HIGHLIGHT OF JOURNAL

Azerbaijan and Central Asia: From Shared Turkic Heritage to a Full-Fledged Strategic Partnership
Zhanat Momynkulov

CAUCASUS
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Sovereignty, Strategic Choices and Survival in the 21st Century

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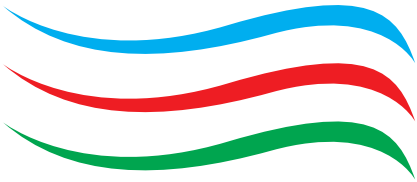

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Editor's Note

The current issue of the Caucasus Strategic Perspectives (CSP) journal entitled ***"Sovereignty, Strategic Choices and Survival in the 21st Century"*** is dedicated to the theoretical and practical dimensions of sovereignty in an era of shifting global norms and exploring how regional states assert sovereignty amid geopolitical competition and conflict. The CSP's summer issue also featured off-topic, yet timely-written article covering the relevant developments beyond the South Caucasus region.

The CSP's new issue includes 8 articles. The CSP's current authors studied strategic partnership between Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states, the nexus between energy sovereignty and resource geopolitics, structural realism and securitization theory to safeguard sovereign, the concept of state sovereignty in the context of expanding global obligations under international law, the diaspora engagement policies of Turkic states, various forms of connectivity, the EU-Central Asia cooperation, and etc.

The new issue's **Highlight** is the article of **Zhanat Momynkulov** titled "*Azerbaijan and Central Asia: From Shared Turkic Heritage to a Full-Fledged Strategic Partnership*". The article examines the evolution of a strategic partnership between Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states, focusing on the transformation of their relations from a shared historical and cultural foundation to the pursuit of new regional interests. The study highlights the role of common Turkic identity, linguistic ties, geography, and cultural heritage as a soft power base that now complements pragmatic cooperation in economics, energy, transport, and security.

The new issue's **Articles Section** follows with the article of **Liliana Śmiech** titled "*Energy Sovereignty and the Geopolitics of Critical Resources*". This article explores the nexus between energy sovereignty and resource geopolitics in the 21st century. It argues that sovereignty must be redefined from self-sufficiency to resilient control over supply chains, generation technologies, and strategic resources. The article concludes that energy policy is inseparable from geopolitics: the future of sovereignty will be

determined not by borders alone, but by control over pipelines, grids, and critical mineral supply chains.

Atia Ali Kazmi's article of "*Reconstituting Sovereignty: Strategic Realignments and Connectivity in a Fractured World*" synthesizes structural realism and securitization theory to argue that sovereign robustness today hinges on the collective safeguarding of non-traditional domains – trade, energy, transport, and data – alongside classic defence concerns. The article concludes that sustainable sovereignty in Eurasia's interior increasingly rests on a cooperative securitization of connectivity, treating shared infrastructure as stabilizing public goods rather than zero-sum prerogatives.

Orkhan Yolchuyev's article of "*Revisiting State Sovereignty in the Context of Global Obligations*" revisits the concept of state sovereignty in the context of expanding global obligations under international law. The article argues that modern sovereignty is best understood as a form of accountable authority – legitimate only when exercised in conformity with universal legal norms. The central question of the article asks how contemporary international law reconciles the classical notion of sovereignty with collective responsibilities owed to the international community as a whole.

Aidar Kurmashev, Amina Urpekova, Amirbek Alibi and Houman Sadri's joint article of "*Diaspora Policies within the Organization of Turkic States: Opportunities for Strategic Engagement*" evaluates the diaspora engagement policies of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Türkiye, and Uzbekistan by comparing legislative frameworks, institutions, and the intensity of engagement. The analysis identifies distinct policy profiles aligned with five ideal types and maps each Organization of Turkic States member to the nearest cluster.

Laszlo Vasa and Peter Barkanyi's joint article titled "*Connectivity in the new world order – Reason or consequence?*" discusses how various forms of connectivity – such as trade, digital networks, cultural ties, and diplomacy – are linked to international cooperation in the South Caucasus region. It examines how these

connections interact with the efforts of multilateral organizations active in the region. One of the key results of this study is that the countries of the South Caucasus are increasingly seeking to rely on their own regional initiatives whenever external actors appear less effective.

Ikboljon Qoraboyev and Nazym Umirzakova's article "*A Geopolitical Europe in Action: Pragmatism and Partnership in EU–Central Asia Relations beyond the Samarkand Summit*" examines how the EU's evolving geopolitical posture is articulated through four dynamics: the elevation of Central Asia's centrality in EU discourse, the prioritization of material interests with critical raw materials at the core, the discursive and policy shift from globalization to connectivity, and the rise of quid pro quo diplomacy in place of conditionality. The analysis highlights both the promise and limitations of the EU's emerging geopolitical actorness in Central Asia, underscoring the need to balance strategic realism with long-term credibility.

Lala Khalilzade's article titled "*Iraq's Development Road and its Potential Linkage with the Zangezur Corridor*" examines the strategic, economic, and geopolitical implications of the Development Road Project for Iraq and Türkiye, situating it within broader regional connectivity frameworks such as the Middle Corridor. Special attention is given to the potential integration of the Zangezur Corridor, a proposed route that could link Azerbaijan with Türkiye via Armenia.

Finally, on behalf of the CSP team, we hope this issue provides food for thought and contributes to and enriches the discussion on subject-matter issues.

Sincerely
Farid Shafiyev
Editor-in-Chief of CSP Journal

Azerbaijan and Central Asia: From Shared Turkic Heritage to a Full-Fledged Strategic Partnership

Zhanat Momynkulov*

This article examines the evolution of a strategic partnership between Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states, focusing on the transformation of their relations from a shared historical and cultural foundation to the pursuit of new regional interests. The study highlights the role of common Turkic identity, linguistic ties, geography, and cultural heritage as a soft power base that now complements pragmatic cooperation in economics, energy, transport, and security. Special attention is given to activities within the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) and the growing significance of trans-Caspian connectivity projects that strengthen regional integration, enhance Eurasian integration, and reduce dependency on traditional power centres. The analysis shows that Azerbaijan's proactive diplomacy and Central Asia's multi-vector foreign policy complement one another, creating dual engines of Turkic connectivity across the Caspian. Key questions of Azerbaijan–Kazakhstan relations are analysed separately to highlight their specific dynamics within the broader regional context. The analysis concludes that this emerging alliance represents not merely cultural solidarity but a strategic axis of Eurasian stability and autonomy.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Central Asia, Organization of Turkic States, regional cooperation, strategic partnership.

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Introduction

Cooperation between Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states has gained remarkable momentum in the past three to five years, evolving from symbolic rhetoric into a concrete framework for strategic engagement. This growing partnership reflects not only geopolitical pragmatism but also the shared cultural, historical, and civilizational foundations that bind the Turkic world into a coherent regional identity.

As for the strategic framework of Azerbaijan–Central Asia cooperation in the 21st century, regional connectivity, energy logistics and security, and cultural diplomacy have become decisive factors shaping Eurasia's strategic landscape. Within this context, Azerbaijan serves as a natural bridge between the Caspian Caucasus and Central Asia, linking continental transport, energy, and digital routes. The relevance of this cooperation lies in its potential to diversify regional economies, reduce geographic isolation and dependency on external powers, and foster intra-Turkic solidarity in a multipolar world.

Azerbaijan serves as a natural bridge between the Caspian Caucasus and Central Asia, linking continental transport, energy, and digital routes.

The key question is, "Why is Azerbaijan interested in forging closer ties with Central Asia?". Azerbaijan views Central Asia as an extension of its historical and linguistic community. Beyond cultural affinity, Azerbaijan seeks to consolidate its role as a transit and energy hub, connecting the Caspian Basin with Europe and Asia. By strengthening relations with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and others, Azerbaijan enhances its geopolitical weight and economic diversification in four directions, while balancing between major powers such as Russia, Türkiye, China, the European Union, and Iran.

Another question is, "Why is Azerbaijan strategically important for Central Asia in a broader sense?". For Central Asian states, Azerbaijan represents a gateway to Western markets through the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) and the Middle Corridor. Cooperation with Azerbaijan also helps the region reduce overdependence on northern or eastern transit channels, creating a more autonomous and resilient regional infrastructure. Moreover, Azerbaijan's post-war experience in state-building and assertive energy diplomacy offers a practical model for Central Asian modernization.

The aim of this research is to examine why Azerbaijan–Central Asia relations are evolving beyond the conventional 'C5+1' framework and

transforming into an autonomous intra-regional Turkic axis of Eurasian cooperation. The central research question asks: "What factors make this partnership genuinely strategic rather than merely symbolic?".

The historical and cultural foundations of these emotional and civilizational bonds constitute the basis for mutual trust, equality, and long-term partnership between Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states. The peoples of Azerbaijan and Central Asia share historical ties rooted in common literary traditions, intellectual exchanges, and mutual support during key historical moments across the Caspian Sea. Cultural links, from classical poetry to Turkology studies, have long sustained a sense of fraternity. The former Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict also evoked solidarity and understanding among Turkic nations, reinforcing emotional proximity.

There are three major historical factors that unite Azerbaijan and the Central Asian nations. Their shared Turkic identity, common Islamic civilization, and Soviet legacies shaped similar political patterns and social systems. These factors make reciprocal understanding natural and cooperation smoother, as societies think and feel within a similar mindset and historical frames.

The structure of the article is as follows. The methodology section outlines the analytical and fieldwork approach, while the theoretical framework presents key concepts such as regionalism, identity politics, constructivism, and Eurasian geopolitics. Subsequent sections analyse and examine (1) the important role of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), (2) Azerbaijan's strategic role in Caspian and Central Asian geopolitics, (3) Central Asian foreign policy in Caspian affairs, and (4) Azerbaijan–Kazakhstan strategic convergence. The conclusion summarizes key findings and answers the research questions.

Methodology

This article employs a qualitative, analytical, and comparative methodology to examine the evolving geopolitical partnership between Azerbaijan and Central Asian states, particularly Kazakhstan, within the framework of the Turkic world and Caspian regional dynamics. The research is based on an interdisciplinary approach, integrating political science, international relations theory, and regional studies.

Primary sources include official statements, summit communiqués, and policy documents from the Central Asia summits and the OTS, while

secondary sources consist of academic publications, expert analyses, and recent media reports. Comparative analysis is used to assess the convergence of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan's foreign policies, focusing on connectivity, energy cooperation, and security frameworks.

The study also employs case-based observation of the 2025 Gabala Summit and trans-Caspian initiatives to evaluate how bilateral and multilateral cooperation contributes to shaping a new geopolitical identity of the Turkic world and strengthening Eurasian integration. The present author acted as a participant observer, attending regional conferences and observing OTS meetings, and engaging with diplomats, experts, and media representatives. This role provided first-hand insight into the evolving discourse on Turkic regionalism and Azerbaijan–Central Asia cooperation.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of Azerbaijan–Central Asia relations draws upon four complementary theoretical perspectives: regionalism, identity politics, constructivism, and Eurasian geopolitics. From this perspective, the concept of 'strategic partnership' in regional studies may be reconsidered as a dynamic and multidimensional framework that transcends traditional bilateral cooperation and reflects a broader process of regional transformation. In this context, a strategic partnership implies long-term, institutionalized cooperation across political, economic, cultural, and security dimensions, grounded in mutual trust and shared strategic objectives rather than temporary alignment. The Azerbaijan–Central Asia partnership embodies this evolving model as it moves beyond symbolic diplomacy and ad hoc summits toward structured regional integration through mechanisms such as the OTS, the Caspian Economic Forum, and trans-Caspian connectivity initiatives.

This evolution reflects what Björn Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum describe as 'new regionalism', a multidimensional process where regional identity, political will, and institutional capacity converge to create sustainable cooperation beyond state-centric interaction. This framework helps explain how Azerbaijan and Central Asia are shaping a region from within, based on shared culture, interests, and interdependence rather than external imposition.

From the lens of identity politics, inspired by Benedict Anderson's

concept of the imagined community[1] and Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolism, the Azerbaijan–Central Asia partnership can be seen as a collective reconstruction of Turkic identity in the post-Soviet era. Shared myths, language, and symbols form the emotional foundation of contemporary political cooperation, where culture reinforces strategic interests.[2]

Brzezinski argued that, without Azerbaijan's stability and openness, Central Asia would remain locked within a continental framework dominated by neighbouring powers.

Alexander Wendt's constructivism provides an interpretive framework for understanding how shared norms, ideas, and perceptions shape political behaviour. The growing trust between Azerbaijan and Central Asia demonstrates that inter-state cooperation is, in parallel, socially constructed through media discourse, identity recognition, and mutual expectations, rather than determined solely by material power.[3] In the 1990s, the American strategist Zbigniew Brzezinski highlighted Azerbaijan's importance as a 'geopolitical pivot' for Central Asia, emphasizing its role in ensuring the region's westward access and strategic independence, while Kishore Mahbubani's vision of an emerging multipolar Asia underscores the importance of regional self-reliance and strategic pragmatism.[4] Both perspectives situate the Azerbaijan–Central Asia partnership within a broader transformation of Eurasia's geopolitical architecture.

Brzezinski argued that, without Azerbaijan's stability and openness, Central Asia would remain locked within a continental framework dominated by neighbouring powers.[5]

The OTS as a Platform for Connectivity and Regional Cohesion within Central Asia

Transformation of cooperation formats between Azerbaijan and Central Asia is essential for understanding the emerging dynamics of the

1 B. Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, London: Verso, 1983, pp.1-240.

2 A. D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp.57-192.

3 A. Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1999, pp. 246-312.

4 K. Mahbubani, *The Asian 21st Century*, (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press), 2022, pp.15-98.

5 Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, (New York: Basic Books, 1997), pp.35-120.

Central Eurasian or Turkic region. Central Asia and the OTS function as mutually reinforcing and overlapping platforms that activate and amplify each other's regional roles. The OTS provides an institutional and strategic framework for cooperation, while Central Asia contributes the geopolitical and economic core that gives the organization its supplementary substance, regional dimension, and strategic direction. Together, they transform the Turkic space from a cultural concept into an operational axis of Eurasian connectivity and policy coordination.

The Azerbaijan–Central Asia relationship has undergone a visible transformation from cultural symbolism to institutional mechanisms. In the 1990s, cooperation was largely expressed through shared cultural and linguistic initiatives celebrating common Turkic identity. In that period, the idea of 'Pan-Turkism' emerged as a unifying discourse among newly independent Turkic republics. Yet, even without the ideology of Pan-Turkism, the peoples of these nations remained conscious of their linguistic and cultural kinship. Over time, this symbolic stage evolved into structured and goal-oriented regionalism supported by formal institutions. Today's partnership builds upon that awareness, transforming shared heritage into pragmatic cooperation and benefit.

Central Asia is moving towards a new phase of strategic unity among member states. Amid intensifying global turbulence, the OTS is entering a new era characterized by institutional maturity and strategic coherence. The 12th OTS Summit, held in October 2025 in Gabala, Azerbaijan, marked a turning point in the organization's evolution and signalled a transition from cultural symbolism to the formulation of concrete mechanisms of cooperation, including discussion of defence and security issues.

Growing international instability, spanning from Ukraine to the Middle East and Afghanistan, is prompting Turkic nations to strengthen their unity and collective resilience. In this context, the OTS is increasingly viewed not merely as a cultural forum but as a platform for regional partnership that brings together its member states around common strategic interests. The emerging 'Turkic Security Belt' thus represents a developing axis of stability at the crossroads of Eurasian geopolitical rivalries.[6]

6 Momynkulov, Zh. "Zhanat Momynkulov: OTG vstupaet v novuyu epokhu strategicheskogo edinstva na fone global'noi turbulentnosti", *Azertag.az*, October 7, 2025, Available at: https://azertag.az/ru/xeber/zhanat_momynkulov_otg_vstupaet_v_novuyu_epohu_strategicheskogo_edinstva_na_fone_globalnoi_turbulentnosti-3790871 (Accessed: October 10, 2025).

Among the initiatives discussed at the Gabala Summit were the establishment of a Council on Cybersecurity within the OTS framework, the organization of joint meetings of foreign ministers and intelligence heads, and proposals for enhanced military cooperation. In 2026, President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev notably called for joint military exercises of Turkic states, reflecting Azerbaijan's proactive approach to transforming the organization into a more cohesive strategic actor. A major focus of the summit was the TITR, also known as the Middle Corridor, linking Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and Europe. This route forms the backbone of the transport autonomy of Turkic states and serves as a cornerstone of the emerging Eurasian security and connectivity architecture. Key priorities include tariff harmonization, technical standardization, port security, and the creation of a joint coordination mechanism, all of which strengthen interregional linkages and position the OTS as a strategic East–West axis of the 21st century.

Equally significant is deepening energy cooperation, as harmonized export strategies among Kazakhstan, the Caspian states, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye underpin the region's energy autonomy and sustainable development. Alongside this, digital integration, through the creation of a unified digital space, e-commerce platforms, and cybersecurity initiatives, has become a new pillar of cooperation between Central Asia and Azerbaijan. The humanitarian and cultural Turkic agenda continues to serve as the soft power dimension of trans-Caspian cooperation, reinforcing a shared civilizational identity and promoting intersocietal cohesion.

In summary, the OTS is transforming from a cultural entity into a strategic platform capable of ensuring political autonomy and regional stability. The Turkic world today is evolving into a space of pragmatic solidarity, marked by cooperation without confrontation and unity without ideology. This shift reflects a broader movement – from symbols to strategies, and from cultural kinship to the formation of an independent political subject in Eurasia.

The Unique and Central Role of Azerbaijan for the Central Asian Region

The evolving cooperation between Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan, whose strategic significance has grown rapidly in recent years due to bilateral and multilateral platforms, now provides a

Under the presidency of Ilham Aliyev, Azerbaijan has pursued one of the most dynamic, multi-layered, and multidimensional foreign policies in the post-Soviet space.

framework of stability and coordination for both official Baku, Tashkent, and Astana. Within the Caspian region, Azerbaijan is emerging as a new anchor point of the Turkic project, serving as a vital link between the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Azerbaijan's strategic geography has enabled Baku to emerge as a key player in regional connectivity, logistics routes, energy security, and Turkic cooperation. Azerbaijan plays a leading role in shaping collective strategies for transport, trade, and defence coordination in the region.

Azerbaijan is deepening its strategic ties with Central Asian countries, participating in regional summits, and fostering bilateral relationships. This alignment is driven by shared interests in countering regional challenges and exploring new economic opportunities. During the last two years or so, Baku's cooperation with Central Asia has developed at an unprecedented pace, marked by the strengthening of formal and informal contacts, expansion of business and diplomatic exchanges, and a rising awareness of shared interests in politics, economics, transport, communications, and the media sphere. At the same time, cultural and humanitarian ties between Central Asia and the South Caucasus are experiencing renewed vitality, reinforcing the sense of common civilizational belonging across the two regions.

