



Türkiye's Central Corridor Policy in the Context of the Belt and Road Initiative and the Organization of Turkic States

Kuşak-Yol Girişimi ve Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı Kapsamında Türkiye'nin Orta Koridor Politikası

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ABSTRACT

The states that declared their independence from the USSR after the Cold War and the rise of China brought about a shift in geopolitics, particularly in Turkestan. Türkiye, which adopted Western-centered policies during the Cold War, shifted its focus towards Asia and devised strategies for cooperation with the Turkic Republics. In this context, the Central Corridor Initiative has been a prominent policy. The Central Corridor, which aims to establish an alternative trade and logistics line between Asia and Europe, also seeks to accelerate the integration of the region it covers into the global economy. Türkiye has built the Central Corridor Initiative on two leading platforms: The first is the Organization of Turkic States, a cooperation organization covering economic, political, social, cultural, and security cooperation with the Central Asian Turkic Republics. The second is the Belt and Road Initiative, which offers infrastructure and financial opportunities to facilitate the region's integration into the global economy and international cooperation. Türkiye has aimed to achieve deeper integration with the regional and international community through these initiatives; and strengthen economic and political ties among Turkestan states. This study aims to analyze the process from the emergence of the Middle Corridor from a geopolitical perspective to the present day and to analyze the projects that Türkiye has completed and planned within the scope of the Belt and Road with China and the Middle Corridor Initiative with the Organization of Turkic States.

Keywords

Central Corridor, Belt and Road Initiative, Organization of Turkic States, Geopolitics.

ÖZ

Soğuk Savaş sonrasında SSCB'den ayrılarak bağımsızlığını ilan eden devletler ve Çin'in yükselişi özellikle Türkistan'da jeopolitiğin değişmesine neden olmuştur. Soğuk Savaş döneminde Batı merkezli politikalar uygulayan Türkiye, yüzünü Asya'ya dönmüş Türk Cumhuriyetleri ile iş birliğine yönelik stratejiler geliştirmiştir. Bu kapsamda Orta Koridor Girişimi ön plana çıkan politika olmuştur. Asya ile Avrupa arasında alternatif bir ticaret ve lojistik hat oluşturmayı amaçlayan Orta Koridor, aynı zamanda kapsadığı bölgenin küresel ekonomiye entegrasyonunu hızlandırmayı hedeflemektedir. Türkiye Orta Koridor Girişimi'ni ise iki temel platform üzerine inşa etmiştir: Bunlardan birincisi Orta Asya Türk Cumhuriyetleriyle ekonomik, siyasi, sosyal, kültürel ve güvenliği kapsayan bir iş birliği örgütü olan Türk Devletleri Teşkilatıdır. İkincisi ise bölgenin, küresel ekonomiye ve uluslararası iş birliklerine entegrasyonunu kolaylaştıracak altyapı ve finans imkanları sunan Kuşak-Yol Girişimidir. Türkiye, bu girişimlerle bölgesel ve uluslararası toplumla daha derin bir entegrasyon sağlamayı amaçlamış, Türkistan devletleri arasında ekonomik ve siyasi bağları güçlendirmeyi hedeflemiştir. Bu çalışmanın amacı jeopolitik perspektiften Orta Koridorun ortaya çıkışından günümüze kadar olan süreci inceleyerek Türkiye'nin, Çin ile Kuşak-Yol kapsamında ve Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı ile birlikte Orta Koridor Girişiminde tamamladığı ve planladığı projeleri analiz etmektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Orta Koridor, Kuşak-Yol Girişimi, Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı, Jeopolitik.

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INTRODUCTION

Geopolitics is the branch of science that examines the advantages and disadvantages of political geography for states and countries' domestic and foreign policies, considering their location, human resources, social, cultural, economic, and political situation.

According to Henry Kissinger, geopolitics is parallel to the concept of *realpolitik*. In other words, it is an effort to maintain the desired equation in world politics. He argues that political decisions should be based on real-world conditions and national interests rather than ideological or moral goals. Kissinger suggests that policymakers should consider political and strategic calculations, balances of power, interests and conflicts of interest. In this context, geopolitics represents a policy approach in which national interests come to the fore and political and strategic calculations play a critical role. Geopolitical assessments help set strategic goals by evaluating a country's advantages and disadvantages regarding its security, economic interests, access to energy and natural resources, trade routes and relations with other countries.

