

Doğu-Batı'dan Kuzey-Güney'e:
Yeni Ulaşım Merkezinin Yükselişi ve Hazar Havzası

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Öz

Ticaret ve ulaşım dinamiklerinde son dönemde yaşanan değişimlerin ortasında Hazar Havzası, önemli bir uluslararası lojistik merkezi olarak ortaya çıkmaktadır. Bu makale, büyük ölçekli ulaşım koridorlarının stratejik önemini vurgulamakta ve Avrasya'daki Doğu-Batı ile Kuzey-Güney eksenleri boyunca önemli altyapı projelerini analiz etmek suretiyle Hazar Havzası'nın artan lojistik potansiyelini değerlendirmektedir. Bu çalışma; geleneksel olarak Kalpgâh (Heartland) teorisi kapsamında incelenen sözkonusu bölgenin, büyük taşımacılık koridorları aracılığıyla küresel ticaret ağlarına giderek daha fazla entegre olmasıyla birlikte artık Kenar Kuşak (Rimland) Teorisi dinamikleri ile daha uyumlu bir hale geldiğini iddia etmektedir. Makale içeriğinde esas olarak iki ana soru ele alınmaktadır: Ulaşım koridorlarının yayılıp gelişmesi, Hazar Havzası'nın daha geniş jeopolitik ve iktisadi yapılanmalarla entegrasyonunu nasıl kolaylaştırmaktadır? Her iki eksen boyunca altyapı yatırımlarını kullanma kapasitesi göz önüne alındığında bölge ülkeleri, kendilerini büyük küresel güçler için jeopolitik olarak stratejik bir odak noktası olarak nasıl konumlandırmaktadır? Bu araştırma, öncelikle nitel, tanımlayıcı ve analitik bir metodoloji kullanarak açıklayıcı bir yaklaşım benimsemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Hazar Havzası, Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi, Uluslararası Kuzey-Güney Ulaşım Koridoru, Trans-Hazar Uluslararası Ulaşım Rotası, Kenar Kuşak Kuramı

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**East-West to North-South:
The Rise of New Transport Hub and the Caspian Basin**

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Article Type Research Article	Abstract The Caspian Basin has emerged as an important international logistics hub amid recent changes in trade and transportation dynamics. This article underlines the strategic importance of major transport corridors and evaluates the Caspian Basin's growing logistical potential by analyzing key infrastructure projects along the East-West and North-South axes in Eurasia. This study argues that, although traditionally viewed as a landlocked territory studied within Heartland, the region's deepening integration into global trade networks through mega corridors now aligns it more closely with Rimland Theory dynamics. The article addresses two key questions: How does the expansion of transport corridors facilitate the Caspian Basin's integration into broader geopolitical and economic frameworks? Given its capacity to leverage infrastructure investments along both axes, how do the region's countries position themselves as a geopolitically strategic focal point for major global powers? This research adopts an explanatory approach using a primarily qualitative, descriptive, and analytical methodology.
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Introduction

While the 2008 Global Recession showed the global risks of unregulated financialization, the disrupted supply chains during the pandemic caused severe malfunctioning of the economies that suffered from dependency on basic necessities, such as food, medicine and energy. Kalyuzhnova and Pomfret (2021, p. 4) argue that the pandemic, coupled with significantly depressed energy prices, is putting supplementary fiscal pressure on the Caspian states. In addition, the Eurasian geography has undergone significant transformations in logistics and trade, particularly following the imposition of Western sanctions on the Russian Federation in response to its war with Ukraine. Since 2022 increasing investment on transportation as well as the recent geopolitical issues have managed to draw attention to the Caspian Basin.

Geography remains a key factor in shaping strategies of major and middle powers and the Caspian basin including Central Asia has historically served as a crossroads linking European, Asian and West Asian civilizations (Khan, 2025). A paradigm shift in the conceptualization of trade and transport corridors has prompted the modification of existing infrastructure and the development of new projects that interconnect various regions of the Eurasian geography. Situated at the heart of Eurasia—between India, Russia, China, and Europe—the Caspian Basin has seen a revitalization of international trade routes. Recent advancements in transportation networks have significantly strengthened the integration of the Caspian Basin into diverse global regions.

