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Silk Road and Middle Corridor: Energy and Transit Opportunities for Eurasia

ABSTRACT

The history of the Silk Road, which played an irreplaceable role in shaping economic, cultural, and political worldviews as a source of cross-cultural dialogue and scientific exchange between the East and the West, began in the 2nd century BC and lasted until approximately the beginning of the 16th century AD. Unfortunately, geopolitical processes that have taken place in the world, including wars, led to the collapse of the Great Silk Road. However, initiatives to restore the Silk Road were launched by the end of the last century. These initiatives were mostly developed during the post-Soviet period. Building a new Silk Road is a guarantee of lasting peace, security, and development for the countries along its route. The realization of this project also plays an important role in promoting global cooperation, long-term economic stability, and energy security in international trade. The active participation of countries makes a significant contribution to the restoration of the Silk Road. This study aims to identify the main initiatives proposed for the restoration of the Silk Road and the emerging perspectives for the economic development of countries in world trade.

Keywords: Silk Road, TRACECA, Belt and Road Initiative, Middle Corridor, energy and transit

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INTRODUCTION

The ancient Silk Road, which connected Asia and Europe for centuries in terms of trade and economic exchange, was a system of caravan routes stretching from China to the Mediterranean Sea. The geographical scope of the ancient Silk Road varied across different periods. However, as a result of historical processes, its boundaries gradually expanded. The peoples of Eurasia had the opportunity to become acquainted with numerous innovations through the Silk Road, and exchanges took place among them in many fields. In this regard, it would be inaccurate to consider the Great Silk Road merely as a trade route for silk. Not only merchants, but also travelers, diplomats, pilgrims, missionaries, and farmers traveled along the Silk Road, carrying their values from their countries of origin to new destinations (Koçak, 2019). Processes of exchange among different peoples took place in the countries located along the Silk Road. In addition to silk, various household items, works of art, and cultural elements were transported from the East to the West. In this respect, the Silk Road played a leading role in the lives of many peoples.

The Silk Road can be regarded as one of the earliest and most significant environments of globalization in human history. This ancient trade route resembles modern globalization, as people became acquainted with each other's cultures and established mutual relations through it. In this sense, it can be argued that one of the earliest processes of globalization in human history occurred precisely through Silk Road trade. In the modern era, projects such as the "One Belt, One Road" initiative have acquired new meaning and importance, particularly in terms of energy transit and regional geopolitical dynamics. Thus, the "One Belt, One Road" initiative proposed by China, the Southern Gas Corridor, as well as projects such as the Middle Corridor, have further intensified both competition and cooperation over energy and trade routes (Rice, 2023). In the modern era, the restoration of the Silk Road is taking shape at the intersection of various strategic interests. The safe transportation of energy resources, the diversification of trade routes, and the expansion of regional spheres of influence are the main directions of this process. In addition to energy-exporting countries such as Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan, transit countries such as Georgia and Türkiye are also gaining strategic positions in Eurasian energy geography. At the same time, global powers such as China, the EU, and Russia are seeking to realize their geopolitical interests through infrastructure projects. Thus, the restoration of the historical Silk Road, particularly the Middle Corridor, can strengthen economic relations among Eurasian countries and contribute to ensuring energy security (Jannatov & Talibli, 2026).

In recent years, China's expanding engagement in Eurasia has increasingly extended to the South Caucasus, where industrial cooperation, logistics hubs, and infrastructure investments are becoming integral components of the evolving Silk Road framework (Niftiyev, 2022). This engagement facilitates the integration of smaller economies into global value chains, enabling them to move beyond transit functions toward value-added production and regional manufacturing networks. In a globalized economy, such processes enhance the strategic relevance of transit corridors such as

the Middle Corridor by linking energy routes, industrial zones, and cross-border supply chains. Moreover, regional geopolitical and geoeconomic organizations, particularly the Organization of Turkic States, play a growing role in coordinating energy security, transport connectivity, and policy harmonization among member states. The Organization of Turkic States thus contributes to the institutional consolidation of Eurasian energy and transit cooperation, reinforcing the resilience and sustainability of the Silk Road across the Turkic world (Niftiyev & Bagirzadeh, 2024).