A crucial factor behind this dynamic is the growing recognition by the presidents and peoples of the above-mentioned states of their collective role in consolidating regional unity. Uzbekistan, in particular, sees itself as one of the key initiators of this project, regarding it as a promising direction for its foreign policy. Regional states are becoming strategic partners and potential allies, shaping a new system of geopolitical and economic interaction amid the broader confrontation between the West and Russia. Recently, Azerbaijan has regularly taken part in Central Asia summits, including high-level inter-regional (Summits of CA states + Azerbaijan) and intra-regional (C5+ Summits with external partners such as the U.S., China, the EU, etc.) meetings.

Under the presidency of Ilham Aliyev, Azerbaijan has pursued one of the most dynamic, multi-layered, and multidimensional foreign policies in the post-Soviet space. Guided by offensive pragmatism and strategic foresight, Azerbaijan has successfully balanced its relations among major global and regional powers, maintaining strong partnerships with Türkiye, Israel, the EU, Middle Eastern countries, and the United

States, while engaging constructively with Russia, Iran, and other actors. Azerbaijan's diplomacy exemplifies agility and confidence; it has positioned itself as a bridge between East and West, and North and South – leveraging its energy resources, transport corridors, and strategic geography. Through initiatives such as the Middle Corridor, Baku contributes to Europe–Asia connectivity and economic diversification, linking Central Asia with Europe through the Caspian. Its close alliance with Türkiye reinforces defence and technological cooperation, while deepening ties with Israel and the Gulf states demonstrate Azerbaijan's pragmatic and interest-driven approach in the Middle East.

The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) published an analysis exploring Azerbaijan's evolving geopolitical strategy toward Central Asia, noting Azerbaijan's ability to balance relations with Russia, Türkiye, and Western actors while strengthening Turkic integration. The study underlines Azerbaijan's role as a 'bridge state', linking Caspian energy networks, transport corridors, and security dialogue across Eurasia.[7] The victory of Azerbaijan in the Second Karabakh War in 2020 resonated deeply in Central Asia's public consciousness, strengthening respect for and solidarity with the Azerbaijani people. This emotional connection adds a new layer of mutual trust and political affinity between similar nations. Ultimately, the revival of unity between Turkic nations depends on the creation of a comprehensive system of cooperation adapted to evolving geopolitical realities. The Türkiye–Azerbaijan–Central Asia partnership demonstrates how shared historical roots and pragmatic coordination can transform the Turkic world from a cultural idea into a functional geopolitical and economic community capable of ensuring stability, autonomy, and development across Eurasia.[8]

In Central Asia, Azerbaijan's leadership in the OTS has revitalized regional cohesion, turning solidarity into economic and security cooperation. Overall, President Ilham Aliyev's foreign policy is characterized by a rare combination of realism, balance, and boldness, making Azerbaijan a respected, active, and influential player in global

7 R. Huseynov and G. Mammadova, "Azerbaijan's Pivot to Central Asia", RUSI Commentary, *Royal United Services Institute*, April 8, 2024, Available at: https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/azerbaijans-pivot-central-asia (Accessed: October 10, 2025).

8 Momynkulov, Zh. "Kazakhstanskii ekspert: Azerbaydzhan de-fakto stanovitsya odnoi iz srednikh derzhav", *Azertag.az,* August 13, 2024, Available at: https://azertag.az/ru/xeber/kazahstanskii_ekspert_azerbaidzhan_de_fakto_stanovitsya_odnoi_iz_srednih_derzhav-3135998 (Accessed: October 10, 2025).

and regional affairs. For Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan represents a bridge to Europe through the trans-Caspian transport corridor and the Middle Corridor initiatives. Conversely, for Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan serves as a gateway to the East, expanding Baku's strategic outreach toward Central Asia and beyond. Azerbaijan's growing role as a transit hub and transport artery of the Turkic world underlines its importance in connecting the Eurasian space from the Caspian to the Black Sea.

The Foreign Policies of Central Asian Countries in Caspian Geopolitics

Central Asia's engagement in Caspian geopolitics reflects the region's evolving role as both a bridge between and a battleground for influence between major powers such as Russia, China, Türkiye, Iran, and the West. The Caspian Sea has become a central hub of transport, energy, and strategic connectivity, and among the Central Asian states, Kazakhstan stands out as the principal actor linking the steppe, the Caucasus, and global markets. Azerbaijan is increasingly being recognized as a key partner by Central Asian states, offering an alternative route to global markets. Its involvement in regional affairs has enhanced its influence and enabled fostering closer ties with Central Asia. These states welcomed the recent initialization of the peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, on August 8, 2025, in Washington, DC, viewing it as a significant step toward regional stability and the establishment of a beneficial South Caucasus trade corridor between Central Asia and Europe.

Uzbekistan is expanding its regional influence in Central Asia and beyond. The strengthened alliance between Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan in 2024 not only paved the way for deeper engagement between Azerbaijan and the broader Central Asian region but also set a positive precedent for potential similar agreements with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The shared cultural and linguistic heritage between Azerbaijan and Central Asia provides a strong foundation for expanding cooperation and fostering closer political, economic, and societal ties across the region.[9]

Azerbaijan is also a viable partner for landlocked Uzbekistan to get access to Turkish and European markets by joining the flagship Middle

9 Azertag, *President: Relations between Azerbaijan and Central Asian States are of special nature*, November 16, 2025, Available at: https://azertag.az/en/xeber/president_relations_between_azerbaijan_and_central_asian_states_are_of_special_nature-3863423 (Accessed: November 20, 2025).

Corridor transit route project. Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan have built a strong strategic partnership grounded in shared Turkic identity, economic pragmatism, and mutual political trust. Cooperation focuses on transport, trade, textile, and industrial collaboration, with both countries viewing the Middle Corridor as a key driver of regional integration. Recent agreements on logistics, energy, and defence industries reflect their commitment to deeper coordination, directly or within regional structures. Uzbekistan has adopted a more competition-driven, outward-looking, and reformist strategy under its recent leadership, enhancing cooperation with Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan in the energy and transport sectors. These three countries could build a small triangle-like resilient bloc inside any regional platform. By seeking new export routes and deeper involvement in regional initiatives, Uzbekistan is strengthening its position as a regional economic hub. Its active engagement with the OTS and Caspian connectivity projects underscores its growing geopolitical relevance and resilience.

Turkmenistan is an energy supplier with a neutral stance. Azerbaijan's relations with Turkmenistan, though improved, have witnessed long-standing disputes over Caspian energy fields such as Dostluk (formerly Kapaz/Serdar). However, recent diplomatic progress has transformed competition into cooperation, opening prospects for joint exploration and participation in energy projects. Ties with both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan illustrate Azerbaijan's growing role as a connector and mediator within the Turkic and Caspian geopolitical framework. Turkmenistan's vast gas reserves make it a crucial player in the Caspian energy landscape, though its constitutionally enshrined neutrality limits overt political alignments. Nevertheless, Turkmenistan is increasingly interested in trans-Caspian cooperation with Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan to diversify its export markets and to participate in energy projects connecting it to Europe, as well as in the direction of North–South corridors.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are secondary but no less important strategic players in the region. While Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan lack direct access to the Caspian Sea, they are becoming indirect beneficiaries of regional connectivity and are holders of vast water resources in the region. Both countries prioritize infrastructure and logistics development, seeking integration with Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan's trade networks. Their participation in broader trans-Eurasian initiatives provides economic and political dividends, even if their influence in Caspian geopolitics remains limited.

Javid Valiyev, from the Baku-based AIR Center, emphasizes the deepening strategic convergence between Azerbaijan and the Central Asian republics, highlighting shared cultural identity, energy cooperation, and growing interregional connectivity. He argues that Baku's diplomatic outreach reflects a pragmatic effort to transform the solidarity of Turkic states into an institutionalized political and economic partnership under the OTS framework.[10]

Kazakhstan's foreign policy is shaped by pragmatism and balance. As one of the world's top oil and gas producers, it exports energy through the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) to Russia while simultaneously developing alternative routes through Azerbaijan and China. This diversification enhances its strategic independence and strengthens economic resilience. Kazakhstan is a driving force behind the Middle Corridor, the China–Europe transport link via the Caspian Sea and cooperates closely with Azerbaijan to improve maritime transport and logistics. As the largest Central Asian state, it has assumed a leadership role within various platforms, promoting regional diplomacy and economic integration. Astana's multi-vector foreign policy enables it to maintain productive relations with Russia, China, Türkiye, and Western partners, ensuring geopolitical flexibility and stability.

Kazakhstan today serves as the geopolitical anchor of Central Asia, linking landlocked economies to international markets through the Caspian corridor. Its role in energy, transport, and diplomacy positions the country as one of the most influential actors in the broader Turkic and Eurasian space. Astana's dual energy strategy, exporting oil through Russia's Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) and Azerbaijan's Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, demonstrates its pragmatic approach to diversification. Investments in Aktau port and joint logistics initiatives with Azerbaijan further underline Kazakhstan's ambition to become a key transit hub in the Eurasian supply chain. The country's geographic position makes it indispensable for the Middle Corridor, connecting China to Europe via the Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus.

Together with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan is upgrading maritime and rail infrastructure at Aktau and Alat ports to ensure seamless East–West trade. By linking these two ports, the two countries are developing a seamless maritime connection across the Caspian, reducing dependency

10 Veliyev, J. "Azerbaijan, Central Asia Merge Paths for New Frontier", *Daily Sabah*, September 11, 2024, Available at: https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/azerbaijan-central-asia-merge-paths-for-new-frontier (Accessed: October 11, 2025)

on Russian-controlled transit corridors and enhancing regional economic sovereignty. Their diplomatic coordination within the OTS, Caspian Economic Forum, and other regional platforms reflects deep political trust and shared long-term vision.

Looking ahead, the future of Caspian geopolitics will be shaped by the deepening collaboration between Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan and the institutional strengthening of the Turkic world.

Through its multi-vector diplomacy, Kazakhstan maintains equilibrium among competing global powers. In security cooperation, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan are deepening defence ties through joint exercises and strategic coordination, often in partnership with Türkiye. It continues to strengthen military-to-military cooperation within the framework of the OTS and regularly participates in joint military training with Türkiye and other Turkic partners, contributing to a broader regional security architecture. These initiatives are strengthening interoperability among Turkic armed forces and contributing to a shared regional security framework.

Energy remains the foundation of their cooperation: Kazakhstan's growing use of the BTC pipeline enables it to bypass Russian routes and integrate more closely with Western markets. Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan also support the realization of the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline, which could bring Kazakh and Turkmen gas to Europe via Azerbaijan. Cooperation between KazMunayGas and SOCAR continues to expand across production, refining, and petrochemical ventures.

Looking ahead, the future of Caspian geopolitics will be shaped by the deepening collaboration between Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan and the institutional strengthening of the Turkic world. Joint ventures in oil, gas, and renewable energy are likely to expand, consolidating both states' roles as leading Eurasian energy exporters. Infrastructure investments in rail, digital trade, and ports will enhance the global relevance of the Middle Corridor. Furthermore, the ongoing transformation of the OTS into a functional economic bloc will provide a stronger institutional basis for regional cooperation. The potential completion of the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline would connect Central Asia directly to European markets, transforming the region's energy landscape. Both Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan will continue pursuing balanced, multi-vector diplomacy, maintaining strategic relations with Türkiye, China, Russia, the European Union, and the United States, while promoting the cohesion and resilience of the wider Turkic world.

Azerbaijan–Kazakhstan Strategic Convergence in the Caspian Region and in the Geopolitics of Central Asia

Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan stand at the crossroads of Caspian geopolitics, Turkic integration, and Eurasian connectivity. Their coordinated efforts in energy, transport, and security mark the emergence of a strategic Turkic axis that could redefine the region's balance of power. As leaders of the OTS and architects of the Middle Corridor, they are not only shaping the Caspian future but also strengthening the voice of the region in global affairs.

Mutual relations have reached an unprecedented level of mutual trust, strategic coordination, and political understanding in recent years. Over three decades of independence, the two states have evolved from partners with shared cultural roots into strategic allies with converging geopolitical visions. Former President Nursultan Nazarbayev consistently supported Azerbaijan in difficult times for Baku, and under President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, this partnership has deepened, marked by frequent high-level visits and dynamic cooperation across multiple domains. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's frequent visits to Central Asia, particularly to Kazakhstan, reflect Baku's growing recognition of Astana's role in the geopolitical landscape.

The emotional and political solidarity between the two nations strengthened notably after Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War (2020), which resonated deeply within Kazakh society. This success symbolized the restoration of justice and inspired a renewed sense of unity and respect among Turkic peoples. In the wake of these developments, both governments have demonstrated a shared commitment to building a sustainable partnership that transcends rhetoric, anchored in pragmatic economic, transport, and energy cooperation.

From a strategic perspective, Kazakhstan views Azerbaijan as its natural bridge to Europe, while Azerbaijan perceives Kazakhstan as its reliable gateway to the East. This duality has transformed the Caspian Sea into a shared strategic neighbourhood, a hub of economic connectivity and political cooperation. The OTS now provides a stable institutional framework for advancing mutual interests in trade, logistics, and security. The recent joint military exercises with Azerbaijan and Central Asian states, Birlestik-2024, symbolized a new phase of trust-based military cooperation, underscoring the

shared responsibility of both nations for regional stability. Azerbaijan has proposed hosting joint military exercises for the OTS in 2026.

Azerbaijan serves as a logistical hub enabling Central Asian states to diversify connectivity toward Europe and reduce dependence on traditional northern and southern routes.

Azerbaijan serves as a logistical hub enabling Central Asian states to diversify connectivity toward Europe and reduce dependence on traditional northern and southern routes. Kazakhstan today stands as a "natural and reliable ally" of Azerbaijan. The bilateral relationship has evolved from formal cooperation into a sustainable axis of trust and coordination in the Caspian region. Both states are building multidimensional, sovereign, and modernization-oriented policies while maintaining strategic autonomy within the shifting world order. The joint naval exercises of the two countries and collaboration in digital connectivity, such as the undersea fibre-optic cable project across the Caspian, demonstrate a forward-looking approach toward regional integration and security.

Economically, the TITR has become the backbone of this partnership, offering both countries alternative logistical and energy export opportunities amid global supply chain transformations. The development of the Digital Trade Corridor platform further enhances the region's connectivity with Asia and Europe. Shared historical experience creates a unique civilizational synergy that enables Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan to cooperate seamlessly and understand each other intuitively.[11]

The Azerbaijan–Kazakhstan partnership represents one of the most dynamic and strategically significant axes in the evolving geopolitical architecture of Eurasia. The partnership of the two states has evolved into a genuine strategic alliance. As two Turkic-speaking, energy-rich, and post-Soviet republics located on opposite shores of the Caspian Sea, both countries have emerged as pivotal actors in shaping new corridors of cooperation linking Central Asia to the South Caucasus, Anatolia, and Europe. This partnership goes beyond bilateral pragmatism as it embodies a broader renaissance, promoting regional integration, strategic autonomy, and diversified connectivity amid the ongoing global power reconfiguration.

11 Umarova, N. "How Will Central Asia Benefit from the Extension of Trans-Caspian Transport Routes?", *Caspian Policy Center*, July 27, 2025, Available at: https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/category/how-will-central-asia-benefit-from-the-extension-of-trans-caspian-transport-routes (Accessed: October 12, 2025)

Ultimately, the Azerbaijan–Kazakhstan partnership represents more than a bilateral alignment; it is a cornerstone for constructing a future Eurasian geoeconomics and security architecture based on balance, sovereignty, equality, and mutual respect. Their collaboration within the OTS, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Central Asia Plus (CA+), Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), and other regional mechanisms strengthens not only national interests but also the strategic coherence of the broader Turkic world.

In parallel to institutionalization, economic integration has become a defining trend. Trade and investment between Azerbaijan and Central Asian countries are expanding rapidly, while joint projects in energy, transport, and logistics are turning the Caspian region into a critical bridge between Europe and Asia. These developments mark a shift from rhetorical solidarity to functional regionalism, in which Azerbaijan and Central Asia act as co-creators of a new inter-continental connectivity model rooted in shared identity, economic complementarity, and strategic foresight. At the foundation of this widening strategic partnership lies the shared commitment to regional trust, connectivity, energy diversification, and unity of similar countries.

The trans-Caspian Middle Corridor, as a backbone for cooperation, not only facilitates trade and logistics but also strengthens both states' strategic independence by reducing reliance on traditional routes dominated by Russia or Iran. The Middle Corridor's growing prominence reflects a broader transformation in Eurasian connectivity, and this Caspian-centred corridor stands out as a stable and efficient alternative.

For the European Union, the corridor provides a vital link for energy and goods trade that avoids Russia and complements China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The EU's approach to the Caspian region emphasizes energy diversification, sustainability, and digital connectivity. The Global Gateway initiative reflects Europe's ambition to provide an alternative to China's BRI while supporting stability and governance reforms. However, the EU's cautious and bureaucratic style limits its agility compared to Beijing's rapid infrastructure-driven approach. The challenge lies in aligning normative diplomacy with pragmatic engagement, thus ensuring that human rights advocacy does not alienate key partners.

For Türkiye, the corridor reinforces its identity as a Eurasian gateway and logistical bridge between East and West. For Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, it consolidates their positions as indispensable transit hubs and economic mediators of the Turkic world. They have skilfully leveraged China's BRI to modernize their transport infrastructure, developing ports, railways, and logistics hubs. Yet, balancing economic opportunity with strategic autonomy remains a core priority for both governments, requiring careful diplomacy to ensure that external investment strengthens rather than undermines national sovereignty.

For the United States and the United Kingdom, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan represent crucial partners in securing energy diversification and geopolitical balance in Eurasia. The Middle Corridor aligns with Western goals of building resilient supply chains and limiting Russian and Chinese dominance in the region. However, Western engagement often lacks the scale of investment that China provides, creating a credibility gap. The United Kingdom has sought to expand its presence through energy partnerships and financial cooperation, with the Caspian region increasingly viewed as a new frontier for trade diversification.

Russia's long-standing dominance in its 'near abroad' has been significantly weakened. The Ukraine conflict and associated sanctions have constrained Moscow's regional leverage, encouraging Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan to pursue more independent foreign policies. Nonetheless, Russia remains a relevant security actor through the Collective Security Treaty Organization and bilateral ties, particularly with Kazakhstan. Yet, the rise of Turkic cooperation and the strengthening of the OTS pose subtle and soft challenges to Russia's influence and its vision of a Eurasian integration framework.

Looking forward strategically, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan's strategic partnership is likely to deepen as both states pursue balanced, multi-vector foreign policies. Strengthening the OTS as a functional economic bloc, harmonizing Caspian transit policies, and expanding trilateral cooperation with Türkiye and the EU will further solidify their regional roles. Maintaining neutrality amid the strategic rivalry between China, Russia, and the West will remain critical to sustaining stability. However, potential risks persist, ranging from environmental vulnerabilities in the Caspian Sea and geopolitical turbulence in the Caucasus to internal governance challenges. If successfully managed, the Astana–Baku axis could emerge as the core of a new connectivity

model, in which Turkic states play a central role in shaping the post-unipolar world order.

Conclusion

This study addressed three main research questions: Why is Azerbaijan interested in closer ties with Central Asia? Why is Azerbaijan strategically important for Central Asia? And what makes this partnership genuinely strategic rather than symbolic?