Geopolitical analysis is essential in strategic planning, foreign policy formulation, military strategy and international relations. The geographical location of a country shapes its national interests and foreign policy. Geopolitics allows a country to achieve its military, economic and political goals by utilizing its geographical advantages. For example, a country's strategic location along major trade routes can make it a regional leader. Geopolitics is also influential in determining a country's military defense strategies. Therefore, states should know their geopolitical position and decide on their best foreign policy strategies to use these advantages. In Türkiye's case, the Anatolian Peninsula has been of critical geopolitical importance throughout history. As a bridge connecting Asia and Europe, Anatolia is an important commercial, demographic, and military transit point.

As the international balance of power and politics change, so do geopolitics. In this context, the geopolitical strategies of the United States during the Cold War played an important role in determining Türkiye's strategic position. Especially according to the "Rimland" theory developed by Nicholas J. Spykman, Türkiye has a highly strategic geopolitical position. According to Spykman, countries that dominate the seas and coasts appear as critical regions that shape and determine the world political map. In this respect, Türkiye is the center of the Middle East and the key to Eurasia (Nicholas Spykman, 1943). Taken together with the Turkic states, Türkiye is the gateway to Eurasia. The strategies developed by the United States based on this theory have

effectively shaped its policy of establishing a military presence on the coasts of Asia and Europe.

The theory formed the basis of the US containment policies against the Soviet Union after World War II. In this context, Türkiye, geographically located as an important bridge between East and West, served as both an adequate buffer zone against the Soviet Union's expansionist strategies and a strategic base for NATO to establish security on its southern border against the Eastern Bloc. This strategic relationship also played a decisive role in shaping Türkiye's defense policies. On the other hand, Türkiye's foreign policy during the Cold War period focused on policies of approaching the West in international relations and soft development and modernization strategies. During this period, the US policy of containment and the Marshall Plan influenced Türkiye's foreign policy and led the country to move closer to the Western powers. Moreover, due to its geographical location and strategic importance, Türkiye became a member of NATO and tried to develop military cooperation with Western countries. Furthermore, it systematically implemented soft development strategies by receiving technical, financial and economic support from the West for Türkiye's internal modernization and development. These various policies shaped Türkiye's geopolitical position and international relations during the Cold War according to the conditions of the period.

With the end of the Cold War, the world rapidly entered a unipolar order and the influence of globalization. In 1989, Francis Fukuyama put forward the thesis "The End of History" and evaluated geopolitics as the struggle of ideologies during the Cold War. According to him, the battle between liberalism and socialism resulted in the victory of liberalism and he claimed that after this victory, the international system would be dominated by liberal democracy, namely the United States (Fukuyama, 2020). In the same period, Samuel Huntington, argued in his "Clash of Civilizations" that cultural blocs, not ideologies, would shape geopolitics. With globalization, neoliberal policies led to an expansion in the world economy. After the Cold War, the US invaded Afghanistan and Iraq to maintain the edge zone geopolitics and to sustain NATO, which had completed its mission, According to J. Nye, this situation caused the USA to lose its soft power (Nye, 1990).

As of the 1990s, most experts thought that the unipolar order led by the US would consolidate, However, since the early 2000s, China, has effectively used globalization to its advantage and, has confronted the US as an economic and military power. Capitalized by the reforms initiated under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping in the 1970s, China has adapted to neoliberal policies and has become the second-largest economic power. In 2012, Chinese President Xi Jin Ping declared the "Chinese Dream" and proclaimed that China aims to be the global leader by 2049. In 2013, he announced to the international community the Belt and Road Initiative, the most concrete project to achieve this goal.



This new reality has raised the question of whether there will be a power transition in the international system.