This study examines the transformation of the historical Silk Road into a modern system of energy and transit corridors, with a particular focus on the Middle Corridor as a strategic axis of Eurasian connectivity. The main objective of the manuscript is to analyze the role of the Middle Corridor in facilitating energy transportation, trade flows, and regional integration across Eurasia. Specifically, the paper aims to identify the structural and geographical components of the Middle Corridor, assess its significance for energy transit and multimodal transport networks, and evaluate its strategic importance within contemporary initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and regional cooperation frameworks. By addressing these objectives, the paper seeks to contribute to the academic debate on Eurasian connectivity and the evolving geopolitical and geoeconomic dynamics of modern Silk Road routes.

METHODS

The study is devoted to the restoration of the Historical Silk Road and its contemporary geopolitical significance in terms of energy, transit, and the regional balance of power. During the research process, a number of sources published in English and Turkish were used, including reports, scientific articles, monographs, statistical data, and thematic maps. In addition, official documents related to the “One Belt, One Road” initiative of the People’s Republic of China, the TRACECA program, the Southern Gas Corridor, and other transport and energy projects were also analyzed.

The methodological basis of the study is formed by historical-analytical and comparative analytical approaches. The historical-analytical method makes it possible to trace the processes of the emergence, decline, and restoration of the Silk Road at different historical stages. Comparative analysis is used to assess the geopolitical and economic impacts of various projects, such as the Middle Corridor, TRACECA, and the “One Belt, One Road” initiative. At the same time, the strategic position of the South Caucasus and Central Asia in terms of transit and energy logistics was examined through political-geographical analysis.

The geographical scope of the study includes China, the countries of Central Asia, the South Caucasus region (especially Azerbaijan and Georgia), Türkiye, and the member states of the European Union. During data collection, special attention was paid to the reliability of the sources. The collected materials were classified by thematic areas and systematized chronologically and spatially. The visualization of transport routes, energy pipelines, and regional connections was carried out using maps and geopolitical diagrams. This methodological approach made it possible to reveal

strategic connections between the historical and modern stages of the Silk Road and to identify new perspectives in terms of energy security and transit cooperation.

RESULTS

Initiatives for Reconstructing the Silk Road

By the end of the last century, geopolitical changes in the world promoted the restoration process of the Historical Silk Road, which had historically played a leading role in the economic development of nations and states along the trade routes. It is expedient to divide the restoration process of the historical Silk Road into the following two important stages.

In the first stage (1991–1998), the foundations for the restoration of the “Historic Silk Road” were established. Due to its nature, this stage was aimed at developing cooperation in the Black Sea and Caspian Sea basins and had a regional character. Thus, the TACIS (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States) and TRACECA (Transport Corridor Europe–Caucasus–Asia) programs were adopted in 1991–1993. TRACECA connects the strategic region of Central Asia with Europe and the broader international community (Yalçinkaya & Güzel, 2021). This is an international program of the European Union and was developed within the framework of TACIS. The TACIS programme is an EU initiative for the New Independent States that aims to foster the development of economic and political links between the EU and these partner countries (European Union, 2022).

The second stage was marked by the convening of an international conference to restore the historic Silk Road, held on September 7–8, 1998, in Baku, Azerbaijan, with the participation of the presidents of nine countries (Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, Romania, Bulgaria, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan), 13 international organizations, and delegations from 32 countries (The Official Website of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan). The conference concluded with the signing of the Basic Multilateral Agreement and the Baku Declaration, which addressed the development of the Europe–Caucasus–Asia Corridor within the framework of the EU’s TRACECA programme. Last but not least, the Europe–Caucasus–Asia Corridor fosters the development of a new trade route. The project implemented during this period became more international than regional in scope. TRACECA also has a very important impact in terms of economic functions:

- To support the strengthening of the sovereignty of CIS countries in the TRACECA region and their economic independence in order to enable the effective integration of these countries’ economies into the world market;
- To increase investment from international financial institutions and private investment resources, which is vital for the countries of the region;
- To link the Eurasian transport corridor with Trans-European, and thus global, transport communications.