The findings show that Azerbaijan seeks closer ties with Central Asia to consolidate its role as a geopolitical bridge and energy hub linking the Caspian Basin to Europe and Asia while reinforcing Turkic solidarity. For Central Asian states, Azerbaijan represents access to Western markets and alternative connectivity routes, reducing dependency on the northern and eastern channels.

Most importantly, the partnership between Azerbaijan and Central Asia is genuinely strategic rather than symbolic because it combines cultural affinity with institutionalized cooperation through the OTS, joint energy and transport projects, coordinated security policies, and a shared pursuit of regional autonomy. It reflects a pragmatic and multidimensional transformation, rooted in common identity but driven by concrete political, economic, and security interests.

Ultimately, Azerbaijan and Central Asia now function as the dual strategic pillars of a new Turkic Eurasian regionalism, with Azerbaijan anchoring the western Caspian flank and Central Asia forming its eastern foundation. Their cooperation strengthens the resilience and agency of the broader Turkic world amid shifting global power structures, transforming cultural kinship into a sustainable geopolitical partnership.

Azerbaijan and Central Asia can be seen as a true engine of the Turkic World. Azerbaijan has emerged as the western column of this alignment, a dynamic, outward-looking state linking the Caspian to the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, and Europe. Central Asia, led by Kazakhstan and joined increasingly by Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, forms the eastern anchor, connecting the Turkic world to China, Russia, and South Asia. Together, they constitute a strategic axis of balance and resilience across the heart of Eurasia.

The Azerbaijan–Central Asia partnership enhances regional agency

amid great-power competition, transforming Organization of Turkic States and Central Asia summits from cultural initiatives into instruments of coordinated economic and security policy. Through energy diversification, joint infrastructure projects, and military cooperation, both sides are asserting independent strategic identities. Ultimately, this evolving partnership represents a new model of Turkic power – pragmatic, multidimensional, and forward-looking – positioning Azerbaijan and Central Asia as the architects of a more interconnected, stable, and self-reliant central Eurasia. The study concludes that Azerbaijan–Central Asia cooperation is evolving into a key potential factor of a new type of economic integration, geographical connectivity, and security architecture based on recently emerging Turkic Eurasian regionalism.

Energy Sovereignty and the Geopolitics of Critical Resources

Liliana Śmiech*

This article explores the nexus between energy sovereignty and resource geopolitics in the 21st century. It argues that sovereignty must be redefined from self-sufficiency to resilient control over supply chains, generation technologies, and strategic resources. With the European Union's Green Deal creating new forms of dependency, particularly on Chinese critical minerals, and with energy shocks reshaping global alignments, Central Europe, and Hungary in particular, illustrates the dilemmas of mid-sized powers caught between ideology and pragmatism. Hungary's conservative approach emphasizes nuclear energy, solar expansion, geothermal heating, and partnerships with Turkic states, especially Azerbaijan, as a path to sustainable sovereignty. The article concludes that energy policy is inseparable from geopolitics: the future of sovereignty will be determined not by borders alone, but by control over pipelines, grids, and critical mineral supply chains.

Keywords: Energy sovereignty, resource geopolitics, Hungary, Central Europe, Azerbaijan, European Green Deal, critical minerals.

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Introduction

Energy has always been a source of power, but in the last fifty years, it has become one of the defining elements of sovereignty. The 1973 OPEC oil embargo was a turning point: Western economies discovered that prosperity could be disrupted by political decisions thousands of miles away. Oil prices quadrupled, stagflation shook governments, and the international order shifted. The United States responded with Project Independence, which aimed to reduce reliance on foreign oil through domestic production, nuclear energy, and conservation.[1] Europe, by contrast, accepted interdependence as a fact of life, betting that trade would ensure stability.

During the Cold War, energy became a weapon of influence. Soviet pipelines, such as *Druzhba*, extending from Russia, tied Central and Eastern Europe into a system of dependency.[2] The collapse of communism was supposed to free the region, yet by the 2000s, many EU members had once again placed their fate in a single supplier.

The 'shale revolution' in the United States again reshaped geopolitics. America became the world's largest oil and gas producer, turning liquefied natural gas (LNG) into a geopolitical tool.[3] Yet nothing revealed the fragility of Europe's strategy more than the war in Ukraine. Suddenly, diversification became not an academic debate but an existential necessity.

At the same time, Europe accelerated its European Green Deal (EGD), announced in 2019 as the continent's "man on the moon moment."[4] The EGD aims for climate neutrality by 2050 but, in practice, risks trading one dependency for another: hydrocarbons for Chinese-controlled solar panels, batteries, and critical minerals. In escaping Russian leverage, Europe is binding itself to Beijing.

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1 D. Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Free Press, 1991), pp. 589–612

2 D. Balmaceda, *Politics of Energy Dependency: Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania Between Domestic Oligarchs and Russian Pressure* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), pp. 44–46

3 K. B. Medlock, "The Shale Revolution and Its Implications for International Relations", Baker Institute Report, *Rice University*, 2015.

4 European Commission, The European Green Deal, COM(2019) 640 final (Brussels: European Union, 2019), Available at: ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/european-green-deal-communication_en.pdf (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

This article contends that the notion of energy sovereignty must be redefined for the twenty-first century. Rather than equating sovereignty with autarky, it should be understood as the capacity to maintain resilience, diversify dependencies, and exercise strategic control over vital supply chains and technologies. The study explores how mid-sized European states, Hungary in particular, navigate this new landscape of interdependence, where energy, industry, and geopolitics intersect. By examining Hungary's pragmatic strategy, with special emphasis on its partnership with Azerbaijan and other Turkic states, the article seeks to identify a model of conservative realism that balances sustainability with sovereignty in Europe's evolving energy order.

Conceptualizing Energy Sovereignty

Autarky vs. Resilience

Energy sovereignty has often been confused with autarky. Yet no modern state is truly self-sufficient. Even resource-rich powers, such as the United States or Saudi Arabia, depend on global markets, refined products, or foreign technology. What matters is resilience: the ability to absorb shocks, resist coercion, and maintain supply under stress.[5]

Layered Sovereignty

Energy sovereignty operates in layers:

- Upstream: control over raw resources (oil, gas, uranium, lithium)
- Midstream: refining, pipelines, LNG, processing plants
- Downstream: grids, distribution, heating networks
- Technology: turbines, reactors, batteries, digital control systems.

Weakness in one layer compromises the whole system. Europe may have pipelines, but no domestic gas. It may mine lithium but rely on China for battery assembly.[6] Sovereignty requires securing all levels simultaneously.

5 V. Smil, *Energy and Civilization: A History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), pp. 411–418

6 Castillo, R. and Purdy, C. "China's Role in Supplying Critical Minerals for the Global Energy Transition", Policy Brief, *Brookings Institution*, August 1, 2022, Available at: www.brookings.edu/articles/chinas-role-in-supplying-critical-minerals-for-the-global-energy-transition-what-could-the-future-hold/ (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

Realism vs. Liberalism vs. Conservative Sovereignty

International relations theory frames energy differently. Realists argue that states must maximize autonomy. Liberals see interdependence as a stabilizer. Conservatives, however, emphasize that sovereignty must never be sacrificed to ideology. Cooperation has value, but only if it strengthens resilience. Hungary's policy embodies this conservative realism: pragmatic, diversified, anchored in sovereignty.[7]

The Geopolitics of Energy Resources

Fossil Fuels: Persistent Power

Hydrocarbons still supply over 80% of global energy.[8] LNG trade has grown dramatically, shifting Europe's dependence from pipelines to maritime routes. U.S. LNG now accounts for a major share of European supply, while Azerbaijan's Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) delivers strategic volumes directly to the continent. Geography still matters: Central Europe, without seaports, remains dependent on vulnerable corridors.[9]

Nuclear Energy: Sovereignty Through Stability

Nuclear energy provides stable, low-carbon baseload power. For Hungary, the Paks I Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) already covers nearly half of electricity consumption; Paks II, scheduled for the 2030s, will secure supply for decades.[10] Nuclear energy shields Hungary from volatility, but uranium supply is concentrated. Kazakhstan has become a key partner, ensuring access for European nuclear plants.[11]

7 J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), pp. 130–137

8 International Energy Agency, World Energy Outlook 2022 (Paris: IEA, 2022), pp. 41–45

9 Congressional Research Service, "U.S. Measures to Provide Liquefied Natural Gas for the European Union", CRS Report R47468, Washington, DC, Library of Congress, 2023, Available at: www.congress.gov/crs-product/R47468 (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

10 World Nuclear Association, "Nuclear Power in Hungary", World Nuclear Performance Report, 2023

11 International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Uranium 2022: Resources, Production and Demand (Paris: OECD/IAEA, 2022)

Critical Minerals: The New Oil

The green transition requires vast quantities of minerals. A single EV battery needs six times more mineral input than a conventional vehicle.[12] Wind turbines require rare earths, solar panels depend on polysilicon, and hydrogen electrolyzers require platinum.[13]

China dominates refining: 90% of rare earths, 80% of cobalt, and over 70% of lithium.[14] The EU imports 98% of its rare earths from China, making sovereignty impossible without diversification.[15]

New Frontiers

Competition now extends to the Arctic (hydrocarbons, rare earths), Africa (cobalt, lithium), and the Indo-Pacific (shipping chokepoints). Sovereignty means preparing for contests in all these theatres.[16]

Europe's Strategic Dilemma

The European Green Deal has been presented as Europe's defining response to climate change. Announced in 2019, it seeks to make the continent climate-neutral by 2050, with interim goals such as cutting emissions by at least 55% by 2030.[17] In practice, however, the EGD exposes the EU to severe strategic vulnerabilities.

First, the policy rests on an assumption of unilateral effectiveness. The EU produces less than ten percent of global emissions.[18] Even a

12 International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), Critical Materials for the Energy Transition (Abu Dhabi: IRENA, 2021)

13 D. S. Abraham, *The Elements of Power: Gadgets, Guns, and the Struggle for a Sustainable Future in the Rare Metal Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), pp. 59–64

14 International Energy Agency, The Role of Critical Minerals in Clean Energy Transitions (Paris: IEA, 2021)

15 Seaman, J. "Critical Raw Materials and Europe's Dependence on China", *IFRI (Institut français des relations internationales)*, October 1, 2024, Available at: www.ifri.org/en/external-articles/external-publications/critical-raw-materials-economic-statecraft-and-europes (Accessed: November 24, 2025)

16 Buchanan, E. and Strating, B. "Energy, Geography, and the Indo-Pacific", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 76, no. 4 (2022): pp. 390–408

17 European Commission, op.cit.

18 International Energy Agency, CO_2 Emissions from Fuel Combustion 2022 (Paris: IEA, 2022), pp. 12–15. Available at: iea.org (Accessed: November 24, 2025)

complete elimination of Europe's carbon footprint would not offset the continued growth of emissions in Asia, Africa, or the United States. By focusing narrowly on unilateral decarbonization, the EU risks inflicting economic harm on its own citizens while achieving little in global climate terms. This raises fundamental questions about proportionality and sovereignty.

Second, the Green Deal accelerates deindustrialization. The cost of energy for European manufacturers has soared, driven not only by the 2022 energy crisis but also by regulatory burdens imposed by the Emissions Trading System (ETS) and subsidies in competing jurisdictions. Mario Draghi's 2023 report on EU competitiveness warned explicitly that Europe risks becoming a 'museum of technology' unless it restores industrial competitiveness.[19] The Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), designed to protect European firms, does little to address the broader challenge of structural decline. Instead, the continent is experiencing a relocation of heavy industry to regions with cheaper energy and looser regulation.[20]

Third, the Green Deal creates new dependencies. In its current form, the policy rests heavily on renewable energy technologies – solar panels, batteries, and wind turbines – whose supply chains are dominated by China.[21] Approximately 80% of solar panels installed in Europe originate in China, while Chinese companies also control the processing of rare earths and critical minerals essential to green technologies.[22] By attempting to reduce reliance on hydrocarbons, Europe risks deepening dependence on China. A sovereignty project becomes, paradoxically, a dependency project.

Fourth, the EGD intensifies energy poverty. Even before the Ukraine war, around 35 million Europeans were unable to adequately heat their homes.[23] Europe's climate policies have significantly increased electricity and energy prices, placing a growing burden on households and industries across the continent. Measures such as the Emissions Trading System (ETS) have contributed to higher wholesale prices, while

19 M. Draghi, The Future of European Competitiveness: Report to the President of the European Commission (Brussels: European Commission, 2024)

20 Graziosi, S., "Energy Incoherence: Why Europe Is Repeating Its Mistakes", *Heritage Foundation*, July 15, 2022, Available at: heritage.org/climate/commentary/energy-incoherence-why-europe-repeating-its-mistakes (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

21 Castillo, R. and Purdy, C., *op.cit.*

22 International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), Critical Materials for the Energy Transition (Abu Dhabi: IRENA, 2021)

23 Eurostat, "Energy Poverty in the EU", Eurostat Statistical Release, 2021

the uneven capacity of the member states to subsidize their industries risks deepening economic disparities within the European Union.[24] This undermines not only energy sovereignty but also European solidarity.

Finally, the Green Deal exacerbates geopolitical fragmentation within the EU. Member states with different energy mixes, nuclear in France, coal in Poland, gas in Germany, and hydro in Scandinavia, face divergent costs in the transition. Attempts to impose a one-size-fits-all model risk alienating Central and Eastern Europe, where energy security concerns are immediate and existential. Hungary, for instance, insists on nuclear and gas as strategic pillars, while Brussels often frames these as transitional or even obsolete.[25] This tension illustrates the gap between ideological aspiration and pragmatic necessity.

From a conservative perspective, the problem lies not with the goal of sustainability itself but with the means chosen to pursue it. A sovereignty-oriented strategy would prioritize diversification of supply, investment in nuclear energy, support for domestic industries, and balanced partnerships abroad. Instead, the EU pursues abstract targets without regard to competitiveness, sovereignty, or realism.

The lesson of recent crises is clear: Europe cannot afford to base its future on external dependencies. Just as overreliance on Russian gas left the continent vulnerable, overreliance on Chinese solar and rare earths threatens to replace one form of dependence with another. Sovereignty requires not utopian ambition but pragmatic realism.

Hungary's Pragmatic Energy Path

Hungary demonstrates how a mid-sized European state can pursue sovereignty through realism rather than ideology. Its strategy is not based on utopian visions of full decarbonization but on a pragmatic mix of nuclear energy, renewables, and carefully cultivated international partnerships. This path underscores the conservative conviction that sovereignty must be secured by diversification, long-term planning, and trust-based alliances, particularly with Turkic partners.

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24 Hegedős, S., "European Green Policy – the Clash between Dreams and Reality", *Hungarian Conservative*, May 7, 2022, Available at: hungarianconservative.com/articles/current/european-green-policy-the-clash-between-dreams-and-reality/ (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

25 Ancygier, A. et al., "Divergent Paths: Energy Transition in Central and Eastern Europe", *Journal of European Public Policy*, 29, no. 9 (2022): pp. 1331–1348

Nuclear and Solar as Dual Pillars

At the centre of Hungary's energy policy stands nuclear power. The existing Paks I NPP supplies nearly half of the country's electricity demand, providing stable baseload power and insulating the economy from the volatility of fossil fuel prices.[26] The planned Paks II expansion, involving two new VVER-1200 reactors, will double Hungary's nuclear capacity by the 2030s.[27] While often criticized by Brussels for its Russian technology provider, the project reflects Budapest's determination to anchor sovereignty in nuclear stability rather than short-term political fashions.

At the same time, Hungary has embraced solar energy with remarkable momentum: its installed capacity passed 6 GW in 2024 and is projected to surpass 12 GW by 2030, making solar a central component of its dual-pillar strategy.[28] Solar is increasingly integrated into the grid, and despite challenges with intermittency, investments in storage and digital grid management make Hungary one of Central Europe's fastest-growing solar markets. This dual reliance, nuclear for stability, solar for growth, embodies the conservative principle of balancing tradition and innovation.

Geothermal and Hydrogen

Hungary also leverages its geographical endowment in geothermal energy. The Szeged district heating project, Europe's largest geothermal heating network, supplies over 27,000 households and numerous public institutions, reducing reliance on imported gas.[29] Hungary also leverages its geographical endowment in geothermal energy. The Szeged district-heating project includes multiple wells and a heating

26 World Nuclear Association, "Nuclear Power in Hungary", *World Nuclear Performance Report*, 2023, Available at: world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-g-n/hungary.aspx (Accessed: November 21, 2025)

27 Ministry of Energy of Hungary, Hungary – Final Updated National Energy and Climate Plan 2021–2030, Budapest: Government of Hungary, 2024, Available at: commission.europa.eu/publications/hungary-final-updated-necp-2021-2030-submitted-2024_en (Accessed: November 21, 2025)

28 International Energy Agency, Renewables 2023: Analysis and Forecast to 2028 (Paris: IEA, 2023), Available at: iea.org/reports/renewables-2023 (Accessed: November 21, 2025)

29 European Commission, "EU Cohesion Policy: Inauguration of the largest geothermal heating system in the EU, in Szeged, Hungary", Brussels, May 25 2023. Available at: ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/whats-new/newsroom/25-05-2023-eu-cohesion-policy-inauguration-of-the-largest-geothermal-heating-system-in-the-eu-in-szeged-hungary_en (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

network serving thousands of households, reducing reliance on imported gas. In parallel, Hungarian multinational oil-and-gas company MOL launched its first green hydrogen production facility at Százhalombatta in 2022, integrating renewable electricity into its refinery operations and signalling a shift from gas-based hydrogen.[30]

While still at an experimental stage, hydrogen offers long-term potential for decarbonizing transport and heavy industry, further reducing dependence on imported hydrocarbons. These developments illustrate that sovereignty does not mean rejecting the energy transition; rather, it means shaping it according to national interests.

Azerbaijan: The Strategic Bridge

Among Hungary's Turkic partners, Azerbaijan is indispensable. Energy relations between the two countries are rooted not only in trade but in a broader framework of trust and shared strategic outlook. The SGC is the centrepiece of this partnership. Stretching over 3,500 kilometres from Azerbaijan's Shah Deniz field in the Caspian Sea through Georgia and Türkiye to Europe, the corridor delivers natural gas to Central Europe, including Hungary.[31] According to the Ministry of Energy of Azerbaijan, the Southern Gas Corridor is not merely a commercial gas pipeline but a strategic mechanism contributing to Europe's energy diversification and supply security.[32] For Hungary, access to this secure supply reduces vulnerability to volatile LNG markets and reinforces sovereignty through stable, long-term deliveries.

Even more significant for the future is the Green Energy Corridor, stemming from the Agreement on Strategic Partnership signed in

30 MOL Group, *One more step toward energy independence: MOL launches the production of green hydrogen*, Press Release, April 27, 2022, Available at: molgroup.info/en/media-centre/press-releases/one-more-step-toward-energy-independence-mol-launches-the-production-of-green-hydrogen (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

31 European Commission, "Diversification of gas supply sources and routes – The Southern Gas Corridor", Brussels, European Commission, 2021, Available at: energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/energy-security/diversification-gas-supply-sources-and-routes_en (Accessed: November 23, 2025)

32 Ministry of Energy of the Republic of Azerbaijan, "The strategic goal of the Southern Gas Corridor was achieved by transporting commercial gas to Europe", Baku, December 31, 2020, Available at: minenergy.gov.az/en/xeberler-arxivi/avropaya-kommersiya-qazinin-neqli-ile-cenub-qaz-dehlizinin-strateji-meqsedine-nail-olundu (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

Azerbaijan's importance goes beyond energy flows. As a member of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), Azerbaijan is a strategic partner in embedding Hungary into a broader Eurasian network.