This study mainly attempts to answer the following questions: How does the expansion of transport corridors facilitate the integration of the Caspian Basin into its surrounding geopolitical and economic frameworks? Given its capacity to leverage infrastructure investments along both axes, how do the region's countries position themselves as a geopolitically strategic focal point for major global powers? The study adopts an explanatory approach, utilizing a qualitative methodology that is primarily descriptive and analytical. It employs explanatory method to interpret the phenomenon of trans-regional integration within the evolving Caspian context, drawing on a range of published materials, including books, academic journals, news articles, and reports.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

International transport projects have significantly shaped the balance of power throughout history. Trade routes established by different economic agents have also constituted the interplay of geopolitics. Shipping lanes, pipelines, railways, and all transport infrastructure play role as critical and vastly contested strategic assets being main instruments for geopolitical influence, energy security and power projection. Among the transport projects that ease and facilitate the trade between Asia and Europe, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are of particular importance. Even China's efforts to advance the BRI have elicited suspicion from the United States as Zhao (2024) put it clearly. In response to the BRI, the United States of America (US) introduced the India Middle East Europe Corridor project (IMEC). This mega initiative shows a desire to highlight India in Asia and enhance its connectivity with Europe through Middle East. Another remarkable initiative targeting India and geographically reaches to Europe is the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) involving Russia. Being

positioned at the crossroad of 'East-West' and 'North-South' axes, the Caspian is evolving into a strategic point in Eurasian geography with the potential to create impact outside the region and role of Caspian Basin in international logistics should be analyzed accordingly.

Peyrouse (2009) discusses existence of unity in the Trans-Caspian region while Acar and Gürol (2016) compare alternative transportation lines in the region and argue that Caspian necessitates 'intermodal' transportation. Khan and Yousaf (2016) examine the plans of integration developed by major powers over Central Asia and Carcanague (2017) argues that Central Asia has opened the competition between regional initiatives. Miholjeic (2018) argues that it is a way to sustained economic development and connectivity in Central Asia and the Transcaucasia while Indeo (2018) discusses Trans-Caspian as energy corridor with regard to settling Caspian issue and Atli (2018) discusses Türkiye as well positioned to become a transport hub in Eurasia, Iskandarov and Gawliczek (2020) discuss clash of interests and energy security in the Caspian region as geopolitical arena and furthermore Iskandarov, Mahammadali, Gardashkhan (2020) argue that 'new great game in the South Caucasus is played between NATO and Russia'. Abilov and Hajiyev (2021) discuss the EU and Azerbaijan transport dialogue, Pomfret (2021) focuses on the potential for the landlocked Central Asian states to convert into land-linked, using enhanced transportation networks between Europe and East Asia to endorse economic progress through export promotion and development, while Kenderdine Bucskey (2021) discusses policy progress and trade potential of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, namely the Middle Corridor. Recently, Wilder (2022) analyses capacity of Trans-Caspian Corridor as Kazakhstan's Silk Road, Vardomsky (2023) discusses international transport corridors in the context of developing Russia's transport potential, Palu and Hilmola (2023) create a agenda for assessing the route for associated economies and testing it out for Estonia and Finland, Novikau and Muhasilović (2023) discuss challenges and opportunities in Türkiye's quest to become a regional energy hub, Gawliczek and Iskandarov (2023) argues about the Zangezur as part of the regional transport route while Beifert and Moldabekova (2024) analyses the willingness of port services in the Caspian Sea within the Eurasian Transport Corridor with case of Port Aktau.

Nevertheless, in this paper a new approach is developed to examine the subject. How the Caspian, which beforehand came to the international politics mainly with its resource base, is now known for emerging trends that could turn the region into a logistics hub, recently has started to show a significant role in connecting the main economic centers of Eurasia is evaluated from the lenses of the Rimland Theory. In order to do that, a detailed account on projects in the East-West trade routes is provided and key position of the Caspian Basin in the newly emerging North-South transport initiative in Eurasian landmass is given.

In understanding modern geopolitics, relevancy of Rimland Theory in contrast to Heartland Theory remains a vital framework regarding the ongoing cooperation and competition in the Rimland region, meaning surrounding region of the Heartland. Heartland argued by Halford J. Mackinder (1943) refers to Eurasia containing Siberia, Central Asia with modern day Russian territory and the World Island consists of the African, European and Asian continents while Rimland argued by Nicholas J. Spykman (1944) refers to countries covering it like a belt. While Mackinder argued that 'who

controls Eastern Europe rules the Heartland; who rules the Heartland rules the World Island; who rules the World Island rules the world”, in 1944, challenging Mackinder, Nicholas J. Spykman revised it as “who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world”.