More recently, the initiatives put forward by China to restore the Historical Silk Road can be considered the third major stage in this process. Thus, the Chinese President announced his country’s

new development strategy during his visit to Kazakhstan in 2013. This concept, called the Silk Road Economic Belt, envisages close cooperation with neighboring states, as well as countries worldwide, in order to increase trade turnover and maintain peace and stability in international trade. In this sense, expectations for the New Silk Road are quite high.

Energy Security and New Perspectives

As can be seen, initiatives aimed at restoring the Historical Silk Road support East–West relations and encourage economic cooperation among countries. Furthermore, energy security has become one of the key issues in this context. The South Caucasus region plays a principal role both in the development of global cooperation and in ensuring energy security.

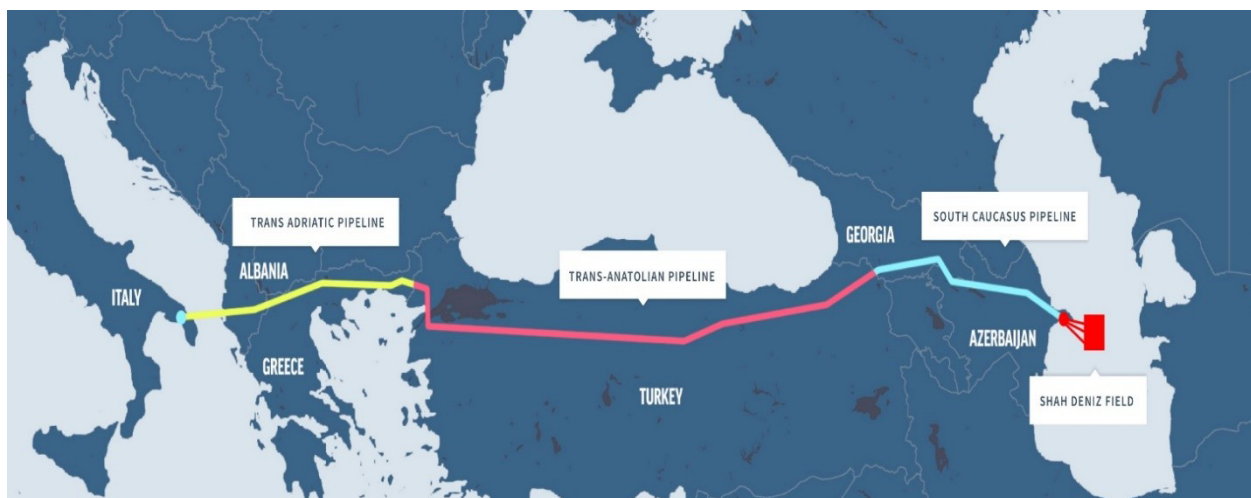
The collapse of the USSR opened a new chapter for the post-Soviet countries, particularly for the South Caucasus republics of Azerbaijan and Georgia, in developing mutual relations with the European Union. The Eastern Partnership has become a key instrument for integrating post-Soviet states into European cooperation frameworks. The EU inaugurated the Eastern Partnership by signing the “Prague Declaration” with six post-Soviet countries, including the South Caucasus republics of Azerbaijan and Georgia, on May 7, 2009 (Wojna & Gniazdowski, 2009). The EU offers free trade agreements and strategic partnerships to its eastern neighbors in order to promote regional stability. The expansion of these relations has also accelerated the process of building a new Silk Road.