The basic concepts of the Transition of Power Theory, proposed by Organski in 1958, include power, transition and destabilization. According to the theory, Power refers to a state's military, economic, and political capacity. Transition refers to the decline of existing power and the rise of a new power. On the other hand, destabilization refers to a change in the power system international system power distribution. According to Organski's theory, power transitions can lead to intractable disputes and conflicts in international relations (Lai, 2011). On the other hand, power transition and the multiple hierarchy model can create new opportunities and risks for geopolitically important countries like Türkiye. In particular, the "Central Corridor" geopolitics that develops with the Belt and Road may change Türkiye's position.

Belt and Road Initiative and Central Corridor Geopolitics

With Xi Jinping's ascension to power in 2012, Beijing emphasized its globalization policy and adopted the "Chinese Dream" doctrine, which aims to be completed by 2049. Most experts consider this doctrine China's hegemony project and the most tangible evidence of it is the Belt and Road Initiative.

With its economic growth rate dropping from 10% to 7% in 2011, China decided to accelerate economic development and make it more complete (Ross, 2018, p. 2). Accordingly, Chinese leader Xi Jinping announced the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) in 2013. BRI is a global project that aims to revitalize the historic Silk Road and develop economic cooperation by building a vast transportation network through land, sea, air and digital routes. The project has five key priorities to enhance policy coordination between countries, freeing up infrastructure connectivity, removing trade barriers, and increasing financial integration and information sharing (Brinza, 2022). At the same time, the initiative published a "Green Belt and Road Guide" in 2017 to promote environmentally friendly development and set sustainability-focused goals such as green finance, green transportation, and green innovation in 2019 (Wang, 2022).

By 2022, the BRI will include 152 countries and 32 international organizations, accounting for more than 60% of the world economy and 40% of global output (Belt and Road Portal, 2023). By 2030, the initiative is expected to reach an annual trade volume of \$5 trillion and increase world trade by 5% (Zhai, 2018, p. 92). In 2022, Chinese Foreign Affairs spokesperson Wang Wenbin announced that China had undertaken nearly three thousand projects under the project (Jennings, 2022). The financial institutions supporting the initiative include potent actors such as the Silk Road Fund, the China Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the China

Exim Bank, while planning and management are carried out by official institutions such as the State Council, the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the People's Bank of China (Damuri et al. 2019, p. 3). The project is also included in the economic programs of international organizations such as BRICS, ASEAN and the Organization of Turkic States (Ujvari, 2019). While energy (40%), transportation (30%) and construction (10%) sectors constitute the majority of BRI's investment areas, East Asia, Africa (Sub-Saharan), Eurasia, and the Middle East are among the most invested regions (Wang, 2022).

BRI geopolitics manifests itself in three main axes. These are the Northern Corridor, the Maritime Silk Road, the Southern Corridor, and the Central Corridor, where Türkiye occupies a key position. These three corridors are vital for China's most important energy security issue, China is focusing its foreign investments and relations on the regions in which these corridors pass. In the Northern Corridor, it has strategic ties with Russia and Central Asian countries, while in the Southern Corridor it is acquiring ports and military bases to control maritime bottlenecks. Progress is slower in the Central Corridor, which is more politically complex than the other two corridors.

The most highly completed corridor of the initiative is the Northern corridor. The New Eurasian Land Bridge Economic Corridor (NELBEC) is the most active and well-known route. NELBEC is a trade route from China, through Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Poland and Germany to the Port of Rotterdam in the Netherlands. The corridor aims to facilitate and accelerate trade through investments such as the modernization of rail and roads, expansion of logistics infrastructure and access to free trade zones. The main route of the line starts from the Chinese cities of Wuhan, Lianyungang, and Chongqing, connecting to the Trans-Siberian Railway and reaching Europe (Sarwar, 2018, p. 136). Rail transportation offers an alternative to air transportation as a cheaper and faster option than maritime transportation. Products transported via NELBEC include clothes, electronic products, household appliances from China to Europe, automobiles, machinery, and food products from Europe to China. In this context, in Duisburg, Germany, the number of Chinese companies increased from 40 in 2014 to over 100 in 2020 (Zhu, Huadong, & Qun, 2023). Moreover, this line has played a significant role as an alternative to the maritime exchanges during the COVID-19 pandemic, with logistics transportation capacity increasing by 50% compared to 2019 to 12,400 freight trains (Zhu, Huadong, & Qun, 2023).