While focusing on World War II, Spykman also highlights long-term continuities and changes from both geographical and political perspectives. Neither the anti-Soviet explanation (O’Sullivan, 1986; Dodds, 2007) nor the basis for Cold War bipolarity (Polelle, 1999) fully captures this. Spykman’s Rimland logic, which emphasizes preventing any single power from dominating the Eurasian Rimland, provided intellectual support for American foreign policy during the Cold War through containment and alliances. Strategist Brzezinski (1998) also underscored the Caspian’s importance for controlling Eurasia. On the other hand, Koukakis (2024) argues that recent technological and geopolitical trends necessitate a new layer of theory. In fact, both theories face criticism for oversimplifying complex geographical realities and underestimating contemporary challenges, including the growing influence of smaller states, non-state actors (e.g., terrorist organizations and multinational corporations), and technological advancements in domains such as cyber warfare and space. These factors complicate the traditional emphasis on geography as a determinant of power. Despite these limitations, the strategic significance of geography and control on trade routes, particularly in regions like the Caspian Basin, remains undisputable in the context of great power competition, as they continue to underpin economic and geopolitical influence. In addition, European attitude to use trade, its core strength and comparative advantage, as its primary geopolitical asset via investing in new partnerships with high-growth economies, and in the corridors that give those ties material form, could help supply the economic foundation for the geopolitical coming of age (Kausch, 2026).

Since its introduction, the Rimland Theory has primarily emphasized maritime corridors stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The Rimland framework provides a robust lens for analyzing the emergence of strategic regions where global power centers may coalesce, such as the Caspian Basin, which offers substantial economic and geopolitical advantages (Astarita & Marconi, 2023). On the other hand, the Caspian Basin has traditionally been viewed as a landlocked region and analyzed mainly within the framework of Heartland Theory. However, following the end of the Cold War, conventional thinking about the Caspian region began to shift, largely due to the successful implementation of huge pipeline projects such as Caspian Pipeline Consortium, Baku Tbilisi Ceyhan crude oil pipelines and the Central Asia–China natural gas pipelines. More importantly, recent developments in the field of international transportation have significantly accelerated this trend. It is indispensable to observe that for economic development, integration into global logistics networks, and regional stability, transport corridors are crucial in terms of enhancing security and stimulating investment, employment, and local industry growth (Augan et. al, 2025). The Caspian Basin with its emerging logistics hub development is a clear example for this explanation. Direct connections between the Caspian Basin and various maritime regions have now been established and the region has been incorporated into world economy through the development of mega transport corridors, which will be examined next.

The East-West Route & the Caspian Basin

The East-West international economic corridors play a significant role in accelerating trade between Asia and Europe. Among the East-West axis projects, the most important is the BRI. In defining the development of the multi-dimensional trade routes between China and the EU, the *Belt* stands for the continental link between China's Western boundaries to the Eastern borders of the EU and the *Road* symbols the sea linking from Pacific Ocean to the Mediterranean via the Suez Canal. Significant part of the trade is conducted via this route and as Chinese government declares it 'aims to promote 'orderly and free flow economic factors, highly efficient allocation of resources and deep integration of markets through increased connectivity' (The State Council, 2015). In addition, due to melt down of glaciers in the Arctic, the Northern Sea Route has been opened and free navigation has become conceivable seasonably. This route is also gaining importance. 37.8 million tons of cargo traffic reported in 2024 which is 1.6 million tons more than the previous year (World Nuclear News, 2025).

The Belt and Road Initiative's railway component encompasses several distinct corridors. Among these, the most extensive is the New Eurasian Land Bridge. This route originates in China, traverses northern Kazakhstan to the west of the Caspian Sea, and continues through Russia and Belarus before reaching various destinations in Europe. For Russia, cooperation with China is providing funding for investments, accelerating Eurasia's economic integration and strengthening its status as a midway between Asia and Europe (Rolland, 2019). In addition, the corridor network includes railway lines linking China with Mongolia as well as direct connections to Russia. In 2021, a total of 693,000 TEUs were transported by rail between Asia and Europe across the Eurasian landmass. (Eurasian Rail Index, 2022). The railway lines traversing Kazakhstan hold particular importance. Despite the considerable length of this route, the fact that Kazakhstan, Russia, and Belarus are all members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) offers significant facilitation through a unified customs regime, thereby simplifying rail transportation between China and the European Union.