The issue of energy security increases the strategic importance of the South Caucasus region. As Azerbaijan is the most strategically significant country in the South Caucasus due to its oil and gas resources, its prospects have increased considerably. From this perspective, EU–Azerbaijan economic cooperation is closely linked to energy security. Alongside economic development, the implementation of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan Pipeline contributed to rapid growth in Azerbaijan. On September 20, 1994, the “Contract of the Century” was signed by eight countries and 13 international companies (Çelikpala & Veliyev, 2015). This policy for the development of the oil and gas sector involved foreign investors and international corporations, thereby increasing international interest in the country. At the 2011 Baku meeting, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and the former President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, signed a Joint Declaration on the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) to bring Caspian, Central Asian, and Middle Eastern gas resources to the European market (Socor, 2014a). Georgia and Türkiye, which play intermediary roles in transporting Azerbaijani gas to Europe, are major partner countries in this cooperation. Figure 1 shows the strategic map of the Southern Gas Corridor and its partner states.

The Southern Gas Corridor connects three pipeline projects—the South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP), the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), and the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP)—and supports mutual relations among the EU, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye (Socor, 2014b). The Shah Deniz II Development Plan, as a key component of this major project, has created more favorable

opportunities for Azerbaijan–EU energy cooperation. The Southern Gas Corridor also opens new perspectives for the development of the Europe–Caucasus–Asia Economic Corridor.

Figure 1. Southern Gas Corridor



Source: Southern Gas Corridor, <https://www.sgc.az/en>

Belt and Road Initiative and Expectations from the New Economic Corridor

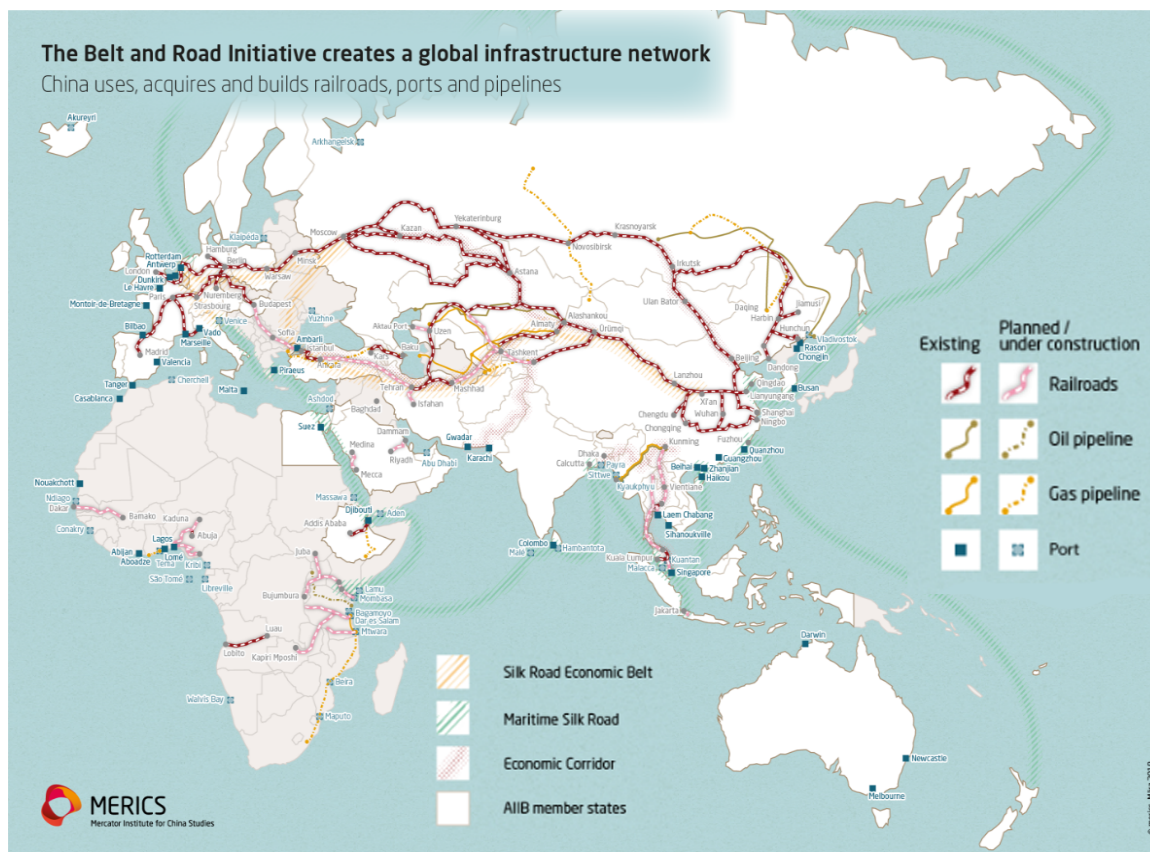
Since the 2000s, China's economy has expanded significantly and the country has become one of the key players in the Asian region (Doğan, 2020). This rapid growth prompted China to revitalize the historic Silk Road in order to ensure its competitiveness in world trade. The "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI), formerly known as "One Belt, One Road," was adopted by China as a development strategy in 2013. Chinese President Xi Jinping announced this strategy as the "Silk Road Economic Belt" during his official visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013 (Rice, 2023). The Chinese government's Belt and Road Initiative plans to invest in nearly 150 countries and organizations, including those in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. One month later, during his visit to Indonesia, the Chinese leader also proposed the construction of the "Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road" in order to enhance economic cooperation with Southeast Asian countries (Zhao, 2015).