Bucharest on December 17, 2022 by Azerbaijan, Georgia, Romania and Hungary.[33] This ambitious initiative will transmit renewable electricity; primarily solar and wind; produced in the Caspian region across the Black Sea and into European grids. As the President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev emphasised, his country remains more than a gas supplier: it is positioning itself as a reliable partner in Europe's energy security and green transition.[34] For Hungary, this project represents a double gain: immediate diversification of electricity supply and alignment with sustainability goals without sacrificing sovereignty.

Azerbaijan's importance goes beyond energy flows. As a member of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), Azerbaijan is a strategic partner in embedding Hungary into a broader Eurasian network. The partnership is thus cultural, political, and strategic, extending sovereignty beyond economics. Hungary's conservative strategy aligns perfectly with Azerbaijan's role as both provider and partner.

Kazakhstan, Türkiye, Uzbekistan

While Azerbaijan plays the leading role, Hungary's cooperation with other Turkic states adds depth to diversification.

- Kazakhstan supplies uranium, making it a crucial partner for Hungary's nuclear sector. Kazakhstan accounts for over 40% of global uranium production, and agreements with Hungarian entities ensure secure access to fuel for Paks I and Paks II.[35] This partnership demonstrates the interconnection of nuclear sovereignty with reliable foreign suppliers.

33 Ministry of Energy of the Republic of Azerbaijan, "Agreement on Strategic Partnership in the Development and Transmission of Green Energy between the Governments of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Romania and Hungary", Bucharest, December 17, 2022, Available at: area.gov.az/en/page/beynelxalq-emekdasliq/beynelxalq-muqavileler/azerbaycan-gurcustan-ruminiya-ve-macaristan-hokumetleri-arasinda-yasil-enerji-sahesinde-strateji-terefdasliga-dair-sazis (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

34 Azertag, *President Ilham Aliyev: Azerbaijan is a reliable partner of Europe not only in the area of energy, but also in many other areas*, April 25, 2023, Available at: azertag.az/en/xeber/president_ilham_aliyev_azerbaijan_is_a_reliable_partner_of_europe_not_only_in_the_area_of_energy_but_also_in_many_other_areas-2586848 (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

35 IAEA, Uranium 2022, op.cit., p.77–79

- Türkiye functions as an indispensable transit hub. The Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), part of the Southern Gas Corridor, runs through Türkiye, underscoring the country's role as a strategic bridge in the European energy network.[36] Beyond pipelines, Türkiye's growing LNG infrastructure strengthens its position as a flexible hub for Central Europe.
- Uzbekistan complements these relationships by contributing to academic and policy cooperation. Hungarian universities and think tanks have expanded ties with those of Uzbekistan, integrating energy into a broader agenda of intellectual and elite cooperation.[37] This illustrates the conservative view that sovereignty is reinforced not only by infrastructure but also by shared knowledge and trust.

Together with Azerbaijan, these partners create a diversified network that elevates Hungary's sovereignty above the vulnerabilities of geography.

Lessons from Resource Geopolitics

The Hungarian experience, combined with the broader European context, provides several important lessons about the meaning of energy sovereignty in the 21st century. These lessons apply not only to Central Europe but also to any mid-sized state confronted with external dependencies and internal vulnerabilities.

First, sovereignty is layered. Energy policy must be understood not as a single chain of supply but as a set of interconnected layers: upstream extraction, midstream transportation and processing, downstream consumption, and the technological backbone that binds the system together.[38] Weakness in any one layer can compromise sovereignty as a whole. The EU's reliance on Chinese refining of rare earths, despite investments in renewable energy generation, illustrates this vulnerability. Hungary's approach, anchoring the downstream layer

36 Anadolu Agency, "Azerbaijan to increase gas supplies to Türkiye by about 17%", June 12, 2023, Available at: aa.com.tr/en/economy/azerbaijan-to-increase-gas-supplies-to-turkiye-by-about-17-/2920289 (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

37 Ludovika University of Public Service, "Strengthening Ties with Uzbek Institutions", November 7, 2024, Available at: en.uni-nke.hu/hirek/2024/11/07/strengthening-ties-with-uzbek-institutions (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

38 V. Smil, *Energy Transitions: Global and National Perspectives*, 3rd ed. (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2022), p. 143–149

with nuclear power and solar generation, shows how resilience can be built step by step.

Second, diversification is the cornerstone of sovereignty. No single supplier, no matter how reliable, should dominate the energy mix. The collapse of Europe's overreliance on Russian gas in 2022 is the most obvious example of what happens when diversification is neglected.[39] Hungary's pursuit of partnerships with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Türkiye, and Uzbekistan is therefore not merely diplomatic outreach but a structural necessity. Diversification is not a luxury; it is sovereignty itself.

Third, domestic capacity is indispensable. Even the best diversification strategy cannot substitute for strong domestic production. For Hungary, nuclear energy, solar expansion, and geothermal heating provide anchors that reduce the share of imports and give the government more room for manoeuvre. These anchors do not eliminate dependence but transform it into a manageable element of a balanced portfolio. This reflects the conservative conviction that sovereignty begins at home, with long-term investment in self-reliance, where possible.

Fourth, regional cooperation multiplies sovereignty. Mid-sized states often lack the bargaining power of great powers. Yet, by embedding themselves in regional frameworks, whether Central Europe's Visegrád Group or the OTS, countries like Hungary gain leverage in negotiations with larger actors.[40] Sovereignty is not eroded by cooperation if that cooperation strengthens collective resilience and enhances trust among partners. The Hungarian–Azerbaijani partnership illustrates how bilateral trust, when embedded in regional frameworks, can yield disproportionate strategic benefits.

Fifth, ideology becomes a direct threat to sovereignty. The European Green Deal shows how lofty ambitions, detached from material realities and competitiveness, risk undermining European sovereignty by saddling industry and households with heavy costs and dependencies.[41]

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39 M. Balmaceda, *Russian Energy Chains: The Remaking of Technopolitics from Siberia to Ukraine to the European Union* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), p. 217–220

40 Gizińska, I., and Łoskot-Strachota, A. "Hungary is starting to import gas from Turkey", *OSW Analyst Report*, April 26, 2024, Warsaw, Available at: www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2024-04-26/hungary-starting-to-import-gas-turkey (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

41 Furchtgott-Roth, D., "Net Zero Is Crippling the EU. Now Brussels Wants To Export Its Madness Globally", *Heritage Foundation Commentary*, September 19, 2025, Available at: www.heritage.org/energy/commentary/net-zero-crippling-the-eu-now-brussels-wants-export-its-madness-globally (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

Hungary's conservative critique is not that sustainability is unworthy, but that sovereignty and realism must precede ideology. Only when security and competitiveness are assured can climate policy be sustainable in both political and economic terms.

The Hungarian–Azerbaijani partnership illustrates how bilateral trust, when embedded in regional frameworks, can yield disproportionate strategic benefits.

Taken together, these lessons underscore that sovereignty in the energy domain is not static, but dynamic. It must be continually reinforced across layers, diversified across suppliers, anchored domestically, supported regionally, and freed from ideological rigidity. Hungary's path is not perfect, but it offers a conservative blueprint for mid-sized powers seeking to navigate a turbulent geopolitical landscape.

Policy Recommendations

The lessons of recent crises underline a simple truth: sovereignty cannot be safeguarded by declarations alone but must be built into the very structure of energy systems. For Hungary, Central Europe, and the EU, this requires a pragmatic reorientation away from ideology and toward resilience, diversification, and trust-based partnerships.

The first priority is to consolidate nuclear and solar power as dual pillars of sovereignty. Nuclear provides stable baseload power, ensuring security against volatile fossil fuel markets, while solar delivers scalability and flexibility. Hungary's Paks II expansion and its rapid solar rollout should be seen not merely as national projects, but as a regional model. Other Central European states could benefit from adopting a similar 'dual-pillar' strategy, supported by EU funding frameworks that recognize nuclear and solar as complementary rather than contradictory sources.[42]

Second, geothermal energy must be scaled up as a strategic tool of heating sovereignty. Hungary's Szeged geothermal project proves that local resources can significantly reduce reliance on imported gas. If replicated across Central Europe, geothermal networks could shield millions of households from energy poverty and seasonal dependence on foreign suppliers. The EU should actively prioritize geothermal within its funding instruments, correcting its overemphasis on intermittent renewables alone.

42 Ministry of Energy of Hungary, *Hungary – Final Updated National Energy and Climate Plan 2021–2030*, op.cit.

Third, hydrogen and storage technologies must be elevated from pilot status to core components of energy strategy. MOL's hydrogen pilot plant is promising, but insufficient at scale. Broader investment in hydrogen corridors, supported by EU-wide infrastructure, could provide decarbonized energy for heavy industry and transport. At the same time, storage, whether batteries, pumped hydro, or hydrogen-based, must be integrated into the grid to stabilize renewables. This is an area where Hungary and its Turkic partners could cooperate in research and development, embedding technological sovereignty into diplomacy.

Fourth, equity stakes in Turkic energy and mineral projects should be pursued more actively. For Hungary, ownership in Azerbaijan's renewable projects, Kazakhstan's uranium sector, and refining ventures with Türkiye would elevate its role from consumer to stakeholder. At the EU level, partnerships with trusted suppliers outside China are essential to diversify critical-mineral supply chains. According to the International Renewable Energy Agency, the growth in demand for critical minerals and the concentration of supply chains create strategic dependencies the continent cannot afford if it wants true sovereignty.[43]

Fifth, policy frameworks must adapt to regional realities. A one-size-fits-all transition cannot succeed in Europe. Central and Eastern European countries face unique vulnerabilities: higher energy poverty, weaker infrastructure, and greater geopolitical exposure. EU policy must reflect these asymmetries by offering flexible pathways to sovereignty. This means supporting nuclear in France and Hungary, geothermal in Central Europe, hydro in Scandinavia, and solar in Southern Europe, without ideological discrimination.

Finally, trusted partnerships with external actors must be elevated to a strategic priority. Azerbaijan, through both the SGC and the GEC, should be recognized as a cornerstone of European sovereignty. Türkiye's hub role, Kazakhstan's uranium exports, and Uzbekistan's growing intellectual cooperation further reinforce this diversified network. Hungary's diplomatic outreach in the Turkic world demonstrates how trust, embedded in long-term cooperation, can strengthen sovereignty for both sides.

In sum, policy recommendations must move beyond rhetoric. For Hungary and Central Europe, the path lies in balancing nuclear and

43 International Renewable Energy Agency, Critical Materials for the Energy Transition (Abu Dhabi: IRENA, 2021), Available at: www.irena.org/Technical-Papers/Critical-Materials-For-The-Energy-Transition (Accessed: November 22, 2025).

solar, scaling geothermal, advancing hydrogen, and deepening Turkic partnerships. For the EU, the task is to reshape the Green Deal into a sovereignty project, rooted in realism, competitiveness, and trusted diversification.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how mid-sized European states can strengthen their energy sovereignty in an age of global resource competition and shifting dependencies. It examined Hungary's approach as a case of conservative realism – an effort to balance sustainability with strategic control through domestic capacity, diversification, and trusted partnerships.

The analysis has shown that Hungary's model rests on several interlinked pillars. Nuclear and solar energy provide a stable and flexible foundation, while geothermal and hydrogen initiatives strengthen self-reliance and technological resilience. Beyond its borders, Hungary's cooperation with Azerbaijan through the Southern Gas Corridor and the emerging Green Energy Corridor demonstrates how partnership, rather than isolation, can secure sovereignty. Complementary ties with Kazakhstan, Türkiye, and Uzbekistan add further strategic depth, embedding energy diplomacy within a wider network of political and cultural trust.

At the European level, the findings suggest that the Green Deal, while ambitious, risks undermining competitiveness and sovereignty if pursued without attention to resilience and diversification. A sovereignty-focused transition – rooted in pragmatic realism rather than ideology – offers a more credible path forward.

The 20th century was defined by oil; the 21st will be defined by critical minerals, nuclear stability, and the partnerships that sustain them. Hungary's experience shows that energy sovereignty is not achieved by isolation but by disciplined diversification, balanced strategy, and trusted alliances. It is a blueprint for Europe's future – one in which freedom and sovereignty remain inseparable.

Reconstituting Sovereignty: Strategic Realignments and Connectivity in a Fractured World

Atia Ali Kazmi*

Amid great-power competition and more intricate global interdependence, sovereignty is increasingly practised as a security function performed through calibrated alignments that protect territorial integrity, diplomatic agency, and economic resilience. This article synthesizes structural realism and securitization theory to argue that sovereign robustness today hinges on the collective safeguarding of non-traditional domains – trade, energy, transport, and data – alongside classic defence concerns. The dynamics are especially visible in Southwest and Central Asia, where states advance multi-vector strategies that emphasize non-interference, sovereign equality, and pragmatic connectivity. Using Pakistan as a focal case, the analysis shows how corridor development (e.g. the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor), regional platforms (e.g. the Shanghai Cooperation Organization), and logistics innovations (e.g. National Logistics Cell's feeder shipping and Gulf-Central Asia cargo services) can translate geo-economics into 'connectivity security' without contravening regional red lines. The article concludes that sustainable sovereignty in Eurasia's interior increasingly rests on a cooperative securitization of connectivity, treating shared infrastructure as stabilizing public goods rather than zero-sum prerogatives.

Keywords: securitization, Central Asia, Pakistan, CPEC, geopolitics.

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Introduction

The Westphalian model of sovereignty, grounded in the principles of territorial integrity and non-interference within internationally recognized borders, has long provided the foundation of the international system. For centuries, this legal-bureaucratic conception of sovereignty served as the primary metric of statehood and legitimacy. Yet, the unipolar moment that followed the Cold War, characterized by U.S. predominance and the liberal international order, is now giving way to a more plural, complex, and interdependent global environment.

This evolving order is not simply a return to the balance-of-power politics of the 19th century. Rather, it is shaped by the ascent of non-Western powers, the growing influence of non-state actors such as multinational corporations (MNC), and the emergence of new, non-physical domains of contestation, including energy flows and critical logistics networks.

This article argues that such structural shifts are actively reconstituting the very nature of sovereignty. Sovereignty today is no longer merely a legal status to be recognized, but a dynamic security condition to be continuously safeguarded and performed. In the contemporary age, sovereignty is increasingly manifested as a security construct, where the traditional guarantees of international law require reinforcement in the face of hybrid threats, economic coercion, and systemic vulnerabilities. In the absence of such reinforcement, states are compelled to pursue strategic realignments, strengthen resilience, and diversify connectivity to secure what they define as their core sovereign interests: territorial integrity, regime stability, and economic survival.

Accordingly, this study asks the key research question: "*How is sovereignty being reconstituted as a security construct within a fractured world order, and enabled by the use of multi-vector foreign policy and logistics innovations to navigate great power competition?"*

To address this question, the study employs a theoretical framework that synthesizes structural realism and securitization theory. Realism provides a macro-level understanding of how states, as rational actors in an environment of limited central authority, behave under the structural pressures of a shifting power distribution.[1] Securitization theory, developed by the Copenhagen School,[2] offers a micro-level perspective

1 K. N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

2 B. Buzan, O. Wæver, and J. de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*

on how certain issues are elevated from ordinary politics to existential concerns, thereby legitimizing extraordinary measures. Bringing these two perspectives together reveals how systemic pressures associated with multipolarity drive states to 'securitize' an expanding array of domains, including trade corridors and digital infrastructure, thereby producing a reconstituted, security-centric practice of sovereignty.

This article is structured as follows. The first section outlines the theoretical framework, integrating structural realism and securitization theory to conceptualize sovereignty as a dynamic and securitized practice. The second section examines the geopolitical imperatives of great-power rivalry in South and Central Asia, providing the contextual foundation for this reconstitution. The third section presents Pakistan as a case study, illustrating how its multi-vector foreign policy and connectivity initiatives operationalize this evolved notion of sovereignty. The final section concludes by synthesizing the findings and proposing a shift toward the collective securitization of connectivity as a pathway to sustainable and shared sovereignty.

Theoretical Framework: Sovereignty as a Securitized Practice in an Anarchic System

The classical realist tradition, from Hans Morgenthau to Kenneth Waltz, viewed the international system as inherently anarchic, lacking a central governing authority. In this environment of limited central authority, states remain the primary actors, and their paramount goal is survival, achieved through the accumulation and prudent exercise of power.[3]

Sovereignty, within this framework, is understood as the institutional expression of a state's autonomy inside its borders and its capacity to resist external coercion. The transition from a unipolar to a multipolar order has sharpened this condition of uncertainty, echoing Waltz's observation that "as the number of great powers decreases, the system becomes simpler and the relations of the remaining powers become more intimate and intense."[4] In a multipolar world with several power centres – the U.S.-led West (including the UK and the European Union), China, and Russia – strategic alignments are less predictable, alliances

(Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998).

3 J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001).

4 Waltz, K. N., *op.cit.* p. 131.

A state today is sovereign not merely because its borders are internationally recognized, but because it can safeguard digital frontiers, secure economic and energy flows, protect logistics and connectivity chains, and maintain internal stability against hybrid disruptions.

are more fluid, and the security dilemma for both large and small states is intensified.

This systemic pressure creates fertile ground for the process of securitization. According to the Copenhagen School, securitization theory holds that security is not an objective fact but a speech act: "by labelling something a security issue, the 'securitizing actor' claims a need for and a right to treat it by extraordinary means."[5] An issue becomes securitized when authoritative actors successfully frame it as an existential challenge to a chosen referent object (such as the state, the economy, or societal cohesion), thereby legitimizing exceptional measures beyond routine political procedures.

The synthesis of realism and securitization theory offers a powerful lens for analysing sovereignty today. The structural uncertainty of a multipolar environment compels states to securitize a widening range of concerns. Where sovereignty was once primarily threatened by military invasion, it is now perceived as vulnerable to diverse non-traditional risks: cyber intrusions into critical infrastructure, disinformation campaigns enabled by artificial intelligence, disruptions of global supply chains, and economic dependencies that can be weaponized through sanctions. Hybrid threats increasingly blur the boundary between war and peace, challenging states to defend sovereignty across multiple domains simultaneously.