Another key component of the BRI's railway infrastructure is the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor. Along this way, which passes to the south of the Caspian Sea, goods originating from Central Asian countries are transported via rail through Iran and Türkiye before reaching European markets. The excessive variety in the countries within this corridor, from ex-Soviet states to regional powers like Iran and Türkiye, makes China's investment along the corridor complicated. Majority of the Caspian or Central Asian countries are transition economies and to join into such a well-developed network could have a positive impact on the course of their economic wellbeing (Twillert & Vega, 2023). China has also demonstrated considerable interest in utilizing Caspian Sea routes through Central Asia to enhance its trade with Europe. In addition to the east-west rail corridors located north and south of the Caspian Sea, maritime transportation is conducted across the Caspian Sea between Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan.

On the other hand, while transportation via the Caspian remained low till recently, transit through the Caspian Sea has also begun to surge speedily thanks to the new developments. The first of these developments was the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely disrupted global supply chains. The second, and arguably more consequential, was the outbreak of

the war in Ukraine in February 2022. This conflict has profoundly affected trade and logistics across a vast geographic area, creating a clear demarcation between pre-war and post-war patterns of Eurasian connectivity. For instance, intra-regional trade increased by 73.4% between 2018 and 2022 only in Central Asia (The Astana Times, 2023). At the same time, the volume of freight directed via Turkmenistan and the Caspian Sea has similarly raised. According to the statistics for 2023, Turkmenistan handled a total of 10,799 container shipments, comprising 5,614 transit shipments, 2,316 export shipments, and 2,869 import shipments. This figure represents an increase of 356 container shipments compared to 2022 (Caspian News 2024). The country's primary container terminal, the Turkmenbashi International Seaport, plays a central role in this activity. Strategically situated along the Lapis Lazuli and Europe-Caucasus-Asia international transit corridors, the port serves as a multimodal hub, facilitating the transshipment of goods arriving via rail, road, and air transport. The terminal is equipped to handle up to 400,000 containers annually and provides comprehensive services for cargo handling and logistics operations. Turkmenistan and its partners are actively working on especially to develop the multimodal transportation passage China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan-Georgia-Türkiye-Europe.

The heightened importance of the Caspian Basin and associated transportation routes stems primarily from the significant disruption experienced by the New Eurasian Land Bridge following the imposition of extensive EU sanctions on Russia in the immediate aftermath of the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. (Bardakçı 2025: 42). In the wake of successive waves of sanctions, energy flows between Russia and Europe declined substantially, ultimately exerting a broader impact on regional trade. These measures have also indirectly disrupted trade between Europe and various Asian countries by impeding the use of Russian territory as a transit corridor. When disruptions occurred in transit of goods from Asia to Europe, route diversification, which is the basis of transit security of the economic corridors, became an alternative. One of the alternative routes is Pakistan-Iran-Türkiye transit. Cargo length for this Southern Corridor is 13 days excluding the travel time between China and Pakistan. While this route which passes through south of the Caspian Sea remains relatively unattractive owing to the persistence of sanctions and war against Iran, the remaining viable options are either traditional inter-oceanic maritime routes or those traversing the Caspian Sea, commonly referred to as the Middle Corridor.

There are different names for the trade routes that cross the Caspian Sea. *Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR)* or *Middle Corridor* are among them. The Middle Corridor is a direct transportation link between Asia and Europe, passing through Kazakhstan/Turkmenistan, South Caucasus and Türkiye. The Middle Corridor concept, officially articulated by Türkiye, denotes the trans-Caspian multimodal transportation network. It particularly encompasses the Kars-Tbilisi-Baku railway line and the integrated Türkiye-Georgia-Azerbaijan connectivity framework. As Sanders (2021) put it correctly, Türkiye's Middle Corridor initiative aims to form a belt of prosperity in Türkiye's east. In addition, the Middle Corridor encompasses routes originating from European Union countries, crossing the Black Sea, and continuing through Georgia and Azerbaijan to reach the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea and onward into Asia.

Comprising multimodal transport options — including maritime, rail, and road segments — the Middle Corridor represents a significant alternative pathway and offers one of the

shortest overland distances for trade between China and Europe. Compared to traditional Northern Corridor through Russia, Middle Corridor is at least 2,000 km shorter, cutting transit times between China and Europe from 19 days to just 12 days, making it more efficient and cost-effective. (Jafarova, 2023) A marked revival has been observed along the Middle Corridor following the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war. For instance, while freight volumes on the Northern Route (New Eurasian Land Bridge) declined by 31.9% year-on-year in 2022, cargo transported from Kazakhstan via the Middle Corridor recorded a 2.5-fold increase (EBRD, 2023).