The Belt and Road Initiative represents a significant opportunity to enhance mutual benefits and cooperation among countries located along the Silk Road. The strategy envisages two main directions of development: the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road (Gülez, 2022). Its primary objective is to create a trade corridor that enables the direct transportation of goods from East to West under favorable conditions. Figure 2 illustrates the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road.

The Belt and Road Initiative is a New Silk Road project that promotes global cooperation. This cooperation, in economic terms, has significant potential to stimulate economic vitality and to create substantial opportunities and benefits. The major objective of the BRI is to construct a unified market and to make use of both international and domestic markets by fostering cultural exchange among

participating countries. From this perspective, the Chinese government is interested in involving numerous actors in this large-scale project. The realization of this initiative may result in a sharp increase in new employment opportunities, foreign investment, productivity, as well as in the development of science and technology in the countries that join the Silk Road.

Figure 2. Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road.



Source: Mercator Institute for China Studies, "Mapping the Belt and Road initiative: this is where we stand", <https://merics.org/en/tracker/mapping-belt-and-road-initiative-where-we-stand>

There is no doubt that China is currently the country most interested in the restoration and development of the Silk Road. However, Central Asia and the Caspian basins constitute the main geographical areas of the New Silk Road. In particular, the South Caucasus region is considered one of the key routes of the Belt and Road Initiative (Hongjun, 2020). Considering that Azerbaijan is a leading country in the South Caucasus region, it can be regarded as one of the strategic powers within the China–Central Asia–West Asia economic corridor. Within this initiative, the governments of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the People’s Republic of China signed a memorandum of understanding on the joint promotion of the establishment of the Silk Road Economic Belt in December 2015 (Babayev & Ismailzade, 2020).

As a result of the long-standing friendly relations between the peoples of China and Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan became the first country in the Caucasus region to support China’s “One Belt, One Road” initiative. The increasing geopolitical importance of the Middle Corridor connecting China and Europe

has led to growing Chinese interest in the South Caucasus region and to the further development of its strategic partnership with Azerbaijan. The strategic partnership between Azerbaijan and China was further strengthened with the signing of the “Joint Declaration of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the People’s Republic of China on the Establishment of a Strategic Partnership” at the 2024 Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit in Astana (Fazl-e-Haider, 2025).