In this environment, sovereignty is transformed from a static legal condition into a dynamic, performative practice of securitization. A state today is sovereign not merely because its borders are internationally recognized, but because it can safeguard digital frontiers, secure economic and energy flows, protect logistics and connectivity chains, and maintain internal stability against hybrid disruptions. This performance requires continuous investment, strategic partnerships, and diversified connectivity to reduce vulnerabilities. The failure to sustain such practices risks rendering legal sovereignty hollow, particularly as the Westphalian model is increasingly tested by rising 'interdependence and vulnerability' that transcend territorial boundaries.[6] The modern state must therefore securitize not only its traditional defence capabilities

5 Buzan et al., *op.cit.* p. 26.

6 D. Deudney, *Bounding Power: Republican Security Theory from the Polis to the Global Village* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 22.

but also its logistics, trade, and communication domains in order to reconstitute sovereign authority in meaningful and durable ways. This theoretical synthesis therefore provides the analytical lens through which this study will examine Pakistan's strategic realignments and connectivity initiatives as performances of reconstituted sovereignty.

Geopolitical Imperatives: Great Power Rivalry and its Repercussions in South and Central Asia

The strategic interaction among the U.S.-led West, China, and Russia is not a distant phenomenon; it is the dominant structural factor reshaping the environment in which South and Central Asian states operate. This rivalry compels regional governments to navigate a highly complex landscape, where economic partnerships, security arrangements, and infrastructure development acquire heightened significance given the region's pivotal role as a trade and energy hub.

The U.S. National Security Strategy explicitly identifies Central Asia as a region where the U.S. will "continue to support … independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity." The U.S. pledged to "foster efforts to enhance resilience and democratic development in the five countries in this region. We will continue to work through the C5+1 diplomatic platform (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and the United States) to advance climate adaptation, improve regional energy and food security, enhance integration within the region, and build greater connectivity to global markets."[7] This partnership thus seeks to comprehensively cover strategic areas, including security, counterterrorism, economic connectivity, trade (e.g. B5+1 initiatives), energy, infrastructure, critical minerals, governance, civil society, and regional sovereignty.

Similarly, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy[8] is defined for the Asia Pacific region, of which South Asia is a subset. Initiatives such as the 'Indo-Pacific Framework'[9] seek to strengthen partnerships with key regional

7 The White House, "National Security Strategy", October 12, 2022, Available at: https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

8 Historical Office of the Secretary of Defense, "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America December 2017", Available at: https://history.defense.gov/Historical-Sources/National-Security-Strategy/ (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

9 U.S. Department of State, "Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF)", Available at: https://ustr.gov/trade-agreements/agreements-under-negotiation/indo-pacific-economic-framework-prosperity-ipef (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

actors while maintaining influence across critical and emerging technologies. Other initiatives, such as the India–U.S. Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET),[10] illustrate this approach by forging closer technological and defence ties with India. Sanctions regimes, including the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA),[11] create compliance dilemmas for states such as Pakistan and Central Asian countries that pursue cooperation with Russia. These pressures do not eliminate sovereign choice, but they complicate it. As U.S. International Trade Administration data show, U.S. trade with India reached over US$128 billion in 2022, while trade with Pakistan stood at around US$6.5 billion, reflecting the divergent strategic priorities.[12]

On the other hand, China and Russia have consolidated their influence through institutional and project-based mechanisms. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO),[13] co-led by official Beijing and Moscow, provides a platform that emphasizes sovereign equality, non-interference, and mutual security principles that resonate with many Eurasian states wary of conditionalities. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)[14] as its flagship, represents a major securitization of economic statecraft. BRI investments are estimated at US$575 billion for 'corridor economies'[15] and approximately US$124 billion for Central Asia. Much of this is directed toward manufacturing, information and communication technology (ICT), renewable energy, trade-enabling infrastructure, and

10 Bajpaee, C. and Bhandari, K. "The U.S.-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET)", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 23, 2024, Available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/the-us-india-initiative-on-critical-and-emerging-technology-icet-from-2022-to-2025-assessment-learnings-and-the-way-forward?lang=en (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

11 U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act-Related Sanctions", August 2, 2017, Available at: https://ofac.treasury.gov/sanctions-programs-and-country-information/countering-americas-adversaries-through-sanctions-act-related-sanctions (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

12 Office of the United States Trade Representative, "India Trade Summary", Available at: https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/south-central-asia/india (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

13 The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Homepage, Available at: https://eng.sectsco.org/ (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

14 Ministry of Planning, Development, & Special Initiatives, "CPEC Secretariat", Available at: https://cpec.gov.pk/ (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

15 World Bank Group, "Belt and Road Initiative", Available at: https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/regional-integration/brief/belt-and-road-initiative (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

strategic projects that are reshaping the region's economic geography. Russia, meanwhile, remains a cornerstone of regional energy security through projects such as the 'Power of Siberia' pipeline, economic linkages through Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), and security guarantees via frameworks such as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO).

This competition represents the core structural pressure that informs the central research question of this study: how sovereignty can be reconstituted as a security construct, enabled by multi-vector foreign policies, to navigate external competition.

For South and Central Asia, this rivalry creates both opportunities and vulnerabilities. On the one hand, it provides strategic space for multi-vector diplomacy, allowing countries to diversify partnerships and extract concessions. On the other hand, it requires careful calibration to avoid provoking major powers. The region has thus become a critical arena where the management of trade routes, energy flows, and strategic alignments is securitized.

In this environment, connectivity projects are rarely perceived as purely economic. A railway or pipeline increasingly carries geopolitical weight, symbolizing alignment and trust. This compels regional states to 'perform' sovereignty through deliberate balancing and hedging, showing that, in a multipolar order, sovereign agency is not exercised through isolation but through the adept management of external pressures. The experience of South and Central Asia therefore illustrates how great-power competition compels sovereignty to be reconstituted as a continuous, adaptive practice grounded in strategic flexibility.

Case Study: Multi-Vector Foreign Policy of Regional Connectivity as Sovereign Strategy

As discussed earlier, the theoretical dynamics of reconstituted sovereignty, articulated through the combined lens of realism and securitization, are vividly demonstrated in South and Central Asia. This region functions as a microcosm of the multipolar world, where the interests of the U.S.-led West intersect and overlap with those of China and Russia. This section substantiates the research enquiry by offering a case study of Pakistan, which is ideally situated at the confluence of South and Central Asia.

For a pivotal middle power such as Pakistan, navigating this landscape requires a foreign policy that elevates diplomatic and economic connectivity as central instruments of sovereign practice. Pakistan's approach reflects the core argument of this study: sovereignty is no longer a passive condition but an active security construct, safeguarded through the securitization of domains such as communication, energy, and logistics.

For post-colonial states like Pakistan, sovereignty is a dynamic process that requires shielding the state from both internal vulnerabilities and external pressures, where economic viability is as critical as military security. Over time, Pakistan's strategy has evolved from reactive balancing into a proactive endeavour that leverages its geographic position as a conduit for trade and energy. In doing so, it transforms sovereignty into a dynamic performance of connectivity-driven security embedded in international law and regional norms of non-interference.

Historically, Pakistan's regional posture was shaped by its eastern frontier. Yet a critical juncture was reached in May 2025, when a brief but intense four-day confrontation with India catalysed recalibration of Pakistan's deterrence posture and external relations. The episode functioned as a securitizing moment: Pakistan's defensive capabilities, paired with strategic restraint that facilitated an internationally mediated ceasefire, reinforced perceptions of the country as a responsible actor whose stability was essential for regional order.

The process also corresponds with the Copenhagen School's framework, whereby crises are utilized to justify policy shifts. In Washington, the event prompted a reassessment of South Asia strategy after decades of India-centrism. High-level dialogue with Pakistan was revived, centred on counterterrorism and economic cooperation.[16] The U.S. also indicated renewed interest in intelligence sharing, operational coordination, and selected security assistance – pillars of modern sovereignty – with Pakistan. The post-2025 détente thus widened Islamabad's diplomatic space.

Pakistan has used this space to accelerate its core foreign-policy priority: becoming a hub of regional connectivity. The CPEC remains the cornerstone, consistently securitized in official discourse as not only

16 Naveed Atif, "Resetting the Arc: The Strategic Reawakening of U.S.-Pakistan Relations in 2025", Modern Diplomacy, August 16, 2025, Available at: https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/08/16/resetting-the-arc-the-strategic-reawakening-of-u-s-pakistan-relations-in-2025/ (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

an economic initiative but also a vital component of national resilience. By linking infrastructure development to regime security and territorial integrity, CPEC has been elevated beyond routine politics into the realm of high national security. This securitization of development underscores how Pakistan frames sovereignty as strengthened not by isolation but by becoming indispensable to regional economic security.

Crucially, this vision now extends to vigorous outreach toward Central Asia and the South Caucasus. Pakistan offers continental Central Asian states sovereign-controlled access options to maritime outlets for global trade. Beyond seaports, opportunities exist in transport, logistics, agriculture, ICT, education, culture, tourism, and people-to-people exchanges. Specific seaport opportunities include container handling, logistics services, off-dock terminals, free-trade zones, and other port facilities under the CPEC.[17]

Moreover, several transformative initiatives include the:[18]

- Uzbekistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan (UAP) Railway Project: a proposed 640-kilometre line linking Termez (Uzbekistan) with Hairatan and Kabul (Afghanistan) before entering Pakistan's Kurram district. A Framework Agreement on its Joint Feasibility Study in July 2025 in Kabul formalized the initial steps.
- Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) Pipeline: designed to bring Turkmen gas to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and onward to India;
- CASA-1000 Power Project: exporting surplus hydropower from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan;[19]
- Lapis Lazuli Corridor: a multimodal transit route connecting Afghanistan to Türkiye via Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, where Pakistan stands to benefit through enhanced access to the Caucasus;

17 Arab News, *Pakistan Seeks Overland Access to Central Asia, Europe*, September 9, 2025, Available at: https://www.arabnews.com/node/2614639/pakistan (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

18 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, "Central Asia", Available at: https://mofa.gov.pk/central-asia (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

19 Modern Diplomacy, *Regional Connectivity: Tajikistan's Race to Finish CASA-1000 by 2026*, June 14, 2025, Available at: https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/06/14/regional-connectivity-tajikistans-race-to-finish-casa-1000-by-2026/ (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

- Preferential Trade Agreements (PTA): one signed with Azerbaijan and another under negotiation with Kazakhstan; and
- Trans-Afghan Railway Project: a broader vision to integrate Central Asian and Pakistani rail systems, overlapping with the UAP railway concept.

Within this framework, the National Logistics Cell (NLC), a state-owned enterprise, has emerged as a key state instrument of connectivity securitization. By launching Pakistan's first containerized shipping service to Gulf ports in 2025 and delivering the first UAE–Tajikistan commercial cargo via Karachi the same year, NLC operationalized multimodal corridors that demonstrate resilience and reliability.[20] Its launch of shipping services is significant because it shows that the state directly involves itself in securing logistics chains. These initiatives complement rather than replace other connectivity vectors through Iran, the Caspian, or the South Caucasus, respecting each state's sovereign choices. They also highlight how logistics facilitation itself has become securitized as a sovereign capability.

These steps collectively seek to unlock access to energy resources and new markets, diversify dependencies, and reduce vulnerability to coercion – a realist imperative of maximizing autonomy and embedding sovereignty in economic resilience.

Furthermore, Pakistan's participation in the SCO has also become strategically pivotal. Since becoming a full member in 2017, Islamabad has emphasized counterterrorism and connectivity. SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) has enabled Pakistan to contribute extensive counter-extremism experience while benefiting from intelligence-sharing and joint exercises with Central Asian and Russian counterparts. According to SCO Secretariat reports, Pakistan has attended major RATS meetings and participated in 'Peace Mission' exercises, thereby improving interoperability with partner forces.

Economically, the SCO provides a vehicle for advancing Pakistan's geo-economic vision, particularly in harmonizing CPEC with initiatives such as Russia's Eurasian Economic Union. Trade with the SCO member states rose from US$12.8 billion in 2018 to over US$18.5 billion in 2023, nearly 35% of Pakistan's global trade. At

20 Arab News, *New Feeder Service Launched between Dubai and Karachi to Strengthen Trade Ties*, January 17, 2025, Available at: https://www.arabnews.com/node/2586791/pakistan (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

the 2024 Astana Summit, Pakistan's Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif emphasized the country's strategic geographical positioning as an ideal trade and transit hub for the entire SCO region,[21] linking South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. This is being operationalized through projects like the UAP Railway, which secured the SCO's endorsement. Pakistan's deepening energy partnerships, such as the proposed Pakistan Stream Gas Pipeline with Russia and energy cooperation with Kyrgyzstan[22] and Tajikistan,[23] further underscore its use of the SCO platforms to diversify energy sources and strengthen sovereignty.

For states, great-power rivalry presents both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, it enables multi-vector bargaining and diversification. On the other, it requires careful calibration to avoid provoking major powers.

Thus, Pakistan's contemporary diplomacy represents a sophisticated performance of reconstituted sovereignty through a focus on: deepening ties with China, Russia, and Central Asia through initiatives such as CPEC; managing a renewed U.S. partnership by engaging on technology and counterterrorism and economic cooperation; pivoting to Central Asia and the South Caucasus, thereby transforming from a peripheral state to a central connectivity node; and maintaining a credible deterrent capability, as reaffirmed during the May 2025 conflict between Pakistan and India, which provides the essential security foundation upon which connective strategies are built.

Despite the challenges, Pakistan's experience demonstrates that sovereignty in the multipolar age increasingly depends on a state's ability to integrate into overlapping economic and technological ecosystems. By positioning itself as a bridge between South Asia, Central Asia, and beyond, Pakistan aims to embed its security and prosperity within a wider community. This case study illustrates the theoretical shift from zero-sum contestation toward a collective securitization of connectivity, which will be explored in the conclusion.

For states, great-power rivalry presents both opportunities and risks. On

21 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Participation of the Prime Minister of Pakistan in the Summit of the SCO Heads of State in Astana", July 4, 2024, Available at: https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/participation-of-the-prime-minister-of-pakistan-in-the-summit-of-the-sco-heads-of-state-in-astana (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

22 Daryo, *Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan Sign Agreements*, July 29, 2025, Available at: https://daryo.uz/en/2025/07/29/kyrgyzstan-pakistan-sign-agreements-to-strengthen-trade-energy-and-investment-cooperation/ (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

23 Gulf News, *Pakistan and Tajikistan Agree to Develop Energy and Corridors*, December 15, 2022, Available at: https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/pakistan/pakistan-and-tajikistan-agree-to-develop-energy-and-corridors-1.92719135 (Accessed: November 22, 2025)

the one hand, it enables multi-vector bargaining and diversification. On the other, it requires careful calibration to avoid provoking major powers. Connectivity projects, such as railways, pipelines, and ports, thus acquire a securitized dimension, requiring deliberate sovereign management.

Toward a Collective Securitization of Connectivity

The transition to a complex multipolar order is not a temporary disturbance but a defining feature of the 21st-century international landscape. This article has argued that such structural change is fundamentally reconstituting the meaning and practice of sovereignty. Moving beyond the Westphalian model of legal recognition, sovereignty today emerges as a performative security construct. States are compelled to safeguard their autonomy and integrity not only against conventional threats but also against a spectrum of hybrid risks. This reconstitution is driven by systemic pressures that incentivize the securitization of ever-wider spheres of policy, ranging from digital infrastructure to logistics chains and energy flows.

The case of Pakistan illustrates how middle powers are adapting to these realities. Through multi-vector diplomacy, participation in cooperative platforms such as the SCO, and strategic partnerships including CPEC, Pakistan has sought to cultivate economic and technological resilience as essential components of sovereignty. This trajectory is not without risks – it may generate new dependencies or sharpen regional dilemmas – but investment in connectivity has consistently proven to be a stabilizing strategy. The operational role of Pakistan's NLC in inaugurating new maritime and overland trade routes to Central Asia exemplifies how logistics securitization is now part of sovereign performance, strengthening resilience while broadening regional options.

The persistence of a zero-sum paradigm, dominated by realpolitik and great power competition, risks fragmenting global systems into rival blocs of technology, infrastructure, and influence. Such fragmentation could exacerbate instability rather than mitigate it. Therefore, this analysis points toward a necessary, though challenging, paradigm shift: the long-term sustainability of sovereignty in a deeply interdependent world may depend less on solitary securitization of infrastructure, and more on a collective securitization of connectivity. This entails reframing shared assets – from undersea cables and data flows to power grids, rail corridors, and port systems – not as vulnerabilities

to be cordoned off, but as common goods whose security is vital to all stakeholders. Instead of pursuing digital or infrastructural autarky, states could work toward international norms and cooperative mechanisms that protect connectivity.

Rather than treating corridors like CPEC, the Middle Corridor, or U.S.-led initiatives as exclusive spheres of influence, major powers and regional actors could collaborate to ensure stability, transparency, and openness, thus reinforcing sovereignty through inclusivity rather than exclusion. In this mindset, the true existential threat is not the ascent of a rival power but the collective collapse of interconnected systems upon which prosperity and security depend.

This is not a call for idealism over realism, but for a more nuanced recognition that, because of profound interdependence, rational security policy may eventually necessitate cooperative practices. The COVID-19 pandemic and the looming climate crisis illustrate that many threats transcend borders and cannot be managed unilaterally. The ultimate reconstitution of sovereignty may therefore rest on its evolution from a doctrine of solitary defence toward a foundation for collaborative action.

In an era when a cyberattack can cripple supply lines or a single disruption can paralyse regional trade, the most resilient sovereignty is perhaps the one most securely connected, both technologically and logistically, to its peers. The multipolar world will test whether states can embrace this lesson, building a cooperative architecture of connectivity securitization before today's fractures deepen into irreparable divides.

Conclusion

This study set out to answer the research question: *"How is sovereignty being reconstituted as a security construct within a fractured world order, and enabled by the use of multi-vector foreign policy and logistics innovations to navigate great-power competition?"*

It examines how sovereignty is being reconstituted as a security construct within a fractured world order, enabled by multi-vector foreign policy and logistics innovations. The findings, grounded in a synthesis of structural realism and securitization theory, confirm that sovereignty is no longer a static legal condition but a dynamic performance, securing the state across an expanding range of domains.

The analysis of Pakistan's strategy provides a compelling case in point. Faced with the structural pressures of great-power competition, Pakistan has actively securitized economic connectivity and logistics through initiatives such as CPEC and the NLC's shipping services. By framing these projects as vital to national resilience and territorial integrity, Pakistan performs its sovereignty by becoming an indispensable connectivity hub, thereby diversifying dependencies and strengthening its diplomatic agency. Its participation in the SCO further illustrates this performative aspect, enabling it to engage in collective security and economic cooperation while adhering to principles of non-interference.

In answer to the central research question, the article concludes that, in a multipolar age, sovereign robustness is increasingly a function of a state's ability to integrate into and secure the connective tissue of the global order, treating shared infrastructure as a stabilizing public good rather than a zero-sum prerogative. The ultimate safeguard of sovereignty may thus lie not in isolation, but in a state's strategically managed and securely embedded position within regional and global networks.