In the development process of the Middle Corridor, firstly, a "Common Cooperation Protocol" was signed by the Transport Ministers of the Turkic Council countries to provide practical solutions for transportation issues. Then, a Coordination Council was established at the Deputy Minister level to coordinate between the participating countries. Finally, in 2013, agreement was signed between Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia to establish a Coordination Committee for the Trans-Caspian International Transportation Route, namely the Middle Corridor (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). In 2023, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Georgia signed a trilateral agreement in order to enhance the potential of the Middle Corridor, facilitating major energy projects through the Caspian surrounding countries (Palu and Hilmola, 2023) via a joint logistics company and registered a single transport operator 'Middle Corridor Multimodal' at Astana International Financial Center (AIFC) to commence official operations (The Astana Times, 2024). The Middle Corridor also has potential to expand to South Asia and marine trade in warm waters, alongside the development of transit and transport potential goal of the Ministry of Investments and Development Republic of Kazakhstan (2014), in six corridor-BRI: China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), New Eurasian Land Bridge (NELB), China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCAWECC).

Apart from the route through Kazakhstan, a revival on transport infrastructure has been recently observed in different Caspian littorals as well. Within that context, the heads of state from China, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan approved a trilateral pact to realize a critical railway which has been discussed almost for thirty years and finally construction ceremony of the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan (CKU) railway, took place on December 27, 2024 (Global Times, 2024). A memorandum signed in May 2023 indicates that the parties have reached an agreement on a joint railway route that would run from Kashgar through the Torugart Pass in western China, continue via Makmal and Jalal-Abad in Kyrgyzstan, and terminate in Andijan in eastern Uzbekistan. For both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, the proposed railway line is expected not only to improve domestic connectivity but also to strengthen their integration into broader east-west Eurasian trade networks. Beijing's decision to finance half of the project's costs represents a significant policy shift in China's approach to the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) railway. This adjustment has been driven by recent disruptions in the regional security environment, as well as changing patterns of trade and transit across Central Asia, which have prompted Beijing to reassess the strategic and economic value of the CKU railway (Eurasia Daily Monitor 2024)

As discussed above, Russia's war against Ukraine has begun to transform connectivity between China and Europe, as many countries seek to find alternative routes. In addition to this, the rise of Houthi attacks in the Red Sea has forced big logistics companies to use

longer, costlier substitute routes. The unstable environment in major maritime shipping routes further threatened the connectivity between China and Europe. In this background, the Chinese government has focused on developing alternative routes and expediting the development of new infrastructure projects, including the CKU railway, to diversify its transport options in Central Asia.

The countries of the Caspian region, which previously attracted international attention primarily through the export of energy commodities, have increasingly become recognized for their role in the transit of a broader range of goods as routes traversing the Caspian Sea have gained strategic prominence. Concurrently, long-standing Caspian energy pipeline projects have re-entered policy discussions over the past two years. In particular, proposals to transport Turkmen gas to Azerbaijan and onward to Europe via the Southern Gas Corridor have resurfaced on the agenda. Nevertheless, the construction of any submarine pipeline beneath the Caspian Sea appears improbable without the explicit consent of all littoral states. Instead of such infrastructure, recent years have witnessed a marked increase in gas purchase-sale agreements and swap arrangements among the Caspian littoral countries. (Eurasianet, 2023)

Despite all these developments, the amount of trans-Caspian transport is still relatively small. In 2022, it covered only one-tenth of the total cargo transported through the northern route. (World Economic Forum, 2023) Despite its potential, the Middle Corridor encounters several significant connectivity obstacles that impede its full development. These include serious infrastructure deficiencies along the route, operational difficulties associated with multimodal transportation, and delays resulting from divergent customs regimes and regulatory frameworks. Accordingly, although the corridor offers a shorter distance than the Northern Route, shipments transported via the Middle Corridor typically reach their destinations more slowly and at a higher overall cost. Substantial infrastructure investment will be essential to overcome these barriers. Infrastructure capacity investments in Middle Corridor include operating 10-container ships per month along the route by China, and by the EU, €10 billion investment for logistics and transport projects in Kazakhstan and Central Asian states and for highways, railways, and seaports of Aktau and Kuryk, additional €18.5 billion, which was the amount needed for the development of the Middle Corridor according to (EBRD, 2023).