The Belt and Road Initiative, an important part of China's global trade strategy, is a far-reaching project that aims to revitalize the Old Silk Road. The most important route is the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCWAEAC), which links China to Europe via the Arabian Peninsula and Türkiye. This corridor aims to increase China's activities in global trade by connecting the historic Silk Road route with modern



infrastructure investments. The CCWAEC starts from Urumqi, the capital of China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, and runs through Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Türkiye to Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, and Russia, where it connects to the Port of Rotterdam in Poland and Germany. Alternative routes include Azerbaijan and Georgia via the Caspian Sea. CCWAEC operates in a broad geography, covering 22 countries in total. These include important countries such as Türkiye, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Ukraine, which China categorizes as "West Asia". This definition also reflects China's geopolitical perspective on the region (Wang, 2023, p. 41). The Middle East leg of the corridor was also shaped by the "Vision 2030 Belt and Road Integration Plan" signed between China and Saudi Arabia in December 2022 (Chen, Shu, & Wen 2018, p. 364). This agreement reveals China's goals in the Middle East and its vision of economic integration in the region. Spanning Central Asia, the Caspian Basin, the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean, this route has financial and political potential.

Along with CCWAEC, the infrastructure pillar of the Central Corridor includes projects such as the Kamchik Pass, the Uzbekistan railway and the Marmaray tunnel in Türkiye. Marmaray is critical infrastructure investment in accelerating the BRI's connectivity with Europe as a transportation passage connecting Asia and Europe under the Bosphorus Strait. On the other hand, China invested around \$15 billion in Türkiye between 2005 and 2018 in transportation, energy, and infrastructure (Yılmaz, 2019, p. 173). These investments show that Türkiye is important for China's regional logistics and trade hub strategies in the Central Corridor.

CCWAEC extends to the South Caucasus with the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) Railway. Connecting Türkiye, Azerbaijan and Georgia, further strengthens Central Corridor's regional transportation networks. Moreover, China's acquisition of the Poti Industrial Zone on Georgia's Black Sea coast is part of its strategy to expand into the Black Sea (Bayar, 2019). This geopolitically diversifies China's geopolitical transportation strategies and offers diversity in benefiting from energy corridors in the region and meeting its energy needs. Türkiye is a key country at the center of the Central Corridor. With its geographical location, infrastructure capacity, industrial strength and technology, Türkiye is important among the partners united by the corridor. Moreover, Türkiye's position as a bridge between the Black Sea, the Mediterranean and Central Asia makes it an alternative. Türkiye's advanced logistics infrastructure and the cooperation between the two countries in the field of digitalization demonstrate the benefits China expects from this project.

The Central Corridor is a set of economic and geopolitical projects that aims to make global trade faster, more economical and more inclusive by connecting China's Far Eastern markets to Europe via the Historic Silk Road. However, regional instability, wars

and political tensions destabilize the corridor's future. Since the beginning of the BRI, the civil war and terrorism problem in Syria, the Karabakh War II and the troubles over the Zangezur corridor, the Ukraine War, Israel's expansionist policies and invasion attempts against the countries in the region have undermined the stability of the corridor. To overcome this instability, China aims to ensure the sustainability of the Central Corridor and become a geopolitical actor in the region by emphasizing infrastructure investments and regional cooperation.

China's Central Corridor policy is built on its economic interests, energy security and geopolitical competition. In geopolitical terms, China's Turkestan policy interacts with factors such as the US Pacific strategy and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (Kodaman & Gonca, 2016, p. 1255). In this context, China's opening to Turkestan is strategically essential in breaking the US blockade in the Pacific. Turkestan is a vibrant region in terms of energy resources. While oil, natural gas, coal and various minerals constitute essential sources of income for the countries in the area, Turkestan's strategic location makes it a center of attraction for international powers. As one of the main drivers of energy demand with its fast-growing economy, China, is making a concerted effort to access energy resources in Turkestan. Therefore, Beijing is pursuing a multi-pronged strategy to increase its presence in the region and expand its economic influence. This strategy, supported by global projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative, focuses primarily on energy cooperation and infrastructure investments.