Revisiting State Sovereignty in the Context of Global Obligations

Orkhan Yolchuyev*

This article revisits the concept of state sovereignty in the context of expanding global obligations under international law. While sovereignty traditionally denotes the supreme authority of states over their territory and population, its scope and meaning have evolved alongside the rise of international institutions, human rights law, and environmental obligations. The research problem addressed in this article concerns the tension between sovereign autonomy and the binding nature of global norms, particularly those of an erga omnes character, such as obligations to prevent transboundary harm to the climate system. The central research question asks how contemporary international law reconciles the classical notion of sovereignty with collective responsibilities owed to the international community as a whole. The article argues that modern sovereignty is best understood as a form of accountable authority – legitimate only when exercised in conformity with universal legal norms. Through historical, theoretical, and jurisprudential analysis, including the ICJ's 2025 Advisory Opinion on climate change, the study demonstrates that sovereignty today functions both as a shield of autonomy and a framework of responsibility. It concludes that the future of sovereignty lies in its capacity to adapt to shared global challenges through legal cooperation and respect for peremptory international norms.

Keywords: Sovereignty, international law, domestic law, climate change, human rights, ICJ

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Introduction

Sovereignty has long stood as a foundational principle of international law, representing the authority of states to govern themselves, exercise control over their territories, and interact as equals in the global arena. Although the modern understanding of sovereignty is often taken for granted, its historical development reveals a complex evolution shaped by political, religious, and legal transformations over centuries.

The concept of sovereignty, as understood in contemporary international law, emerged most prominently with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648,[1] which concluded the devastating Thirty Years' War in Europe. The Westphalian treaties established a new framework in which states were recognized as territorially bounded, legally equal entities, free from external interference except by mutual consent. This marked a decisive shift away from the universalistic authority of the Pope and the hierarchical legal order that had dominated Europe for centuries, paving the way for a system of secular, territorially defined states.

Despite the formal establishment of sovereign equality, theological and philosophical concepts continued to influence the early practice of international relations.

Despite the formal establishment of sovereign equality, theological and philosophical concepts continued to influence the early practice of international relations. These developments reflected the dual influence of earlier legal theories, such as Bodin's conception of absolute sovereignty, and emerging norms of non-interference, exemplified by the Peace of Augsburg in 1555. Westphalia thus not only ended armed conflict but also laid the foundations for the multilateral legal order that continues to shape the contemporary international system.

In the modern era, sovereignty continues to play a central role in regulating international relations, though its scope has evolved. States are no longer isolated actors; they operate within a complex legal system that includes international and regional organizations, treaties, customary law, and, increasingly, norms addressing non-state actors such as corporations and individuals. Sovereignty now encompasses both internal and external dimensions: internally, it grants states the authority to legislate and govern populations within their borders; externally, it protects them from coercive interference by other states.

1 Britannica, "Peace of Westphalia", available at: https://www.britannica.com/event/Peace-of-Westphalia (Accessed: August 16, 2025).

Yet, the expansion of international law, the rise of human rights, and the development of peremptory norms (*jus cogens*)[2] have gradually constrained the unfettered exercise of state authority, requiring a careful balancing of national discretion and international obligations. Growing interdependence among states, especially in areas such as climate protection and human rights, further highlights the tension between sovereignty and global legal responsibilities.

Despite abundant scholarship on sovereignty, international obligations, and global governance, a persistent research gap remains in systematically connecting the classical concept of state sovereignty with the emerging body of global obligations, particularly those of an *erga omnes* or universal character, such as climate and human rights duties. While traditional analyses often treat sovereignty as a static principle of authority, this article contends that it is a dynamic legal concept undergoing reinterpretation in response to collective international responsibilities.

Accordingly, the central research question of this article is: *How does the modern international legal order reconcile the principle of state sovereignty with the growing set of binding global obligations owed to the international community as a whole?* The central argument advanced here is that sovereignty today functions not merely as a shield of autonomy but as a framework of accountable authority – one that derives legitimacy from a state's capacity to exercise power in conformity with global legal norms, particularly those safeguarding human rights and the environment.

The goal of this article is to provide an overview of the historical evolution and contemporary legal foundations of sovereignty, tracing its development from Westphalia to the modern international legal order. Hence, this **article** provides an analysis of the interaction between sovereignty and international obligations, the ways in which national and international legal orders intersect, and the practical implications of sovereignty in light of emerging global challenges, including obligations recognized by the International Court of Justice (ICJ).[3]

2 Under Article 53 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, "A peremptory norm of general international law is a norm accepted and recognized by the international community of States as a whole as a norm from which no derogation is permitted and which can be modified only by a subsequent norm of general international law having the same character" (United Nations, Treaty Series, Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, May 23, 1969, available at: https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/1_1_1969.pdf (accessed: September 7, 2025).

3 On 23 July 2025, the International Court of Justice (*ICJ*) issued a landmark *Advisory*

To address this question, the article proceeds in three parts. The first section traces the historical evolution of sovereignty and its legal foundations from the Peace of Westphalia to the modern international order. The second part explores the interaction between international and domestic legal systems through the monism–dualism debate, revealing how constitutional structures mediate global commitments. The third part analyses the ICJ's 2025 Advisory Opinion on climate change to illustrate how *erga omnes* obligations redefine the practice of sovereignty in light of global challenges. The **article** concludes by synthesizing these findings and reflecting on the implications for the future of sovereignty and international cooperation.

The legal foundation of sovereignty: Historical development and modern international law

The concept of sovereignty emerged from the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which marked the starting point of modern international law in Europe. Westphalia gave rise to the modern European state system, which later spread around the world through European colonialism.[4]

The Peace of Westphalia decisively curtailed the Pope's secular authority over other states, establishing Catholic and Protestant states as sovereign and equal under no higher power. Noteworthy, this marked a shift away from a universal Christian-based law that had dominated

Opinion on the obligation of States in respect of climate change. Several main findings and brief explanations: Climate Change Treaties are embedded in international law - UNFCCC, Kyoto, and Paris Agreements are binding and impose strict duties, but don't override customary international law. International duties to cooperate and exercise due diligence are stringent and binding all States. States must show ongoing, due-diligent efforts under broader international frameworks. NDCs are not just aspirational, but binding obligations of conduct or result. To prepare, communicate, maintain, and improve national climate plans (NDCs) is an obligation. For one, States must actively legislate and regulate to control private-sector emissions under national law. States risk international responsibility if they don›t oblige. NDCs must reflect each country's highest possible ambition and be measurable against the 1.5°C target. Right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment to emphasize the intersection between environmental law and human rights law. Climate protection is now a human rights imperative under international law, being a precondition for enjoying fundamental rights like life, health, privacy, and water. Internationally wrongful climate (in)action can lead to reparations and the damage of the injured individuals. According to the ICJ, international law is flexible to encompass to the specific elements involved in climate change damage.

4 G. Hernandez, International Law (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 5; Beaulac, S. "The Westphalian Legal Orthodoxy – Myth or Reality?", Journal of the History of International Law, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2000), p. 148.

international relations through the sixteenth century.[5] Nevertheless, theological concepts persisted; for example, Francisco de Vitoria argued that indigenous peoples in the Americas could not be sovereign, as they could not wage a 'just war', thereby facilitating Spanish conquest.[6]

The concept of sovereignty emerged from the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which marked the starting point of modern international law in Europe.

Moreover, Westphalia granted states – including the many entities of the Holy Roman Empire – the freedom to choose their official religion (*cuius regio, eius religio*). States were recognized as equal and sovereign in their interactions, free from external interference unless expressly consented to, typically through a treaty. Although the idea of sovereignty drew on Bodin's sixteenth-century theory of 'absolute sovereignty'[7] and the non-interference principle of the 1555 Peace of Augsburg,[8] Westphalia was groundbreaking in establishing the state as a territorial entity capable of guaranteeing its commitments. In addition to ending the war, the treaties laid the foundation for a future multilateral legal order.

International law has traditionally centred on regulating relations between states, which, while composed of individuals, are treated as autonomous entities capable of expressing collective will and interests. Notably, states are characterized by effective governance, territorial control, and authority over a population. In addition to states, international law governs international and regional organizations, such as the United Nations, and increasingly addresses other actors, including individuals, corporations, and NGOs, although these remain secondary to the primacy of states.

A cornerstone of international law is the principle of sovereign equality, enshrined in Article 2(1) of the UN Charter.[9] This principle ensures that all states, regardless of size or power, enjoy equal rights and obligations, a concept famously illustrated by Vattel: "a small republic is no less a sovereign state than the most powerful kingdom."[10] Sovereignty

5 A. Nussbaum, *A Concise History of the Law of Nations* (Macmillan, 1954), pp. 17-23; S. Neff, *Justice Among Nations: A History of International Law* (Harvard UP, 2014), p. 94.

6 A. Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law* (CUP, 2005), p. 26.

7 J. Bodin, *Six Books of the Commonwealth* (Tooley, Basil Blackwell, 1967).

8 Britannica, *Peace of Augsburg*, **Available at:** https://www.britannica.com/event/Peace-of-Augsburg (Accessed: August 16, 2025).

9 United Nations, *The Charter of the United Nations*, Available at: https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter (Accessed: August 19, 2025).

10 E. Vattel, Le *droit des gens*, ou Principes de la loi naturelle, appliqués à la conduite *et* aux affaires des Nations *et* des Souverains (Londres, 1758), 2 vols. Vol. 2,

encompasses both external and internal dimensions: externally, it shields states from coercive interference by others; internally, it confers exclusive authority to govern territory and population, including legislating and establishing institutions. Moreover, while globalization has increased interdependence among states, sovereignty continues to serve as a key lens for understanding their authority and role in the international system.

The external aspect of sovereignty implies that, as long as they respect the sovereignty of others, states possess broad discretion in their actions. They may structure their political and economic systems as they see fit and legislate according to the values they wish to uphold. Historically, this freedom was extensive, with recourse to war once regarded as a legitimate instrument of foreign policy. Over time, however, states increasingly undertook obligations that narrowed their scope of unilateral action. Today, this freedom is constrained by the UN Charter and other multilateral treaties, which prohibit the use of force and require respect for fundamental human rights. In addition, the rise of '*peremptory norms'* (*jus cogens*) has entrenched certain obligations from which no derogation is permitted.

From a classical perspective, the binding force of international obligations rests primarily on state consent.[11] In this sense, states are bound only by those commitments to which they have expressly agreed. Consent is closely linked to the principle of reciprocity: states accept limitations on their freedom in exchange for similar restrictions on others. Thus, legal regulation has always been relational, with reciprocity serving as a pragmatic safeguard of state interests.[12] Alongside consent and reciprocity stands the principle of good faith, now codified in Article 2(2) of the UN Charter, which requires states to honour their obligations sincerely and without malice.[13] This principle is reaffirmed in Article 26 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties,[14] which enshrines the maxim *pacta sunt servanda*, requiring states to perform their treaty commitments in good faith.

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p. 26; For an introductory summary in English, see E Jouannet, "Emer de Vattel" in B Fassbender and A Peters (eds), *Oxford Handbook of the History of International Law* (OUP, 2012), pp. 1118–1122.

11 H. Lauterpacht, *Oppenheim`s International Law* (8th edn. Longman and Sons, 1955), p.15.

12 J. Combacau and S. Sur, Droit International Public (LGDJ, 2016), p. 28.

13 United Nations, "The Charter of the United Nations", Available at: https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter (Accessed: August 19, 2025).

14 United Nations, Treaty Series, Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, May 23, 1969, available at: https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/1_1_1969.pdf (Accessed: September 7, 2025).

Finally, to understand the evolving nature of sovereignty, it is essential to recognize the decentralized structure of modern international law. Unlike domestic legal systems, where authority is vested in a single sovereign, international law functions among multiple sovereign and equal states. With no central legislature above them, it remains a horizontal legal order in which new obligations emerge only through the collective will of states, expressed in treaties or customary international law.

In order to understand sovereignty, it is also necessary to examine how international law interacts with domestic legal systems.

Interactions between legal orders: Monism versus dualism

In order to understand sovereignty, it is also necessary to examine how international law interacts with domestic legal systems. While the international legal order claims primacy over national legislation, it ultimately leaves to state constitutions the determination of how international norms are incorporated and enforced within domestic legal systems. This interaction has long been framed through the classical debate between monism and dualism, each offering a distinct perspective on the relationship between international and national legal orders. Although some commentators dismiss this debate as overly formalistic and of limited practical value,[15] the concepts nonetheless provide useful insights into how different legal orders interact.

Dualism emphasizes the independence and self-contained nature of municipal legal systems, grounded in the idea of the state as sovereign. From this perspective, international and domestic law are distinct spheres, with neither possessing the authority to alter or generate rules for the other.[16] For an international rule to be effective within the domestic sphere, it must first be accepted or incorporated by the state, which retains the authority to determine how conflicts between international and national norms are resolved.[17] This approach has historically been associated with common-law countries, such as the United Kingdom and the United States, where international treaties typically require legislative incorporation or judicial recognition before

15 G. Fitzmaurice, *The General Principles of International Law Considered from the Standpoint of the Rule of Law* (1957) 92-II Recueil des Cours 1, p. 71.

16 K. Strupp, *Les règles générales du droit international de la paix* (1934) 47 Recueil des Cours pp. 258, 389.

17 R. Jennings and A. Watts, *Oppenheim's International Law* (9th edn Stevens & Sons, 1992), p. 53.

acquiring domestic effect.[18] While this strict separation was once practical, when the domains of international and domestic law rarely overlapped, it appears increasingly limited today, particularly given the rise of international norms that directly affect individuals, most notably in the field of human rights.

In contrast, monist theories depict international and domestic legal orders as parts of a single, integrated system, deriving their authority from a common source. The practical implication of monism is that international rules can operate directly within national legal systems without the need for legislative transformation. Civil law jurisdictions such as France, Spain, Germany, and the Netherlands exemplify this approach, incorporating international law automatically by virtue of constitutional provisions. In this sense, international norms are considered 'self-executing'.[19]

The Austrian jurist Hans Kelsen advanced the most influential version of monism, arguing that both legal orders draw their validity from a single foundational norm – the *Grundnorm*.[20] For Kelsen, this meant that international and municipal law ultimately form a unified system of norms, with international law providing the overarching framework. Although Kelsen himself did not fully resolve the content of the *Grundnorm*, his theory implied that international norms apply automatically in domestic systems, and that conflicts with domestic rules result not in the invalidity of the latter, but in the international responsibility of the state.[21]

Building on Kelsen's ideas, Sir Hersch Lauterpacht argued for a monist view that placed international law at the apex of the hierarchy.[22] He maintained that national law must conform to international obligations, especially as both are directed toward the protection of individuals. From this perspective, monism not only underscores the universality of law but also attributes to international law a moral dimension rooted in human rights and the promotion of human welfare.[23]

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18 G. Hernandez, *International Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p.79.

19 Ibid.

20 H. Kelsen, *General Theory of Law and State*, (2nd edn 1967, Transaction reprint, 2005), p. 559.

21 Ibid, p. 564.

22 H. Lauterpacht (ed), *Oppenheim's International Law* (8th edn Longman, 1955), p. 38.

23 H. Lauterpacht, *International Law and Human Rights* (OUP, 1950), p. 70. For a more recent exponent of this position, see A Cassese, *International Law* (2nd edn, OUP, 2005), p. 215.

Monism and dualism offer fundamentally different perspectives on the link between international and domestic legal systems. A common critique of both approaches is that they fail to fully capture the actual practices of international and national courts, which are crucial for understanding the interaction between international and municipal law.[24] Ultimately, it is up to each state, through its constitutional framework, to determine whether its legal system follows a monist or dualist approach. This indicates that the debate does not concern the inherent nature of international law itself, but rather how its relationship with domestic legal orders can be interpreted.

Sovereignty in practice: Lessons from the ICJ Advisory Opinion

In practice, the legal exercise of sovereignty is not absolute. Thus, states must continuously navigate the tension between their national interests and binding international obligations.

While sovereignty grants states discretion over their internal and external affairs, participation in the international legal order entails commitments that may limit this discretion. Treaties, customary law, and peremptory norms impose duties that states cannot unilaterally disregard, requiring careful alignment with domestic policies. Courts, both domestic and international, play a crucial role in interpreting and reconciling these obligations, often shaping the manner in which international norms are implemented at the national level.

At the same time, states may invoke reservations, declarations, or derogations as legal tools to preserve core aspects of sovereignty while maintaining compliance with international law. Globalization and interdependence further complicate this balancing act, as transboundary issues – ranging from human rights to environmental protection – demand coordinated action that may constrain unilateral decision-making. Ultimately, the practice of sovereignty in a legal sense is inseparable from the responsibilities and limitations that arise from participation in the global legal community, highlighting the dynamic interplay between state authority and international norms.

In its landmark Advisory Opinion issued on July 23, 2025, the ICJ affirmed that states have legal obligations under both treaty and customary international law to prevent significant harm to the climate system.[25]

24 J. Crawford, *Brownlie's Principles of Public International Law* (8th edn, OUP, 2012), p. 50.

25 International Court of Justice, "*Obligations of States in respect of Climate Change*",

The Court emphasized that failure to take adequate action to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions constitutes an internationally wrongful act, engaging state responsibility. This responsibility encompasses not only cessation of harmful conduct but also guarantees of non-repetition and full reparation, including restitution, compensation, or satisfaction, provided there is a clear and direct causal link between the act and the damage.[26]

The Court further recognized that these obligations are of an *erga omnes* nature, meaning "they are owed to the international community as a whole" and "can be invoked by any state, regardless of direct injury".[27] In the same way, treaty obligations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and Paris Agreement are *erga omnes partes*, on the basis that they "protect the essential interest of all states in the safeguarding of the climate system, which benefits the international community as a whole".[28]

Hence, the Court connects the *erga omnes* nature of these obligations to the nature of the environment as a 'global common good'. This development underscores the evolving nature of sovereignty, in which national interests must increasingly align with global environmental imperatives, compelling states to reconcile their sovereign rights with their duties under international law.

The ICJ's recognition of *erga omnes* climate obligations vividly illustrates the tension between national interests and international duties. While states retain discretion to design policies reflecting domestic priorities, this discretion is no longer unfettered; the imperative to prevent significant harm to the global climate system imposes binding legal constraints that cannot be ignored without engaging international responsibility.

In practice, reconciling national interest with international obligations requires careful policy calibration, in which measures to achieve economic or social objectives are designed in ways that do not violate

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Advisory Opinion, 23 July 2025, Available at: https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/187/187-20250723-adv-01-00-en.pdf (Accessed: September 12, 2025).

26 Ibid.

27 Mustafayeva, N., "Multilateral Diplomacy for Shaping the International Environmental Regime: Key Landmark Conferences and COP29 in Azerbaijan", *Caucasus Strategic Perspectives*, Vol. 3, Issue 1, (Summer 2022), p. 76.

28 Paddeu F., and Jackson M., "State Responsibility in the ICJ's Advisory Opinion on Climate Change", *EJIL*, 25 July 2025, available at: https://www.ejiltalk.org/state-responsibility-in-the-icjs-advisory-opinion-on-climate-change/
(accessed: August 28, 2025).

collective environmental responsibilities. This dynamic demonstrates that sovereignty in the contemporary legal order is not merely the exercise of power within territorial borders but a **responsible authority** exercised in dialogue with the international community.

By framing climate obligations as *erga omnes*, the ICJ emphasizes that even in areas traditionally associated with domestic discretion – such as energy production, industrial regulation, or land use – states must account for transboundary consequences, thus aligning sovereign decision-making with global legal norms.