From this point of view, Azerbaijan plays the role of a logistics center, hub, and bridge in the implementation of the “One Belt, One Road” strategy. The Baku–Tbilisi–Kars Railway, connecting Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye, is the largest and most successful project in the Silk Road restoration process implemented by the Republic of Azerbaijan. The Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway plays a crucial role in the transportation of goods and people (Scotti et al., 2024). The Azerbaijani government also plays an active role in the development of the North–South Transport Corridor. The integration of these two projects—the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars Railway and the North–South Transport Corridor—will benefit China, Central Asian countries, South Caucasus republics (Azerbaijan and Georgia), Türkiye, and Europe. These large-scale projects enhance the strategic role of the South Caucasus region in the newly restored Silk Road. The South Caucasus region may take a leading role in the new Silk Road connecting East and West. In particular, the Russian–Ukrainian crisis has increased the role of the South Caucasus region in both the restoration of the Silk Road and the provision of Europe’s energy security. Figure 3 indicates that the Middle Corridor—railways of Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye—creates more options for transit from China to Europe.

Figure 3. Middle Corridor – Railways of Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Türkiye.

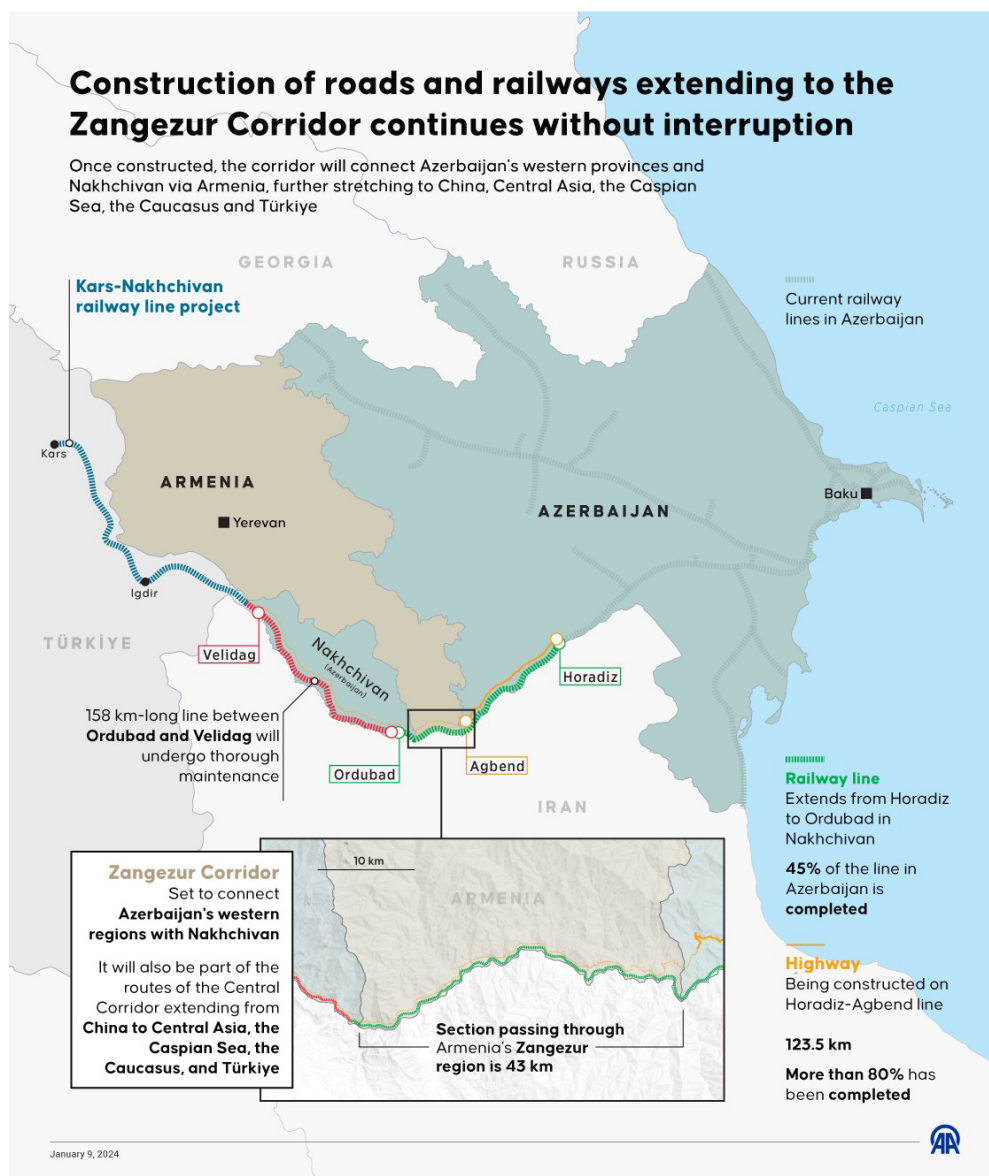


Source: Railways of Georgia, Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Kazakhstan will create a joint venture “Middle Corridor”,

The post-war period has opened a new phase in Azerbaijan–Armenia relations, creating a potential framework for normalization and long-term peace in the South Caucasus. Sustained diplomatic efforts contribute to regional stability, which is a critical prerequisite for the development of transnational transport and energy corridors. In this context, the proposed Zangezur Corridor represents a strategic link that could enhance connectivity between Azerbaijan and its exclave, Nakhchivan,

while simultaneously strengthening East–West and North–South transit routes (Rehimov, 2024). The realization of the Zangezur Corridor is expected to further strengthen the Middle Corridor by reducing transportation time, diversifying logistics routes, and increasing the overall resilience of Eurasian supply chains. Moreover, it would integrate the South Caucasus more effectively into global value chains by connecting Central Asia, the Caspian region, and Europe (Aguiar, 2025). From a broader geopolitical perspective, the corridor has the potential to transform the South Caucasus from a zone of competition into a platform for cooperation and economic interdependence. Consequently, the successful implementation of post-conflict infrastructure initiatives would further consolidate Azerbaijan’s role as a key transit and energy hub within the Middle Corridor framework. Figure 4 shows the importance of the Zangezur Corridor for the South Caucasus region as well as the Middle Corridor.