China has concluded energy cooperation agreements with Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan and has implemented infrastructure projects such as oil and gas pipelines, highways, railways and bridges. These projects, developed under the BRI, are vital in meeting China's energy needs. They also facilitate trade with Turkic states and promote regional integration. For example, billions of dollars have been invested in various energy projects in Kazakhstan, including the Kashagan Oil Field, and similar efforts have been made in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (Omonkulov, 2020, p. 51). These investments aim to develop the economies of the region's countries and increase China's commercial influence in the region. China's other strategy focuses on security cooperation with the countries in the region through the Shanghai Five. In 2004, the fourth summit of the Five convened in Tashkent and the declaration emphasized security cooperation on the "three evils" of terrorism, separatism, and extremism (Çolakoğlu, 2010, p. 396).

Countries in the region have criticized China's economic activities in Turkestan. The indebtedness of countries in financing BRI projects has led to concerns of a "debt trap", especially in countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Kumar, 2017). In addition, problems such as using Chinese workers instead of local labor in infrastructure projects and Chinese traders' dominance of regional markets have also caused local



people to react. This has created economic and social skepticism towards China in the region (Kumar, 2017). China's soft power policies in Turkestan have also been criticized. Beijing spreads the Chinese language and culture in the region through institutions such as Confucius Institutes. These institutes have provided scholarship opportunities to the region's people, enabling many students to study in China (Önal, 2020). However, according to some views, while these institutions increase China's cultural influence, they are also perceived as a tool of assimilation and imperialism. In addition, China's assimilation policies against Uyghur Turks in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region have also led to reactions from the people of Turkestan.

Türkiye's Central Corridor Policy

TRACECA laid the foundation for Türkiye's Central Corridor project. TRACECA is the Iron and Maritime Silk Road and the North-South corridor connecting Europe and Central Asia (Gigauri, 2024, p. 425). Founded in 1993 at the Brussels Conference, TRACECA is an intergovernmental program to improve international transport and socio-economic growth in the Black Sea, Caucasus and Turkestan (Türkiye's relations with TRACECA / Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs). "The Orient/East-Med Corridor connects parts of Central Europe to Northern, Baltic, Black Sea and Mediterranean ports" (Tümenbatur, 2021, p. 104). Türkiye's Central Corridor Initiative is a product of its "Multilateral Transport Policy" that aims to strengthen land, rail and maritime transport links between Asia and Europe. The "Trans-Caspian East-West-Central Corridor Initiative", which starts from Türkiye and crosses the Caucasus region, the Caspian Sea and Turkestan via Georgia, Azerbaijan and reaches China, is one of the most critical components of the efforts to revive the Old Silk Road (Türkiye's Multilateral Transportation Policy / Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

With the end of the Cold War, a rapprochement began between Western and Central Europe and the countries that left the USSR in Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Turkestan. In this process, countries in the region tried to integrate into international organizations and global markets. However, the political and economic difficulties that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union negatively affected the development processes of the countries in the region. Problems in many areas such as education, health, trade, and transportation have slowed down the international integration efforts of these states. In this context, the transportation sector is an important area where the region's countries can cooperate. In this context, Türkiye's Central Corridor Initiative is a multidimensional infrastructure and logistics strategy and a project created to establish close relations with the Central Asian Turkic Republics since the 1990s.

Accordingly, the first steps were taken in 1992 to establish the Council of Turkic Speaking States (Turkic Council), but it was only realized in 2009. In 2021, the Council was renamed the “Organization of Turkic States” (OST). The organization’s founding members are Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Türkiye. Observer members are Turkmenistan, Hungary and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Uzbekistan is the last full member to join the Organization of Turkic States in 2019 (Organization of Turkic States,/turkicstates.org.). The OST is recognized as the umbrella organization at the top of the cooperation mechanisms among Turkic-speaking countries. Within this framework, TURKSOY (International Organization of Turkic Culture), TURKPA (Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic States), Turkic Business Council, Turkic Academy and Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation, operate as associated institutions of the Organization of Turkic States (Organization of Turkic States/turkicstates.org.).

