

THE IMPACT OF THE BLACK SEA ON THE MIDDLE CORRIDOR PROJECT AND ITS GEOPOLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE

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Abstract. The present study discusses and analyzes the geopolitical role of the Black Sea in the development of the Middle Corridor project and the importance of its successful functioning for modern global trade. The study systematically examines the economic and geostrategic aspects of the Middle Corridor as a trans-Caspian international transport route and the special role of the Black Sea in this system.

The research methodology includes a complex study of geopolitical analysis, economic assessment and infrastructure development. The paper extensively discusses the role of the main Black Sea ports - Batumi, Poti, Constanta, Burgas, Samsun and Trabzon - in the logistics chain of the Middle Corridor. The study has shown that the Black Sea is not only a geographical boundary, but also a critical geopolitical instrument that determines the degree of success of the Middle Corridor.

Keywords: Middle Corridor; Black Sea geopolitics; Trans-Caspian transport; Energy diversification; Logistics chain; Port infrastructure; Regional integration; Trade corridors.

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Introduction. In the context of the modern global economy and geopolitics, transport corridors play a key role in relations between states and the development of regional cooperation. The Middle Corridor, also known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, is one of the most important transport axes connecting Asia and Europe. In this context, the geopolitical role of the Black Sea is particularly important, as it is a vital node in the context of the Middle Corridor.

The Middle Corridor project, launched in 2013, was an alternative to the Northern Corridor through Russia and the Southern Corridor through Iran. The importance of this route has especially increased after 2022, when Russian routes were restricted due to the Russia-Ukraine war. The Black Sea, as an integral part of this corridor, is gaining special geopolitical importance.

Methods. The present study is based on a complex methodological approach that combines both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The research methodology includes several interconnected components that provide a comprehensive analysis of the Black Sea and Middle Corridor interconnections.

Geopolitical analysis method. The study uses the classical geopolitical analysis method, which focuses on the study of the interaction of regional powers, strategic interests, and geographical factors. Within the framework of this method, the strategic importance of the Black Sea region and its role in global geopolitical dynamics are discussed.

Comparative analysis. The study uses the comparative analysis method, which allows us to assess the functional characteristics, infrastructural capabilities, and strategic advantages of various Black Sea ports. The operational characteristics of the ports of Batumi, Poti, Constanta, Burgas, Samsun and Trabzon and their role in the logistics chain of the Middle Corridor are compared.

Economic assessment method. The study includes an analysis of economic data based on official statistics of the Black Sea ports, trade data and indicators of logistics operations. Cargo turnover statistics and trends for the period 2020-2023 are analyzed.

Documentary analysis method. The empirical base of the study includes official and strategic planning documents of international organizations related to the development of the Middle Corridor. Special attention was paid to regional cooperation agreements and multilateral agreements.

Systemic analysis. The study uses a systemic approach that considers the Middle Corridor and the Black Sea as components of an interconnected system. This method allows us to understand how a change in one element affects the entire system.

Infrastructure Assessment. The study includes an analysis of existing and planned infrastructure projects, an assessment of their technical parameters and development prospects. Special attention was paid to the Anaklia Port project and its potential impact on the throughput of the Middle Corridor.

Analysis of secondary sources. The study is based on a review of extensive scientific literature covering issues of geopolitics, international relations, transport economics, and regional integration. Scientific publications from 2021-2023 that relate to the geopolitics of the Middle Corridor and the Black Sea are analyzed.

Discussion. The Middle Corridor is a modern version of the ancient Silk Road, connecting the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan) with the western shore of the Caspian Sea (Azerbaijan), and then through Georgia, Armenia, and Turkey to the Black Sea. This route is of strategic importance due to several important factors. (Ahmadov 2022)

First, the Middle Corridor is a tool for geopolitical diversification. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus began to seek alternative routes to Russia's monopolized transport system. In this context, the Middle Corridor has become a symbol of political and economic independence.