Figure 4. Zangezur Corridor: Construction of Roads and Railways.



Source: Rehimov, R. (2024, January 09)

CONCLUSIONS

As can be seen, the restoration of the Silk Road in the 21st century is not merely an economic project but also a manifestation of a new global order, in which connectivity, mutual dependence, and sustainable development have become central elements of international cooperation. It fosters intercultural dialogue and enhances regional resilience against global challenges such as economic crises, political instability, and climate change. Therefore, the New Silk Road should be regarded as a multidimensional initiative that unites nations not only through infrastructure but also through shared values of peace and collaboration.

The major issue affecting transport and, consequently, the future development of the New Silk Road—also known as “One Belt, One Road”—is the growing trade flow between Europe and Asia. In order to understand the economic significance of the European Union and China at both the regional and global levels, it is crucial to examine the impact of the New Silk Road initiative on their future trade trends. The New Silk Road will further strengthen economic relations among partner countries and facilitate the transportation of goods.

Considering the issue of energy security, the South Caucasus region may play a decisive role in the newly restored Silk Road. The fact that Iran’s economy remains under embargo and, following the Russia–Ukraine crisis, the decline of Russia’s status as a reliable transit route has turned the South Caucasus region—especially Azerbaijan—into a leading transit area within the Belt and Road project from China to Europe. All countries joining the New Silk Road will benefit economically. Thus, like the Historical Silk Road, the New Silk Road will play an important role as a means of exchange in trade, science, and culture among peoples and countries.

The Middle Corridor represents a multimodal transport route linking China to Europe through Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus, and Türkiye. The corridor integrates rail, maritime, and pipeline infrastructure, connecting key transit nodes such as Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye. Its strategic position enables the transportation of energy resources and goods while reducing transit distance and delivery time compared to traditional northern routes. In this context, the Middle Corridor functions as a complementary and increasingly utilized pathway within the broader Eurasian transport and energy network.

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