The “Silk Road Initiative” launched by Türkiye in 2008 is an essential complement to the Central Corridor. This initiative, which aims to revitalize the historical Silk Road route as a modern logistics network, covers a vast geography and includes many countries such as China, Central Asian Turkic Republics, Caucasus, Iran, Russia, Iraq, and Pakistan (Mikail & Küçükylıdız, 2015, p. 850). In this respect, the Central Corridor is older than the BRI, still its overlap with the BRI in terms of interests and routes has increased the importance of the Central Corridor and accelerated the infrastructure investments to be made in this context. Instead of seeing this project as a competitor, Türkiye has seized the opportunity for cooperation. The cooperation between Türkiye and China in the Central Corridor started in 2005 and the first concrete step was taken with the Ankara-Istanbul high-speed rail line completed in 2014. Accordingly, the “Memorandum of Understanding on Harmonization of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Central Corridor Initiative” was signed in 2015 (Altun vd., 2021, p. 88). This agreement allowed Türkiye to support the Central Corridor projects with Chinese investments and Turkish companies to participate in projects along the Belt and Road. Among the projects carried out in Türkiye under this agreement are major transportation and infrastructure projects such as the Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge, Eurasia Tunnel, Çanakkale 1915 Bridge, Kınalı-Tekirdağ-Çanakkale-Savaştepe Motorway.

Starting from Türkiye, the Central Corridor extends through Georgia, Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea via rail and road connections, respectively, to China, following the “Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan or Kazakhstan route (using the Caspian transit)” (Günay et al., 2019, p. 165). Türkiye is a strategic member of the BRI as one of the countries with the longest route after China. Türkiye is essential to this project because it has a critical share of the Chinese goods transported to European markets. Using the Trans-Siberian route, the Northern Corridor carries only 4% of the goods to Europe, in



comparison 96% are transported through the Southern Corridor and the Central Corridor (Türkiye's Multilateral Transportation Policy / Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs). The two countries have signed Many infrastructure investments in recent years for the development of the Central Corridor. The most important projects within the scope of the Central Corridor are the "Lapis Lazuli Transit, Trade and Transportation Route Agreement" signed in Ashgabat in 2017 and the "Baku-Tbilisi-Kars" railway, which started service in the same year (Toprak, 2020, p. 25). Thanks to the Central Corridor, the railway distance is 2 thousand km shorter than the Northern Corridor. It is three times faster than sea transportation (Türkiye's Multilateral Transportation Policy / Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs). The Tuz Lake Underground Storage Facility and Emba Hunutlu Thermal Power Plant, which were built in cooperation with the scope of harmonizing the Central Corridor and BRI, are important projects in terms of energy security (China Embassy, 2019).

Within the framework of this initiative, the Nomad Express stands out as one of the remarkable projects. Starting from the city of Shihezi in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China to the Port of Aktau in Kazakhstan, this railway line offers an alternative to diversify trade routes between Asia and Europe". Nomad Express was launched in 2013 as part of the "Establishment of the Azerbaijan Committee for the Coordination of the Development of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Line" signed between Georgia, Kazakhstan and Kazakhstan Railways and the port authorities of Batumi, Aktau and Baku. Covering a distance of 3540 kilometers in as little as five days, this route presents itself as an important transportation network that accelerates Asia-Europe connections (Mussayev, 2019).

The Lapis Lazuli Corridor, another essential route within the scope of the Central Corridor, starts from Herat in Afghanistan to Turkmenbashi Port in Turkmenistan, then crosses the Caspian Sea to Baku in Azerbaijan and reaches Kars in Türkiye via Poti port in Georgia. "This route was named after the navy blue stone, an important export product from Central Asia throughout history" (Toprak, 2020, p. 25). The Lapis Lazuli Corridor is based on the work carried out by the Asian Development Bank in 1997 to increase economic cooperation among Central Asian countries. In 2017, it became official with the "Agreement on the Lapis Lazuli Transit, Trade and Transport Route" signed in Ashgabat. This 2400-kilometer route is 2,000 km shorter than the NELBEC (Northern Corridor) route and has more favorable climatic conditions. It is also faster than the sea route and reduces logistics time by 15 days (Türkiye's Multilateral Transportation Policy / Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs). It is of great importance for the trade route from Afghanistan to Türkiye.