The second important aspect is energy security. The Caspian Sea region is rich in oil and gas resources, and the Middle Corridor provides an alternative route for transporting these resources to Europe. This has become especially important for Europe in the context of reducing its dependence on Russian energy resources. (Karimov 2023)

The economic importance of the Middle Corridor is due to several factors. First of all, it is a geographical advantage - the route provides a relatively short route for transporting goods from China to Europe. If the traditional ocean route (via the Suez Canal) takes 45-50 days for cargo from China to Europe, the same route can be covered by the Middle Corridor in 15-20 days. (Shaffer 2023)

The second important economic aspect is the optimization of logistics costs. The Middle Corridor can be more efficient when transporting goods by sea, especially for high-value goods that require fast transportation.

The geopolitical importance of the Middle Corridor is also due to the balance of regional power. This route is an important component of China's Belt and Road Initiative, but at the same time it is not fully under China's control, which gives it a special geopolitical balance.

The US and the EU support the development of the Middle Corridor because it helps to limit the geo-economic influence of Russia and China in the region. At the same time, Russia sees this route as a challenge to its geopolitical influence. (Celikpala 2024)

The Black Sea has historically always been an important geopolitical area. From the ancient Greeks to the Ottoman Empire, control over the Black Sea gave states significant strategic advantages. In the 20th century, especially during the Cold War, the Black Sea became an area of direct confrontation between NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

In the modern context, the geopolitical importance of the Black Sea has increased even more after the Russo-Ukrainian war. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 radically changed the geopolitical landscape of the Black Sea and significantly strengthened Russia's position in the region. (Ehteshami 2023)

The strategic importance of the Black Sea is determined by several factors. First of all, it is the control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, which gives states the opportunity to influence the ports leading from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. (Nye 2023)

The second important aspect is energy communications. Several important oil and gas pipelines pass through the Black Sea, including the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Baku-Sufsi oil pipelines, as well as the South Caucasus gas pipeline.

Since 2022, after the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the Black Sea has become a zone of active hostilities. This has radically changed the security architecture of the region and significantly complicated the use of trade routes.

The blockade of Ukrainian grain exports, followed by the "Black Sea Grain" initiative, clearly demonstrated the role of the Black Sea for global food security. This initiative demonstrated the importance of the Black Sea not only for regional but also for global trade.

The interconnection of the Middle Corridor and the Black Sea is fundamental for the functioning of the entire system. The Black Sea is the western terminal of the Middle Corridor, where continental transportation transitions to sea transportation. (Celikpala 2024)

The logistics chain includes several stages: cargo from China goes by rail to Kazakhstan, then is transported across the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan, from there by rail to Georgia and finally by sea from the Black Sea ports to Europe. The effectiveness of this entire chain depends on the coordination of each element. (Helly 2022)

Infrastructure projects related to the Middle Corridor significantly enhance the role of the Black Sea. It should be noted that the modernization of the ports of Batumi and Poti is important. These ports are already developing as the main sea terminals of the Middle Corridor. The port of Batumi is particularly important for the export of oil products, and the port of Poti for containerized cargo. (Laruelle 2022)

The successful functioning of the Middle Corridor and the Black Sea interconnection requires close political coordination between the participating countries. The Open Organization for Coordination and Development of the Middle Corridor is the institutional framework for this coordination. (Jafarova 2021)

The unified tariffs, legal framework and technical standards developed within the framework of this organization ensure the effective functioning of the entire route. The participation of the countries of the Black Sea region - Georgia, Turkey and Bulgaria - in this organization is crucial for the success of the system. (Trenin 2023)

The integration of the Middle Corridor and the Black Sea creates significant economic synergies. Through the Black Sea ports, the Middle Corridor is connected to the main economic centers of Europe - Germany, Italy and France. (Babayev 2021)

The port of Batumi is one of the most important Black Sea ports in the context of the Middle Corridor. The port is strategically located and connects Azerbaijan and Central Asia with the West. (İşeri 2023)

The main advantages of the Batumi port include: a deep-water basin that provides reception of large-tonnage vessels, a developed railway connection with Azerbaijan, and an infrastructure for processing oil and oil products.