Conclusion

This article set out to examine how the principle of sovereignty has evolved in international law and to what extent it can coexist with emerging global obligations. Its main objective was to trace the historical and legal development of sovereignty, explore how international and domestic legal systems interact, and evaluate how contemporary challenges – exemplified by the ICJ's Advisory Opinion on climate change – are reshaping our understanding of sovereign authority. The analysis has shown that sovereignty is no longer a doctrine of absolute independence but a principle conditioned by legal responsibility.

As argued in this article, sovereignty has evolved from the absolute authority of states over their territories and populations to a nuanced principle that balances national discretion with binding international obligations. From the Peace of Westphalia to the contemporary international legal order, sovereignty has guaranteed territorial integrity and sovereign equality while being gradually constrained by treaties, customary law, and the peremptory norms (*jus cogens*) of international law.

The analysis in this article further demonstrates that the interaction between international and domestic legal orders, conceptualized through monism and dualism, underscores both the discretion states retain and the responsibilities they must uphold. While the traditional dualist and monist positions may appear increasingly strained, it would be simplistic to dismiss dualism as mere legal nationalism or to valorize monism as an ideal of committed internationalism. Monism indeed carries a universalist aspiration, yet dualist systems have cultivated practical mechanisms to manage conflicts arising from the engagement of multiple legal orders.

In today's technologically interconnected world, where individuals and activities routinely cross borders and states act beyond traditional domestic spheres, the monism–dualism debate can seem somewhat antiquated compared to urgent global challenges. Ultimately, the relationship between municipal and international regimes may not hinge on full harmonization but rather on pragmatic accommodation, reflecting the ongoing coexistence of multiple overlapping legal systems.

The international legal order brings with it the promise of universality, harmonization, and cooperation. Thus, the ICJ's Advisory Opinion on climate change illustrates how *erga omnes* obligations require states to reconcile domestic policies with global imperatives, showing that modern sovereignty entails not only authority but also accountability.

In sum, as submitted in this article, contemporary sovereignty functions both as a protector of state autonomy and as a framework for fulfilling collective international responsibilities, with legitimacy measured by a state's capacity to govern internally while upholding global legal norms.

Connectivity in the new world order – Reason or consequence?

Laszlo Vasa* and Peter Barkanyi**

This article discusses how various forms of connectivity – such as trade, digital networks, cultural ties, and diplomacy – are linked to international cooperation in the South Caucasus region. It examines how these connections interact with the efforts of multilateral organizations active in the region. The article also highlights some of the main problems faced by these organizations. For example, the OSCE is often seen as weak when it comes to conflict resolution, and there are doubts about how fairly the UN, OSCE, and EU apply international law in this context. At the same time, the article points out some successes achieved by international organizations. They have supported economic development, encouraged more diverse economies, and helped to build better infrastructure in the South Caucasus. The UN and others have also supported economic growth, new industries, and infrastructure development in the countries of this region. The article also highlights that cooperation among regional organizations is often weak or not well coordinated. As a result, countries in the region are beginning to focus more on regional cooperation, especially when larger international actors appear to have less influence than before. One of the key results of this study is that the countries of the South Caucasus are increasingly seeking to rely on their own regional initiatives whenever external actors appear less effective. Ultimately, the article suggests that building strong and fair linkages – while understanding the needs of the countries of the South Caucasus – can help create lasting peace, stability, and shared progress in the region.

Keywords: South Caucasus, Connectivity, Multilateralism, Diplomacy, Regional Cooperation, Peacebuilding, Digital Transformation, Energy Infrastructure

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Introduction

In today's world, countries are more interconnected than ever before, linked through trade, technology, travel, cultural exchange, and cooperation through international organizations. This web of relationships – often described as 'connectivity'[1,2] – has become a defining feature of global development. Strong connectivity fosters economic growth, supports problem-solving across borders, and creates opportunities for more stable and peaceful relations. Yet such connectivity also brings some challenges: excessive competition, weak communication, and unresolved disputes can turn connectivity into a source of tension rather than cooperation. Nowhere is this dual nature more evident than in the South Caucasus. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia all seek stronger economies and deeper international partnerships, but they are grappling with long-standing divisions. In this context, connectivity is more than a policy goal – it is a strategic necessity. It has the potential to unlock new avenues of cooperation, accelerate progress, and contribute to lasting peace if managed wisely.

In the South Caucasus, the question remains whether connectivity and multilateralism can genuinely promote peace and stability, or whether they sometimes reproduce existing rivalries instead.[3] This study addresses this issue by examining how different forms of connectivity – economic, digital, cultural, and diplomatic – interact with the work of international organizations and the policies of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The main research question guiding the article is whether connectivity in the South Caucasus functions primarily as a cause or as a consequence of peace and stability.

This article, therefore, will explore the role of connectivity and multilateralism in the South Caucasus, focusing on economic development, digital transformation, cultural exchange, and diplomacy, while also considering the contributions of international organizations. Ultimately, it will reflect on some practical steps the region can take

1 European External Action Service (EEAS), "About the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA)", Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/euma/about-european-union-mission-armenia_en (Accessed: October 3, 2025).

2 International Telecommunication Union (ITU), "Measuring Digital Development: Facts and Figures 2024", Available at: https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/facts/default.aspx (Accessed: October 3, 2025).

3 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "Peace and Development in the South Caucasus", Available at: https://www.undp.org/georgia/projects/peace-development (Accessed: October 3, 2025).

to build stronger ties and gradually move toward greater stability and integration in the future.

The aim of the article is to identify the main forms and drivers of connectivity in the region and to assess the conditions under which they can contribute to more stable and cooperative regional relations. The article argues that connectivity can only foster peace when it is shaped by locally owned and balanced institutional frameworks. Its structure reflects these objectives: after this introduction, the article examines economic connectivity, digital transformation, cultural and educational exchange, and diplomatic cooperation before concluding with lessons for future regional integration.

Economic Connectivity in the South Caucasus

Economic connectivity refers to the trade, transport, and financial links that bind countries together. In the South Caucasus, these connections are particularly significant, yet their full potential remains underutilized.[4] Situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, the region holds a natural advantage as a transit hub that can facilitate integration and generate new opportunities for growth. Over recent decades, several large-scale infrastructure projects have already demonstrated this potential. The Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, for instance, has connected Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye, enabling goods to move more efficiently between Asia and Europe.[5] Similarly, the Southern Gas Corridor has positioned the region as an essential energy bridge, transporting Caspian gas from Azerbaijan through Georgia and Türkiye to European markets.[6, 7] These projects illustrate that the South Caucasus is far from being isolated; rather, it is increasingly embedded in global trade and energy networks. However, challenges remain. The benefits of connectivity are not evenly distributed among the countries, and gaps in cooperation, infrastructure, and trust

4 *Ibid.*

5 Azerbaijan Railways (ADY), Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway officially reopened after year-long closure, 2024, Available at: https://corp.ady.az/en/2/news/news/baku-tbilisi-kars-railway-is-officially-open-again-after-year-long-closure-1 (Accessed: October 3, 2025)

6 Pirani, S., "Expansion of the Southern Gas Corridor pipelines and prospects for additional Azeri gas supplies to Europe", *Oxford Institute for Energy Studies*, 2024, Available at: https://www.oxfordenergy.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Expansion-of-the-Southern-Gas-Corridor-NG180.pdf (Accessed: October 3, 2025)

7 Trans Adriatic Pipeline AG (TAP), *TAP delivers 50 billion cubic metres of natural gas to Europe*, 2025, Available at: https://www.tap-ag.com/news/news-stories/tap-delivers-50-billion-cubic-metres-of-natural-gas-to-europe (Accessed: October 3, 2025)

continue to limit progress. Unlocking the region's full potential will require sustained efforts to deepen collaboration, balance national interests, and ensure that connectivity serves as a driver of shared development.

In Central Asia, countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have invested heavily in developing new roads and railways, while also establishing special trade zones to facilitate commerce. Beyond physical infrastructure, regional cooperation has been strengthened through membership in organizations such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)[8] and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). These platforms not only help harmonize trade regulations and improve transport coordination but also attract foreign investment to support long-term development.[9] Together, such initiatives illustrate how Central Asian states are seeking to position themselves as important connectors between markets, while also diversifying their economic partnerships.

This brief comparison with Central Asia helps to highlight that, unlike their eastern neighbours, the South Caucasus countries have not yet developed similarly coordinated regional frameworks. While the potential for economic cooperation exists, political divisions and differing external alignments have so far limited the depth of integration. The following section examines how these differences shape the region's economic and infrastructural connectivity.

The situation in the South Caucasus differs significantly from that of Central Asia, as Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan each pursue distinct political and economic paths. Georgia has aligned itself closely with the European Union (EU), yet this has not prevented its participation in large regional initiatives such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway and the Southern Gas Corridor, which connect all three states. Armenia, while a member of the EAEU, has also shown openness to new initiatives, including a trilateral agreement with Azerbaijan and the United States on transport cooperation – sometimes referred to as the 'Zangezur', or 'Trump' corridor. Azerbaijan, meanwhile, leverages its resources to maintain a greater degree of strategic autonomy. These divergent approaches made it difficult to design a single, unified plan for the region. Nevertheless, the fundamental needs remain the same: better infrastructure, expanded trade, and greater economic opportunity. This opens space for pragmatic cooperation in less politically sensitive areas – such as agriculture, energy, small business development, and

8 Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), About the EAEU, Available at: https://eaeunion.org/?lang=en (Accessed: October 3, 2025)

9 Vasa, L., "Regionalism in Central Asia", *Tér-Gazdaság-Ember*, 2020, 8(3), pp. 27–46.

transportation – where shared interests can overcome divisions.

International organizations also play an important role in supporting economic development in the South Caucasus. The United Nations (UN) implements programmes aimed at reducing poverty and strengthening local economies, while institutions such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank have provided significant financing for infrastructure, modern agriculture, and energy projects. These projects and initiatives not only create jobs and improve living standards but also help integrate the region into wider networks of trade and cooperation. By enhancing connectivity and building capacity, international organizations contribute to making the South Caucasus more resilient, more open, and better positioned to benefit from global opportunities.

Armenia, however, remained largely excluded due to the occupation of Azerbaijani territories, which limited its participation in regional initiatives.

Yet significant challenges remain. The countries of the South Caucasus do not always move in the same direction, as each pursues its own strategies and partnerships. This divergence makes it difficult to formulate a common regional approach.

In summary, economic connectivity offers significant opportunities for the South Caucasus, yet its development has been uneven across the region. For many years, Azerbaijan and Georgia advanced joint projects with Türkiye and global partners, building railways and pipelines that opened new corridors for trade and energy. Armenia, however, remained largely excluded due to the occupation of Azerbaijani territories, which limited its participation in regional initiatives. As a result, connectivity has not progressed equally: while some parts of the region have moved forward rapidly, others have been left behind. Overcoming this imbalance will require greater cooperation among the three states as well as stronger engagement with international partners. Only through more inclusive collaboration can economic growth reach wider segments of society and contribute to fairer, more sustainable development across the South Caucasus.

Digital Connectivity in the South Caucasus

Digital technology – ranging from the internet and mobile communication to a wide array of online services– has become an integral part of everyday life.[10] In the South Caucasus, Armenia,

10 International Telecommunication Union, *op.cit.*

Azerbaijan is also making strides, channelling revenues from its resource economy into digital transformation. Investments in smart city initiatives, new data centres, and digital platforms are positioning Baku as a regional hub for innovation and technology.

Azerbaijan, and Georgia are each striving to strengthen their digital ecosystems. Their efforts focus on expanding high-speed internet access, developing more efficient e-government platforms, and fostering innovative technology companies.[11] By investing in digital infrastructure and skills, the three countries aim not only to modernize their economies but also to enhance regional competitiveness and integration into global markets.

(1) Georgia is in a favourable position, having developed advanced e-government platforms that allow citizens to access public services online with greater ease. The country also provides strong support for startup firms, making Tbilisi an active hub for young entrepreneurs and tech talent.[12]

(2) Armenia, meanwhile, has cultivated a vibrant IT sector. A large section of its youth are engaged in programming and software development, and several international companies have established offices in this country.[13]

(3) Azerbaijan is also making strides, channelling revenues from its resource economy into digital transformation. Investments in smart city initiatives, new data centres, and digital platforms are positioning Baku as a regional hub for innovation and technology. Although each country follows its own path, all three recognize that digital transformation is essential for creating jobs and securing future growth. Whether through e-government platforms, a thriving IT sector, or smart city initiatives, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia share the understanding that digital connectivity is not only a driver of innovation but also a foundation for long-term competitiveness and regional development.

Increasingly, governments in the region are also integrating cybersecurity strategies, e-government expansion, and the first applications of artificial intelligence into their national digital agendas. These priorities

11 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), "UN E-Government Survey 2024: Digital Government in the Decade of Action for Sustainable Development", Available at: https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Reports/UN-E-Government-Survey-2024 (Accessed: October 3, 2025)

12 World Bank, "Armenia's Digital Technology Adoption by Firms 2025", Available at: https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/armenia/publication/armenia-s-digital-technology-adoption-by-firms (Accessed: October 3, 2025)

13 *Ibid*.

reflect a growing awareness that secure and well-governed digital systems are essential not only for economic modernization but also for state resilience and public trust.

The international community also plays an active role in advancing digital connectivity in the South Caucasus. The EU's EU4Digital programme supports Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia in improving internet infrastructure and expanding online services. Financial institutions such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank have similarly provided funding for projects that bring internet access to schools, create training opportunities for youth, and assist small businesses across the region.

The growing use of digital tools also brings new vulnerabilities. Online risks, cyberattacks, and hacking have become serious challenges for digital economies,[14] threatening both businesses and critical infrastructure. In the South Caucasus, these risks are heightened by inter-state political tensions, which increase the likelihood of cyber threats being used as instruments of pressure or conflict. This makes the need for stronger cybersecurity measures particularly urgent. Building resilient digital systems is, therefore, not only a technical issue but also a matter of national and regional security.

Cultural and Educational Connectivity in the South Caucasus

Culture and education play a vital role in fostering understanding between people, a point of particular importance in the South Caucasus, where diverse languages, religions, cultures, and traditions coexist alongside a difficult history marked by conflicts. Cultural exchange and educational cooperation can gradually reduce tensions and challenge entrenched stereotypes, thereby opening new pathways for dialogue.

Shared traditions – such as music, cuisine, art, or history – provide opportunities for mutual learning and respect. Initiatives such as joint cultural projects, student exchange, and tourism not only strengthen cross-cultural ties but also allow local communities to showcase their identities.[15]

14 International Telecommunication Union (ITU), "Global Cybersecurity Index 2024", Available at: https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Cybersecurity/Pages/global-cybersecurity-index.aspx (Accessed: October 3, 2025)

15 Shubladze, R., "Youth Study South Caucasus 2023 – Comparative Analysis: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia", Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2024, Available at: https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/georgien/21144.pdf (Accessed: October 3, 2025)

Education is equally central to both social and economic progress. It equips young people with the knowledge and skills needed for modern economies while also teaching them how to collaborate across cultural boundaries.

Among these initiatives, international scholarship programmes such as the Stipendium Hungaricum provide valuable opportunities for students from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia to complete full degree programmes abroad.[16] Living and studying in a new environment helps them build professional networks and personal friendships that often continue long after their return home. These experiences broaden horizons and promote empathy, creating small but lasting bridges of understanding.

In the South Caucasus, a variety of initiatives support this goal, ranging from scholarship programmes and international exchanges to partnerships between universities. The EU's Erasmus+ programme, for example, enables students from the region to study in Europe, build new professional networks, and gain broader perspectives.

Smaller-scale initiatives, such as school and university partnerships within the region, also play an important role by connecting students and teachers across borders. These direct human contacts can often do more to build trust than official diplomacy.[17] They give young people a sense of belonging to a wider regional community and create social ties that endure beyond political cycles.

Cultural and educational cooperation contributes to peacebuilding. It highlights common human values that transcend political disputes and provides space for dialogue even during times of heightened tension. Cultural and educational exchanges often progress more slowly than economic or digital projects, yet their effects reach deeper into everyday life. Their impact may not be immediately visible, but they help shape perceptions, encourage tolerance, and prepare the social ground for reconciliation. In the long run, these connections build trust and mutual understanding, laying the groundwork for reconciliation and more stable regional relations.

Still, cultural and educational initiatives cannot achieve this alone. For trust to take root, they require the support of diplomacy and institutional cooperation.

16 Bárkányi, P., "The ten years of the Stipendium Hungaricum programme in the perspective of Hungarian–Central Asian relations", *Új Munkaügyi Szemle*, 2023, Vol. IV, No. 3, pp. 2–17.

17 Shubladze, R., *op.cit.*

Diplomatic and Institutional Connectivity in the South Caucasus

Diplomatic and institutional connectivity refers to the ways in which states engage in dialogue, negotiate agreements, and attempt to resolve disputes. It is not limited to heads of state, but also involves officials, experts, and sometimes even local actors. International organizations play a central role in this process by providing platforms for dialogue, offering mediation when parties cannot agree, and supplying coordination or technical assistance. They also contribute to creating norms and frameworks that can promote stability and cooperation over the long term. In the South Caucasus, where complex politics persist, such external support remains particularly important. International actors can sometimes open doors that the regional players alone cannot. Some international organizations are more active in the South Caucasus than others. The EU is the most visible, with initiatives that support peacebuilding and assist governments in implementing reforms.[18] The UN also maintains a presence through development and humanitarian programmes, though its role is somewhat more limited than that of the EU.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe are also recognized actors, yet today their influence in the region is smaller and less clearly defined. The track record of these institutions is mixed. The OSCE once played a leading role through its Minsk Group, tasked with mediating the [former] conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Yet the group ultimately failed to produce a settlement, as demonstrated by the renewed war of 2020 and 2023.[19] Many observers had long argued that the Minsk Group lacked both the political backing of major powers and the institutional strength to be effective, leaving its peace efforts largely symbolic.

The UN, meanwhile, has contributed through humanitarian aid and development assistance, but it has never been a decisive player in mediation.[20] Perceptions of bias – where some actors are criticized

18 European External Action Service (EEAS), About the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA), Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/euma/about-european-union-mission-armenia_en (Accessed: October 3, 2025)

19 Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), "OSCE Dissolves the Minsk Group", 2023, Available at: https://pism.pl/publications/osce-dissolves-the-minsk-group (Accessed: October 3, 2025)

20 ReliefWeb, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Regional Overview: Europe, Caucasus, and Central Asia – October 2024, Available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/regional-overview-europe-caucasus-central-asia-october-2024 (Accessed: October 3, 2025)

more harshly than others – have further eroded trust in multilateral institutions. This reflects a broader challenge: efforts to remain neutral often make organizations cautious and slow-moving, while perceived double standards undermine legitimacy.