Another significant project in Türkiye's trade policy is the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway line. The BTK railway line, also called the "Iron Silk Road", was put into service in 2017 and a train loaded with grain from Kazakhstan arrived at Mersin Port (Israfilbayova, 2017). The BTK railway result from joint efforts between Türkiye, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Due to political problems with Armenia, the three countries sought an alternative route and decided to built this line in 2007. The 838-kilometer BTK line was opened in 2017, providing an uninterrupted connection between Asia and Europe (Gadimova, 2014). The BTK line, and the Marmaray Railway Project crossing the Bosphorus contributed to Türkiye's goal of becoming a logistics bridge between Asia, the Caucasus and Europe. This project is strategically important in diversifying Türkiye's trade routes between Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and Europe.

Due to its location, Türkiye's proximity to energy basins serves as a bridge between natural gas and oil exporting countries and European countries, which are the largest importers. The Central Corridor Initiative transports Azerbaijani gas from Türkiye to Europe via the Trans Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline Project (TANAP), for which a formal agreement was signed in 2012 and amended in 2014 (Quliyev, 2014). The Turkish Stream Gas Pipeline project, for which an agreement was signed between Türkiye and Russia in 2016 and inaugurated in 2020, will take Türkiye to the next level and is said to take Turkish-Russian relations to an advanced stage in energy. The project consists of two lines, each with a capacity of 15.75 billion cubic meters of natural gas (UNCTAD, 2024). The Turkish Stream pipeline, which starts in Russia and runs 930 kilometers under the sea along the Black Sea coast, contributes to Europe's energy security and strengthens Türkiye's position as a hub for energy transit. However, the Russian-Ukrainian war that started in 2022 and the disruptions in the Western pipeline, which passes through Ukraine and Bulgaria and reaches Türkiye, and the natural gas embargo imposed by Russia on Europe prevent the pipeline from being used at the desired efficiency (UNCTAD, 2024).

International cooperation protocols are crucial for the success of the Central Corridor project. Türkiye has signed cooperation agreements with different countries and international organizations to address issues such as trade facilitation, simplification of customs procedures and developing logistics infrastructure. The Organization of Turkic States also supports the Central Corridor project and participates in joint work. The "Caravanserai Project" established within the OST includes goals such as setting common standards at border gates, accelerating logistics transitions and facilitating international trade. In this direction, the "Joint Cooperation Protocol" developed by the Organization and signed by the Ministers of Transport of the member states and the "Coordination Board" established at the level of Deputy Ministers are important for increasing cooperation among the members in the field of transportation



and bringing institutional solutions to possible problems. The Sister Ports process initiated by signing the “Memorandum of Understanding on Sister Ports Relationship and Cooperation” in 2013, the Sister Ports meetings organized between Samsun Port of Türkiye, Baku Port of Azerbaijan, Aktau and Kuryk Ports of Kazakhstan, and initiatives such as the “International Combined Freight Transportation Share” signed between Türkiye and Azerbaijan in 2014 are among the concrete examples of this cooperation (Ametbek, 2019, p. 201).