The Caspian littoral states have been actively expanding their trade and logistics infrastructure, drawing on both domestic resources and development loans from international financial institutions. In addition to the existing port of Aktau, Kazakhstan has completed the construction of the Kuryk port on the Caspian Sea. Turkmenistan has significantly expanded the capacity of its Turkmenbashi port, while Azerbaijan has developed new terminals at the Alat port through the second and third phases of the Baku port expansion project. At present, the Caspian Sea crossing can handle approximately 15 million tons of cargo and 100,000 TEUs annually. (Tsereteli, 2023). Though the transported cargo volumes have amplified significantly, the capacity is still underutilized. As for 2024, container transport through the Caspian increased 170 % yearly and the volume increased to 4.5 million tons annually. (Interfax, 2025) Furthermore, Georgia has been incrementally expanding its Black Sea traffic, particularly toward the Romanian and Bulgarian ports, through targeted investments in addition to the existing substantial capacities of the ports of Batumi and Poti. These initiatives have received significant

support from the European Union. Türkiye, for its part, has sought to enhance its cargo-carrying capacity not only through highway improvements but also via the modernization of the 829-kilometer Kars–Tbilisi–Baku railway line, which became operational in 2017. Nevertheless, despite the revitalization of the Middle Corridor, freight volumes transported via the Kars–Tbilisi–Baku railway remain considerably below initial targets and have declined relative to the previous year. In 2022, only 427,000 tons of cargo were carried on this line. By comparison, railway freight between Türkiye and Iran reached 781,000 tons in the same year. (Turkish Railways, 2022).

Moreover, in order to reduce travel time by half and triple trade flows, they proposed following measures: an urban railway bypass around Almaty to reduce congestion, new railway connection between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to eliminate long wait time at the border, enhanced port operations at Aktau with most efficient cranes and rail-mounted equipment for increased operational efficiency, improved freight capacity and efficiency with increasing rolling stock (locomotives, railway vehicles) particularly by Georgia, a dual gauge railway track construction at the Akhalkalaki–Türkiye border in Georgia with multimodal container terminal or marshaling yard for operational efficiency, restored maritime capacity of the Poti Port in Georgia and upgraded rail connectivity for more container vehicles and less container transit time, modernization of Sivas-Kars-Georgia railway line, above ground railway link across the Bosphorus via third bridge for enhanced competitiveness of the Middle Corridor’s Türkiye section, investments for improving port and rail connectivity in Romania and Bulgaria reinforcing the cross-border linkage of the Middle Corridor with Central Eastern Europe, and digitization of customs and efficient border management, prompt information exchange and standard turnaround time for service delivery (The Astana Times, 2024).

Moreover, recent US and Israel’s war against Iran has also contributed to development of the Middle Corridor. War on Iran has shown heavy dependence on maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz and the war has potentially long-term consequences for global trade. Current crisis is already reshaping global pricing and trade behavior (ZeroHedge, 2026). While diplomatic efforts struggle to stabilize access to the Strait of Hormuz amid tensions between the United States and Iran, Eurasian trade is increasingly being redirected toward overland alternatives such as Middle Corridor. Moreover, straits of Bab-al-Mandab and Hormuz are crucial not only for energy security and economic security but also for military leverage as reflected in the armed conflict began at the end of February 2026 between US/Israel and Iran.

Transit Times	Cargo Capacity	Security & Liability
Southern Corridor: 13+ days	Southern Corridor 5 million tones	Security Risks and Sanctions
Northern Corridor: 19-20 days	Northern Corridor 100 million tones	Security Risks and Sanctions
Middle Corridor: 12 days	Middle Corridor 10+ million tones with capacity enhancement	Low Risk and No Sanctions

Table 1: Comparative Analysis East-West Economic Corridors in Eurasia.

Thanks to these developments described above, the Caspian Basin is now linked to open seas and integrated into different regions of the world at unprecedented level. The recent expansion of transportation networks along East-West axis has significantly integrated

the Caspian Basin into global economic and geopolitical systems, transforming it from a historically landlocked region into a critical node with enhanced connectivity to open seas. This development amplifies the relevance of Spykman's Rimland Theory, which underscores the strategic position of coastal and peripheral regions in global power dynamics through the projection of sea power (Kumar, 2024).

The North-South Complement to the East-West Corridor

The remarkable position of the Caspian Sea in trade between Europe and Asia is not limited to the East-West axis schemes but extends to the North-South axis as well. The pandemic and, more prominently, the war in Ukraine have caused another economic corridor to be realized: *International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC)*.

