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NEW OPPORTUNITIES AND INITIATIVES FOR THE MIDDLE CORRIDOR

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In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of initiatives for the development of the "Middle Corridor" connecting Asia and Europe via the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus, and Türkiye. The idea of a Trans-Carpian Middle Corridor, which was introduced in the 90s following the collapse of the Soviet Union, came to the fore with China's Belt and Road Initiative, and was completed for the most part after the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway became operational in 2017. Recent developments in the international conjuncture are encouraging the acceleration of cargo transfers from China to Europe via the Middle Corridor.

More than 90% of the rail transport from China to Europe passes through Russia.[1] Risks involving freight transportation from China to Europe were exposed due to the war in Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Russia, which led to the search for alternative routes.[2] International companies, including Danish shipping company Maersk and Finnish Nurminen Logistics have, since April, been operating using the route passing from China to Kazakhstan, from there to Azerbaijan and Georgias Poti Sea Port via the Caspian Sea, and to Romania's Constanta Port and European countries via the Black Sea.[3] The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, which provides transit between the ports of Aktau in Kazakhstan and Baku in Azerbaijan, and also passes through Türkiye along the Kars-Sivas-Ankara-Kosekoy-Istanbul line, became operational two years ago.[4] It is estimated that the shipment volume of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route will increase six-fold this year.[5]

A series of diplomatic talks and initiatives have been launched in recent months to develop alternative routes. Negotiations for the construction of the "China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway", which will be an important pillar of the China-Europe transition, have intensified. Following the announcement of a five-year investment and economic cooperation program between China and Uzbekistan on 5 February 2022, it was announced that the construction of the railway to connect Kashgar, Osh, and Tashkent would begin by 2023. In June, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with his Kazakh counterpart Mukhtar Tileuberdi, addressing the efforts on increasing the potential of the

Trans-Caspian Corridor.

Türkiye attaches special importance to the development of the Middle Corridor as it ensures Türkiyes role as a transit center between East and West and helps improve its economic and political relations with Central Asian countries. In this context, a series of negotiations and agreements were signed in the past months. On 29-30 March 2022, ten cooperation agreements were signed between Türkiye and Uzbekistan, including the Protocol on the Exchange of Preliminary Information Regarding the Crossing of Goods and Vehicles through the Border, and it was announced that Turkish-Uzbek relations had reached the level of "comprehensive strategic partnership".[6] On the same dates, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Türkiye, as members of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) Association, held a meeting on the strategy to be developed until 2030 regarding freight transport.[7]

On May 10-11, 2022, during the President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayevs visit to Türkiye, the "Joint Declaration on the Enhanced Strategic Partnership" was published, and 15 agreements were signed between the countries addressing the defense industry, transportation, shipping, and trade. Tokayev stated that after the Kuryk Port joined the Trans-Caspian Corridor, cargo-shipping time from Khorgos to Istanbul shortened by five times, and noted their ongoing efforts to increase the capacities of Kuryk and Aktau that are among the ports under development.[8]

On 27 June 2022, the "Declaration on the Cooperation in the Fields of Transport and Communication" was signed at the trilateral meeting attended by the Foreign Ministers of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Türkiye.[9] It was emphasized that the Zangezur Corridor would form an important link between the East-West and North-South transportation corridors. Afterwards, at the meeting on 30 June 2022, attended by the heads and representatives of the railway administrations of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Georgia, Türkiye, and the Azerbaijan logistics company, a protocol was signed on the development of the multimodal route including road and rail transport.[10]

While the efforts on the Trans-Caspian Route are intensified, construction of the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline project, which will reach Azerbaijan through Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan is being reconsidered with regard to Europe's desire to reduce its natural gas dependence on Russia. Apart from the resources available in Turkmenistan, which has the world's fourth largest natural gas reserve, it is estimated that there are approximately 48 billion barrels of oil and 8.3 trillion cubic meters of natural gas reserves in and around the Caspian basin.[11] With the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea signed by the Caspian littoral states in 2018, and by the settlement between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan over the disputed area in the Caspian Sea reached through the 21 January 2021 Friendship Agreement, the obstacles to the realization of Trans-Caspian energy projects have largely been removed.[12] Currently, Azerbaijani gas reaches Europe through the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline Project (TANAP) and the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) as part of the Southern Gas Corridor. Turkish Vice President Fuat Oktay stated that they have accelerated their surveys for the transfer of Turkmenistans natural gas to the Southern Gas Corridor, and that they are working on alternatives for energy transition through the Caspian Sea conducted via the pipeline or by shipping.[13]

All these steps serve to strengthen Türkiyes core position in the transportation and energy

transfer between the East and the West. It is thought that the construction of transportation roads on new routes and energy projects will help open Central Asian countries to the West and invigorate their economies.

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