With the “Turkic World Vision 2040 document” signed at the 8th Summit of the CIS held in Istanbul on November 12, 2021, the OST agreed to unite cooperation mechanisms and joint projects, as well as to share material and intellectual resources when necessary, to raise the political, economic, social and cultural standards of the Member States (Baghirova, 2022, p. 54). In order to raise the political, economic, social and cultural standards of the Member States, it was agreed that cooperation mechanisms and joint projects should be unified, and material and intellectual resources should be shared when necessary. “At the 8th Summit, the Heads of State discussed the proposal to establish the “TURANSEZ” Special Economic Zone in the Turkestan region of Kazakhstan, which aims to strengthen economic cooperation and ties among the Turkic States, in particular through the International Trans-Caspian East-West Central Corridor (Düğen, 2024, p. 1266). Since 2022, the OST has facilitated cooperation between the member states’ railway sectors by organizing Meetings of Heads of Railway Administrations. These meetings aim to explore cost-effective alternative routes and formulate strategies to increase regional freight transportation. Established in 2024 under the auspices of the OST, the “Association of Logistics Centers and Freight Forwarders” aims to connect logistics centers, carriers, terminals and ports in Turkic countries (Aracıoğlu & Esmer, 2023, p. 2).

In geopolitical terms, the Zangezur Corridor is the most critical pillar of the Central Corridor Initiative. The Zangezur region, which severs Azerbaijan’s land connection with the Nakhchivan Autonomous Region of Azerbaijan, which borders Türkiye, is within the borders of Armenia. One of the most important demands of Azerbaijan, which liberated the Nagorno-Karabakh region from Armenian occupation after the Second Karabakh War, is the opening of the Zangezur corridor in peace negotiations. With the Zangezur corridor, Azerbaijan will have a land connection with Nakhchivan (Uraloğlu, 2023). In addition, Türkiye’s direct land connection with Azerbaijan will be ensured and direct transportation between Türkiye and Turkestan will be ensured. After the ceasefire, transitions are provided under the control of Russian peacekeepers in the region. However, Armenia and Iran oppose the opening of this corridor. According to the plan, a 166 km railroad will be built from Khoradiz to Ordubad (Rehimov, 2023). 43 km of this railway will pass through Zangezur and the 158 km railway from Ordubad to Velidag in

the north of Nakhchivan will be repaired and extended by 14 km, thus extending the railway to Kars (Rehimov, 2021). In parallel with the railroad connection, highway construction is also being considered. However, Yerevan and Tehran are at odds with Ankara and Baku on this issue.

CONCLUSION

Changing geopolitics enabled Türkiye to implement multilateral policies and cooperate with Turkestan countries. Since the early 1990s, Turkish foreign policy has changed, and the “Asia Anew” doctrine has come into effect. However, Türkiye’s economic and political unpreparedness, as well as that of the new republics that left the USSR, delayed cooperation.

The political and economic stabilization of Türkiye and the Central Asian Turkic republics since the early 2000s made the Central Corridor Initiative viable. This initiative has an important place in Türkiye’s and global strategies. The Central Corridor Initiative links Asia and Europe, stretching land and lines from China to Europe. This initiative is an economic project and a set of strategies that contribute to integrating countries in the region into the international system. Türkiye’s Central Corridor policy aligns with China’s Belt and Road Initiative. The 2015 Memorandum of Understanding signed between Türkiye and China shows that these two initiatives are complementary. Rather than competing with China’s grand project, Türkiye aims to increase cooperation through joint projects. Türkiye’s Central Corridor initiative has a sustainable structure for the future of regional and global trade. This initiative could create a new bridge between Asia and Europe, providing many economic and political advantages. This initiative serves Türkiye’s purpose of becoming not only a transit country but also a regional logistics hub.

Türkiye is a key country for China in the BRI. With the Central Corridor, Türkiye is improving its relations with Central Asia and the Turkic Republics and creating a new geopolitical balance with China. However, there are risks as well as opportunities created by this situation. The power rivalry between China and the United States may trigger crises and conflicts in the regions through which the project passes. Moreover, Türkiye is a key country for China and a threat to the BRI. Because Türkiye, as a NATO country, has the opportunity to undermine the BRI in terms of its geopolitical position. It can block Caspian transit through the Black Sea, the Mediterranean and the Organization of Turkic States. Therefore, China will want to control Türkiye as much as possible. For example, although the Zangezur Corridor, which planned to connect Türkiye and Azerbaijan directly after the Second Karabakh War, is a beneficial project for the BRI, the Beijing government has not expressed open support. At this point,



Türkiye needs to manage its relations with China in a balanced manner and should look for ways to reduce the trade deficit in favor of China.

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