Although official efforts to extend the International North-South Transport Corridor from Russia to India, via Caspian Sea crossings and Iranian transit routes, commenced in 2002, the initiative has recently gained momentum and operational effectiveness in recent years. Facing severe disruptions to its trade with Europe caused by the ongoing war and Western sanctions, the Russian Federation has been compelled to reorient its geopolitical and economic strategy. In this context, Moscow has prioritized the development of more than 7,000-kilometer INSTC infrastructure, which stretches from its European territories southward across Eurasia to the Indian subcontinent. As Russian strategist (Karaganov, 2018) explained it well before the sanctions, Iran has potential to become a dynamic center of Eurasia by connecting the Persian Gulf and India with the north of the continent. Moscow, which beforehand stressed the idea of Eurasia from Lisbon to Vladivostok, has now put the idea of Eurasia from Murmansk to Mumbai at the center. As (Lewis, 2018) put it the notion of Greater Eurasia in this sense, designates the simultaneous geoeconomic processes that would unite Russia, China and the post-Soviet Central Asian states into an influential new geopolitical space. The INSTC is projected to provide logistical advantages to the Caspian littoral states within the broader Eurasian geography. Under current conditions, a vessel departing from Russia's northern ports bound for Indian ports via the traditional route—through the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and the Suez Canal—requires 30 to 45 days. In contrast, the INSTC route, which utilizes the “European Russia United Deep-Water System” (including the Volga River), followed by a Caspian Sea crossing and onward transit through Iranian ports such as Bandar Abbas or Chabahar, can reduce transit time to 15–24 days. Despite its considerable potential, the full operationalization of the INSTC faces several infrastructural challenges. According to projections, the corridor's container transportation capacity could reach up to 662,000 TEU by 2030. However, overcoming existing bottlenecks will require an estimated total investment of 38.2 billion USD across 102 projects. (Eurasian Development Bank Report, 2022). A significant share of this investment is anticipated to be allocated to infrastructure development in Russia, Iran, and Kazakhstan.

The INSTC is not limited to the Caspian Sea maritime crossing alone. On the western shore of the Caspian Sea, it incorporates a north-south land corridor that links Russia, Azerbaijan, and Iran. On the eastern shore, the corridor connects Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Iran through an alternative north-south axis. While the eastern route is largely equipped with road and rail infrastructure and is considered operationally ready, the volume of international freight transported via the western branch remains relatively

low. In contrast, significant infrastructure investments are required to effectively develop the western side. In addition to the modernization of road and rail infrastructure in Russia and Azerbaijan, a critical component of the INSTC is the construction of the 162-kilometre Rasht–Astara railway line in Iran (Silk Road Briefing, 2023). Upon completion, this missing link will enable seamless rail transport of goods from Russia directly to Iran's southern ports, from where they can be efficiently transshipped to India. Although the project has faced prolonged delays due to international sanctions, a loan agreement was signed between Russia and Iran.

Both Iran and Russia are intensifying infrastructure development efforts in the Caspian Sea region. Iran's Free Trade Agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union has further reinforced the shared strategic ambitions of Moscow and Tehran to advance the International North–South Transport Corridor. Moreover, the INSTC and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) both depend on Iranian port infrastructure in the Caspian Sea to promote exports into the Persian Gulf and South Asian markets (Grajewski, 2022). At present, Amirabad is Iran's only Caspian port with direct railway connectivity, while the integration of Anzali port into the rail network is underway. These developments have already contributed to a significant increase in transportation volumes between Russian and Iranian ports and boosted trade volumes. In the 2023-24 financial year, vessel traffic along the INSTC surged by 43 % while container traffic 34 % (Sri Lanka Guardian, 2025). Cargo transshipment between vessels also forms an integral part of the corridor's multimodal operations. India has expressed growing interest in the Caspian region and has begun exploring investment opportunities along the route. On the Russian side, Moscow is establishing a special economic zone in Astrakhan on the Caspian coast and is prioritizing the development of key ports, including Astrakhan, Lagan, Makhachkala, and Solyanka. Furthermore, Iran and Russia plan to establish a joint investment fund aimed at expanding Caspian maritime capacity through the construction of additional vessels. Despite rising regional demand, the current fleet remains insufficient to meet projected needs. To enhance the effectiveness of the INSTC, Russia is even reportedly considering granting exclusive navigation rights in its internal waterways (the Volga River and Don Canal) to a third country—namely Iran—for the first time in its history. (Kaleji, 2023). Nevertheless, a major constraint lies in the limited cargo-carrying capacity of vessels operating beyond Astrakhan in Russian internal waterways, primarily due to technical and navigational restrictions. In addition, the freezing of rivers and ports during winter months significantly disrupts operations, while the limited depth of the Volga-Don Canal necessitates extensive dredging works to enable more efficient and higher-volume cargo transportation.

