Türkiye, some people think the Uyghur issue is one of the obstacles for the two countries, but China maintains that it is not an issue. Mehmet Akif Okur pointed out China's view of the subject from a purely security perspective. According to Okur, China should not regard the Uyghurs as a potential and permanent

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threat to providing safe transportation to Europe and the Middle East via the Turkish Belt.²³ Kadir Temiz also cited the political problems between the two countries as one of the biggest obstacles to the project. According to Temiz, China maintains a different position from Türkiye when it comes to the Uyghur people and the instability in the Middle East conflict areas. Both issues are important and will strain the bilateral relations. Also, the fact that China is establishing its Middle East policies, especially through Iran and the Gulf countries, raises some security concerns for Türkiye. For this reason, the political and security differences in the Middle East policies of Türkiye and China can be counted among the issues that are likely to cause problems in the future stages of the project.²⁴ On the other hand, despite the criticisms of Turkish scholars, there

is no official discourse on this issue because the Turkish government avoids establishing a connection between the Uyghurs and the BRI.

The opinions of Turkish academicians on the project have been positive.²⁵ Although some difficulties in the relations between the two countries may hinder the project's success, academics have a favorable view of the project. Turkish scholars generally centralize Türkiye's position in the BRI. They argue that the MC is the most logical route in the BRI. Nonetheless, political and economic problems between the two countries need to be resolved for the projects to be successful.

Conclusion

The MC is a project that reflects Ankara's dream of establishing transport links with China through the Caucasus and Central Asia. This scheme aims to create a belt of railway networks stretching from Türkiye through Central Asian Turkic Republics to Xi'an city in China. The corridor is based on the modernization of the existing road and railway routes from China to Türkiye. In the last 10 years, Türkiye has developed various projects to revitalize the historical Silk Road within the scope of the MC. With these projects, Türkiye will strengthen its economic relations with several countries, such as China, Iran, and Russia, as well as others located on the Silk Road Economic Beltline, such as Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. Tür-

kiye's main goals with this initiative are to create a prosperous zone in the region, strengthen cultural ties with the Central Asian Turkic states, linking Europe with Asia, attract foreign investments, achieve economies of scale, create employment opportunities, and foster a sense of regional ownership in the region. With the integration of the MC and the BRI, Türkiye will not only become an energy trade center but also attract foreign investments and accelerate economic growth by opening up its economy. However, Türkiye's ability to integrate its MC with China's BRI may be limited if Ankara and Beijing cannot resolve ongoing problems. ■

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