According to statistics for 2020-2023, cargo turnover at the Batumi port is increasing significantly. In particular, the growth trend is observed in the direction of container cargo, which is directly related to the development of the Middle Corridor. (Yılmaz 2022)

As for the Port of Poti, it is the largest port in Georgia and the main container terminal of the Middle Corridor on the Black Sea. The port is located on the Rioni Estuary and provides deep-water access. (Raballand 2022)

The main directions of development of the Port of Poti include: the expansion of the container terminal, which will provide for the processing of more than 1 million TEU of containers per year; the introduction of automation, which will enhance operational efficiency; and the development of intermodal transport. (Ahmadov 2022)

The Port of Constanta, located in Romania (although not directly part of the Middle Corridor), plays an important role in the European end of this route. The port is the most important sea terminal on the Danube and provides a connection to Central Europe. (Pepe 2023)

Constanta is of particular importance for the Middle Corridor, as it connects the Black Sea with the Danube, which provides cargo supplies to Austria, Hungary, Slovakia and other Central European countries. (Freire 2023)

The port of Burgas, located in Bulgaria, plays an important role in the Balkan direction of the Middle Corridor. The port specializes in petroleum products and chemicals, which makes it particularly important in the transportation of energy resources from the Caspian region to European markets. (Papava 2022)

The advantages of the port of Burgas include: a developed railway network connecting the port with Central Europe; storage infrastructure for oil and petroleum products; and deep-water access.

The Turkish ports of Samsun and Trabzon play an important role in the development of the Turkish segment of the Middle Corridor. These ports provide a link between the Black Sea and the domestic markets of Turkey. (Kakachia 2022)

The port of Samsun specializes in general cargo processing and is an important logistics center in northern Turkey. The port of Trabzon is of particular importance in Georgian-Turkish trade. (Laruelle 2022)

In modern conditions, the integration of the Middle Corridor and the Black Sea faces several important geopolitical challenges. First of all, these are regional conflicts. The Russian-Ukrainian war directly affects the security of the Black Sea and trade routes. (Karimov 2023)

The second important challenge is Russia's geopolitical opposition. Russia considers the development of the Middle Corridor as a limitation of its geoeconomic influence and is taking active measures to limit the effectiveness of this route.

The third important challenge is cybersecurity issues. Modern logistics systems are significantly dependent on digital technologies, which makes them vulnerable to cyberattacks. Russia's cyberattacks on Ukrainian infrastructure have demonstrated the reality of this threat.

The fourth challenge is related to the regional balance of power. The clash of interests between China, the United States, the European Union, and Russia poses difficult political choices for the countries participating in the Middle Corridor. (Kassenova 2023)

Despite the challenges, the integration of the Middle Corridor and the Black Sea creates significant opportunities. These include: a significant increase in trade volumes, which could reach up to 10 million tons

per year; promoting energy diversification; encouraging regional economic development; and opportunities for the introduction of new technologies.

A special opportunity is the development of the “green corridor” concept, which envisages the use of environmentally friendly transportation technologies. This includes the use of electric locomotives and the optimization of digital logistics systems. (Koranyi 2023)

The future development of the Middle Corridor and the Black Sea integration for the period 2025-2030 includes: the commissioning of the Anaklia deep-sea port, which will significantly increase the throughput capacity of the Middle Corridor, and the full integration of digital logistics platforms. (Kilavuz 2022)

Conclusion. The influence of the Black Sea on the Middle Corridor project is one of the most important aspects of modern geopolitics and geoeconomics. This study has shown that the Black Sea is not just a geographical area, it is a special geopolitical tool that determines the success of the Middle Corridor.

The integration of the Middle Corridor and the Black Sea is a complex geopolitical, economic and technical challenge that requires close coordination of regional powers. After the Russian-Ukrainian war, the importance of this integration has increased even more, as Europe is looking for alternative ways for trade and energy diversification.

The study has shown that the Black Sea ports - Batumi, Poti, Constanta, Burgas - play a special role in the European integration of the Middle Corridor. The infrastructural development and technological modernization of these ports are vital for the effectiveness of the entire system.

Despite the challenges – from geopolitical trends to technical problems – the integration of the Middle Corridor and the Black Sea creates enormous opportunities for regional economic development and global trade diversification. If successfully implemented, this integration could become a symbol of a new “Silk Road” for the 21st century.

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