The expansion of economic and logistical infrastructure along the North-South axis also serves as vital commercial conduits, promoting integration, communication, and cooperation across Eurasia. As detailed above, a comprehensive network of East-West and North-South transcontinental trade and logistics corridors is being developed across the Caspian Basin, facilitating connectivity among Asia, Europe, and Africa. This development enhances access to international markets for countries in the Caspian Basin, while the potential for trade strengthens regional and cross-continental connectivity within the Eurasian geopolitical and economic space. Bilateral trade volumes are increasing among the Eurasian countries unprecedentedly thanks to the newly established

or revitalized economic corridors. For instance, in the first ten months of 2023 the trade between China and some Eurasian countries increased by 16%, reaching 277 billion dollars (Asianews, 2024). More importantly, situated at the heart of the two main arteries in the Eurasia, namely East-West & North-South, the Caspian Basin has gained particular significance within the possibility of transnational infrastructure schemes that are advanced recently on a multi-dimensional basis.

The Caspian's integration into global trade networks at unprecedented levels challenges the traditional Heartland-centric view, as access to open seas especially via Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan aligns the region with Rimland's maritime connectivity. This enhances the region's agency in global trade. In this context, the Rimland extends beyond coastal regions to encompass a broad expanse of land along the western, southern, and eastern borders of Eurasia. Positioned as a vital conduit linking the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea, and the Eurasian hinterland, the region now serves as a hub for transcontinental trade routes, thereby embodying the Rimland's role as a gateway for maritime and continental influence. These attributes align with Spykman's argument that control over such areas is essential for global dominance, reinforcing the Caspian Basin's status as a pivotal geopolitical arena.

Conclusion

In conclusion, recent developments have transformed the Caspian region into an emerging international logistics hub, propelled by the expansion of economic corridors along the East-West and North-South axes of Eurasia. Disruptions stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war have significantly reformed global trade and supply chain dynamics, accelerating the reorientation of transportation routes toward the Caspian. This shift has fundamentally altered the geoeconomic and geopolitical landscape, particularly for Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan, repositioning the region from an isolated pivot within Mackinder's Heartland Theory to a critical node in Spykman's Rimland Theory, thereby enhancing its strategic significance in global connectivity.

The development of these economic corridors has created a "Rimland space," where control over transportation infrastructure—ports, railways, and pipelines—confers significant geopolitical leverage, enabling influence over trade flows, energy security, and regional integration. Historically, Mackinder's Heartland Theory emphasized the strategic importance of controlling the Eurasian interior, characterized by its inaccessibility and resource wealth. The Caspian region, with its landlocked geography, traditionally aligned with this framework, functioning as a relatively isolated yet resource-rich pivot. In contrast, Spykman's Rimland Theory underscores the significance of coastal and semi-coastal zones that serve as interfaces between continental and maritime domains, facilitating trade and projecting influence. The Caspian region's increasing integration into global trade networks through international economic corridors aligns it with Rimland dynamics. This transformation underscores the region's evolving role as a strategic hub, where dominance over logistics infrastructure shapes geopolitical influence in Eurasia.

Today, as the phenomenon of globalization facilitate regionalization, infrastructure connectivity is also intensified by the development of intra-Eurasian trade. Trade volumes

between three biggest economies of BRICS, namely China, India and Russia have also been increasing tremendously. This growing integration also holds considerable potential for generating increased value added across the entire logistics value chain. For instance, while facing significant challenges in its relations with the West, Russia is simultaneously seeking to expand its trade and connectivity with China and to strengthen direct access to India which is a key potential rival to China. For its part, China is demonstrating interest not only in deepening trade ties with Russia but also in the development of the Middle Corridor as an alternative transport route.

Located at the center of major economies within the broader Eurasian geography, the Caspian Basin countries have significant potential to benefit from complementary transport developments. Beyond their transit potential, the expansion of transportation infrastructure is crucial for the emergence of the regional market. As intra-regional trade volumes increase, the creation of a wider regional market becomes easier with the potential inclusion of other Central Asian countries. This, in turn, would have ramifications over economic development and geopolitical standing of the region. International organizations, such as the Organization of Turkic States, could also gain increased institutional significance within this framework. In the coming years, the Caspian Basin is expected to consolidate its position as a logistical hub in Eurasia.

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