These dynamics illustrate the limits of traditional multilateralism in the South Caucasus. Western-designed frameworks do not always fit the local realities of the South Caucasus, where history, entrenched disputes, and different political logics shape outcomes. As a result, external involvement is sometimes viewed less as cooperation and more as external pressure.[21] Some experts argue for a more flexible, context-specific approach that adapts international support to regional needs rather than imposing universal models.[22]

Recent years, however, have seen new developments. Following the war in 2020, the EU became more engaged in the South Caucasus, launching fresh initiatives to facilitate dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan and deploying a small civilian monitoring mission along the Armenian border to build confidence (although it became rather counter-productive because of its extension, neglecting the discontent of Azerbaijan). Georgia also has strong links with the EU and NATO. These links pushed reforms. They also supported Georgia's democratic agenda, although the pace of progress has recently become uneven, and debates over Western alignment have slowed down. Even though the EU has expanded its assistance and engagement with Armenia in recent months, and Armenia has demonstrated a more pro-European tendency in its foreign policy, this country remains in Russia's economic orbit with its membership of the EAEU. Azerbaijan often questioned the EU's fairness because of its recent inclination towards supporting Armenia financially (mainly in the post-conflict period, when Azerbaijan needed more support for the recovery of its conflict-affected territories) and some European officials' bias in the context of the former conflict with Armenia. However, the change of the cabinet of the commissioners of the EU in late 2024 brought a new atmosphere to cooperation between the EU and Azerbaijan, with recent intensification of bilateral interactions, mainly in areas such as energy, trade, and connectivity.

Meanwhile, regional cooperation remained weak among the three South Caucasian states. In the past, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia often

21 Vasa, L., "The Geopolitical and Geo-Economic Significance of Central Asia in the 21st Century", *European Mirror*, 2020, 25(1), 67–80.

22 Bárkányi, P., & Vasa, L., "Revitalisation of Regional Cooperation in Central Asia", *Economic and Regional Studies*, 2023, 16(3), 304–316.

avoided direct trilateral talks. There is no regional body uniting these three countries. They were tending to make more deals with regional or outside powers than with each other. However, in 2024, the three countries held a trilateral meeting in Tbilisi (Georgia) at the deputy foreign minister level – a small but symbolic attempt to resume regional dialogue without external mediation.

Nevertheless, there are modest signs of progress. Georgia has served as a venue for dialogue in the past, and in recent years, Armenia and Azerbaijan have engaged in direct discussions, even without strong external mediation. While these are small steps, they suggest a shift toward more regionally driven diplomacy. In the past, the EU and Russia tried to mediate these talks; however, each failed due to several factors associated with the expectations of the negotiating parties. For diplomacy to succeed, South Caucasus states will need to take greater ownership of the dialogue, develop their own formats for engagement, and build confidence incrementally. International partners can and should support these efforts, but durable progress will depend, above all, on initiatives that originate within the region itself.

Regional Cooperation and Future Possibilities

Regional cooperation refers to the ability of neighbouring states to work together by establishing common rules, addressing shared challenges, and pursuing joint goals in areas such as trade, transport, education, and culture. In the South Caucasus, stronger cooperation contributes significantly to stability, economic growth, and social development. Yet political tensions and a persistent lack of trust continue to limit progress, leaving regional cooperation weak and underdeveloped. For more than three decades, unresolved territorial questions have shaped the political landscape of the region, influencing how the three states see their security and limiting the trust needed for deeper cooperation.

As a result, trust among the three South Caucasus states remained low, making regional cooperation difficult to achieve. Instead of working closely with one another, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia often looked outward for major partnerships with, for example, the EU, the U.S., NATO, Russia, or China. While these external connections provided opportunities, they also introduced new layers of competition and rivalry, further complicating prospects for genuine regional cooperation.

As a result, the three South Caucasus states often turn to external powers for support. While this kind of engagement can provide important resources and security guarantees, it also carries risks. When one country grows closer to a major power, the others may feel marginalized or threatened. Rather than fostering stability, such dynamics can increase rivalry and create new challenges, complicating efforts to achieve lasting peace in the region.

Armenia has traditionally relied on Russia for its security, though in recent years it has shown growing frustration with Moscow and a willingness to explore Western partnerships. Azerbaijan maintains close ties with Türkiye and continues to build up its defence capacity, while Georgia aspires to integrate with the EU and NATO, though progress there has been uneven. China has also expanded its economic presence in the region through the Belt and Road Initiative, which, while focused on infrastructure, carries long-term strategic implications.

Yet beneath rivalries over the region, the three states share many of the same fundamental needs: reliable transport infrastructure, secure energy networks, and greater employment opportunities for their populations. These common priorities could serve as a foundation for cooperation if approached in a spirit of mutual benefit rather than competition.

Shared needs can create strong incentives for cooperation. The Middle Corridor offers a clear example: stretching across the South Caucasus, it connects Central Asia with European markets and holds significant potential for trade and transit. Yet this project can succeed only if all countries in the region participate. No single state can develop or sustain such a corridor on its own – regional cooperation is the only path forward.

International organizations can play a supportive role by providing funding, expertise, and platforms for dialogue. This assistance is valuable, but it cannot substitute for the political will of the countries themselves. Lasting cooperation must ultimately come from within the region, grounded in shared interests rather than external intervention.

The countries of the South Caucasus should increase direct dialogue and develop their own regional platforms. This effort may not be limited to governments – experts, civil society, and young people also need to be included. One practical step could be the creation of a regional forum.[23]

23 LINKS Europe, *Action Plan for the South Caucasus 2025: Pathways to Dialogue and Cooperation*, 2025, Available at: https://links-europe.eu/action-plan-2025 (Accessed: October 3, 2025)

At first, it could focus on easier areas of cooperation, such as tourism, culture, or disaster relief. Later, if trust grows, it could address more sensitive issues, such as security or cross-border management – areas that already have bilateral mechanisms but could benefit from a regional framework.

Security remains one of the most difficult issues in the South Caucasus. Each country follows its own path to ensure its security. Armenia, once closely tied to Russia and the CSTO, is now trying to make a move more toward the West. This shift began gradually after 2020 but became more visible in 2024, when Armenia froze its participation in the CSTO and sought deeper relations with the U.S. and the EU. Azerbaijan maintains strong links with Türkiye and invests heavily in its hard power due to its existing threat perception. Georgia has long sought integration with NATO and the EU, but today that path appears slower. Because of these different approaches, building a common regional security system is currently less likely.

Therefore, all three South Caucasian states are diversifying their foreign policies to avoid dependence on a single partner. Georgia looks more to the West but keeps some other ties. Armenia is now moving away from Russia but needs new partners. Azerbaijan works closely with Türkiye, and at the same time, maintains energy deals with Europe.[24] These directions reflect not a lack of will to cooperate regionally, but rather the different security perceptions, economic structures, and foreign policy orientations that evolved from each state's unique historical trajectory. There are, however, also small steps toward direct cooperation.

Today, Armenia and Azerbaijan are no longer engaged in open warfare, following the large-scale hostilities of 2020 and the renewed clashes in 2023. With the signing in Washington, DC, of the August 8 Trilateral Statement between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the U.S., the situation in the region has become more stable, yet the borders remain unsettled, and many key issues are still unresolved.[25] So, the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia is no longer on the agenda, as Azerbaijan has restored sovereignty over its formerly occupied territories. However, some unresolved problems remain in the South Caucasus. While the war ended long ago, political tensions and humanitarian challenges continue to affect relations.

24 *Ibid.*

25 Fraser, C., "Peace Prospects in the South Caucasus", *Royal United Services Institute* (RUSI), 2024, Available at: https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/peace-prospects-south-caucasus (Accessed: October 3, 2025)

So, the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia is no longer on the agenda, as Azerbaijan has restored sovereignty over its formerly occupied territories.

Georgia, however, still faces unresolved challenges to its territorial integrity. The regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Tskhinvali) broke away in the early 1990s and remain outside Georgia's control, sustained by political, economic, and military support from Russia. This situation undermines Georgia's sovereignty, weakens its security, and prevents the country from being fully united.

Such unresolved cases have kept the region fragile and unstable. However, in the absence of conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, today the three neighbours (including Georgia) could agree on some regional norms and address intraregional practical challenges relating to trade, transport, mobility, etc.

Conclusion

The South Caucasus is a region with a long history and many different cultures. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia are all trying to build stronger economies and better societies, and they want a peaceful environment. However, mistrust between the countries has inhibited this enthusiasm.[26]

This article has examined how different kinds of connectivity – economic, digital, cultural, and diplomatic – can help the region move forward, and what limits their impact. The analysis shows that, while progress exists in some areas, such as infrastructure and digital development, other forms of cooperation remain fragile. Political divisions, unresolved issues, and uneven foreign alignments continue to hold back broader regional integration.

International organizations can also play a role by supporting peace and development. For example, the EU, the UN, and the OSCE have provided platforms for talks and technical help in rebuilding infrastructure. However, their influence is often limited because of local mistrust and the perception that external actors are not fully impartial.

There are still many difficulties. Some international organizations are not seen to be as strong or as fair as people expected. Regional cooperation also remains weak due to political factors. There is still no regional framework for the South Caucasus where Armenia,

26 Vasa, L., "The Geopolitical and Geo-Economic Significance of Central Asia..", *op.cit.*

Azerbaijan, and Georgia can work as equals. Cooperation often takes place through larger powers – Russia, Türkiye, or the EU – which also generates some rivalry. Nevertheless, recent developments, such as the 2024 trilateral meeting at the deputy ministerial level in Tbilisi and direct talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan, suggest that small steps toward regional dialogue are possible.

Countries often feel more comfortable working with outside powers rather than with their neighbours. To move forward, the South Caucasus nations need fair support. Economy, borders, culture – all can be shared goals and can be achieved with the additional support of outside partners.

Peace is possible, but it takes time and persistence. True stability can also be built with small and consistent steps toward cooperation.[27] The countries must keep dialogue open, institutions need to cooperate, and people must continue to build trust through direct contact. Step by step, the region can become safer, more stable, and more open.

For policymakers, the most effective steps may be modest ones – rebuilding cross-border transportation lines, expanding student exchanges, or coordinating regional disaster response. These small, practical projects cost little in political terms but can build habits of trust. Ultimately, one lesson stands out: connections alone do not create peace, but they can make it easier for peace to take root. In the South Caucasus, stability must come first before deeper cooperation can grow — yet, over time, connectivity may become not just a reflection of peace but one of its main drivers.[28]

27 Bárkányi, P., & Vasa, L., *op.cit.*

28 Vasa, L., "The Geopolitical and Geo-Economic Significance of Central Asia..", *op.cit.*

Diaspora Policies within the Organization of Turkic States: Opportunities for Strategic Engagement

Aidar Kurmashev*, Amina Urpekova**, Amirbek Alibi*** and Houman Sadri****

This study evaluates the diaspora engagement policies of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Türkiye, and Uzbekistan using F. Ragazzi's multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) to compare legislative frameworks, institutions, and the intensity of engagement. The analysis identifies distinct policy profiles aligned with five ideal types (expatriate state, closed state, global-nation state, managed labour state, indifferent state) and maps each Organization of Turkic States (OTS) member to the nearest cluster. Türkiye and Azerbaijan exhibit global-nation features, with strong cultural and lobbying toolkits; Uzbekistan aligns with managed labour, prioritising economic integration and skills transfer; Kyrgyzstan approximates the indifferent type, given weak extra-territorial infrastructure; and Kazakhstan blends features of global-nation, expatriate, and indifferent profiles, reflecting institutional gaps alongside active symbolic politics. We highlight practical "windows of opportunity" for OTS-level coordination: a shared "Turkic diaspora" label, joint cultural and education programmes, and an annual OTS Diaspora Policy Summit evolving into a World Turkic Congress. These measures would enhance soft-power reach, reduce duplication, and convert dispersed initiatives into a coherent, outcome-oriented agenda.

Keywords: OTS, Turkic Diaspora, diaspora engagement policy, diaspora institutions, diaspora typology.

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Introduction

Engaging the diaspora has become a significant component of the foreign and domestic policy instruments of many nations. Reflecting this trend, nations worldwide are instituting frameworks for diaspora engagement policies. This development reflects not only the growing demographic weight of migrant communities but also the recognition of their role as political, cultural, and economic actors across borders. Diaspora groups today influence bilateral relations, shape public diplomacy, and contribute to knowledge and financial flows between home and host countries. Consequently, the design and effectiveness of diaspora policies have become an important subject of comparative research and international cooperation. As noted by A. Gamlen,[1] by 2014, nearly 60 percent of UN member states had established diaspora institutions.

This trend has attracted scholarly interest, predominantly focused on individual country cases. Interestingly, within the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), Türkiye's diaspora policy has been the primary focus of comprehensive research, while other members, including Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, tend to be neglected.[2]

This study aims to fill in this gap by explaining the dynamics surrounding the implementation, primary objectives, and strategies of diaspora engagement policies within five member states of the OTS. Furthermore, this study endeavours to categorize the OTS countries by employing F. Ragazzi's classification of state diaspora engagement policies and his methodological framework.[3] This enables the definition of possible points of cooperation in the field as well as offering new opportunities from uniting diaspora resources.

The article is structured as follows. It begins with an examination of the methodologies used for analysis. Case studies on Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Türkiye, and Uzbekistan provide comparisons of legislative frameworks, institutional mechanisms, and policy instruments, culminating in a synthesis of findings and strategic implications.

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1 Gamlen, A. Cummings, M.E. and Vaaler, P.M. "Explaining the Rise of Diaspora Institutions", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 4, 2019, pp. 492-516.

2 Gamlen, A. "Diaspora Institutions and Diaspora Governance", *International Migration Review*, Vol. 48, No. 1, 2014, pp. 180-217.

3 Ragazzi, F. "A Comparative Analysis of Diaspora Policies", *Political Geography*, 41, 2014, pp. 74–89.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this study draws from F. Ragazzi's framework,[4] which involves utilizing Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) to examine categorical variables within a dataset pertaining to diaspora policies; in simple terms, MCA helps to reveal similarities and differences across countries by grouping them according to shared policy features. To do so, we collected information on the diaspora policies of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye from both primary and secondary sources to code and distribute within 18 active variables categorized into five headings.

Table 1. Active variables (with possible modalities)

Symbolic policies	Religious and cultural policies
Inclusion of the diaspora in the national calendar of celebrations (Yes/No)	Religious institutions or personnel abroad (Yes/No)
Diaspora conferences (Yes/No)	Cultural centres abroad (No/Co-financed/Fully financed)
Highest administrative unit (Directorate/Agency/Ministry)	Schools abroad (No/Language and cultural programmes abroad/ Affiliated schools/Controlled schools)

Social and economic policies	Citizenship policies
Scientific networks (No/Not orientated toward return/Orientated toward return)	Access to citizenship through ethnic or religious belonging (No/With residency provisions/Without residency provisions)
Investment schemes for populations abroad (No/Only for returnees/For returnees and for the diaspora)	Loss of citizenship through residence abroad (Yes/No)
Welfare provisions for the diaspora (Yes/No)	Loss of citizenship if other citizenship is adopted – acceptance of dual citizenship (Yes/No)
Welfare provisions for returnees (Yes/No)	External vote (No/Vote from abroad/ Vote from abroad and representation)

4 Ibid.

State and bureaucratic control
Origin identification document for non-citizen (Yes/No)
Lobbying officially encouraged by the state (Yes/No)
Policing of populations abroad is suspected (Yes/No)
Mobility restrictions for citizens who want to go abroad (Yes/No)

Based on the analysis, the present authors were able to classify the OTS countries into five types of states depending on the nature of their diaspora policies. However, the sample of countries was not determined by indirect statistical data *(passive variables)*. F. Ragazzi used this methodology due to the large number of countries, dividing them into subgroups based on statistical indicators. Consequently, the interpretation of the results in multiple correspondence analysis did not consider passive variables.

It should be noted that the analysis was carried out based on the official sources of each country. Thus, data from international organizations and other studies were not included in this article.

Defining Clusters of States

According to F. Ragazzi's typology, five types of countries are distinguished depending on the nature of their diaspora policies: expatriate state, closed state, global-nation state, managed labour state, and indifferent state.

The first cluster – *expatriate states* – includes those which place special emphasis on issues related to culture, education, and political activity in their diaspora policies. Such states demonstrate this by providing opportunities for political participation, specifically by enabling overseas voting for the diaspora. The research findings show that none of the diaspora policies of the five selected countries belong to the first cluster. It is noteworthy that countries such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Türkiye, and Uzbekistan focus on operating cultural centres abroad, ensuring their full funding and offering courses teaching the native language and cultural reproduction.

The second cluster – *closed states* – includes those states that maintain a strict policy regarding diasporas. In these countries, internal policy is aimed at regulating or restricting the mobility of their populations, while external policy is directed at reducing the level of political influence of compatriots abroad. Multiple correspondence analysis of the selected countries suggests that they do not belong to the second cluster.

Global-nation states in the third cluster interact with their diasporas in various ways: holding diaspora conferences, establishing cultural programmes and supporting lobbying efforts. The primary goal of these states is to extract economic and political resources, either by attracting the most talented representatives of the diaspora to return to their homeland or by utilizing their expertise and knowledge. According to the data, Azerbaijan and Türkiye fall into the third cluster category.[5]

In the fourth cluster – *managed labour state* – countries provide economic support to their populations abroad. These countries have specific investment programmes for repatriates and diasporas. This category also includes those states that have large numbers of emigrants. The findings indicate that Uzbekistan belongs to this cluster, as the country has a large number of emigrants (including Uzbek citizens) who are supported both institutionally and socio-economically, as well as having investment and knowledge transfer projects.[6]

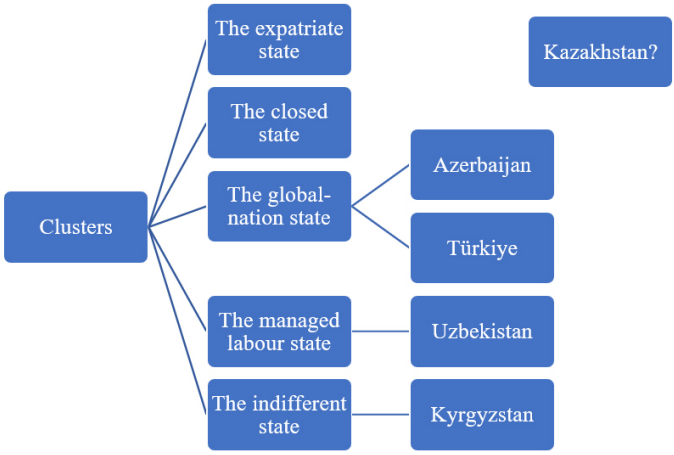
The fifth cluster – *indifferent states* – comprises states characterized by a generalized lack of interest in their populations abroad. The research results show that Kyrgyzstan falls into this category of countries.[7]

5 President.az, *Azerbaijani President, German Federal Chancellor held joint press conference*, Press Conferences, August 25, 2018, Available at: https://en.president.az/articles/29744 (Accessed: 24 September 2018)

6 Otanazarova, Y. "Statistics and Government Policies on Uzbek Diaspora in Foreign Countries", *Texas Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 5, 2022, pp. 37–39; Irina, N. "Why Is Tashkent Reluctant to Reconnect with Ethnic Uzbeks Abroad?", *The Diplomat*, February 9, 2024, Available at: https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/why-is-tashkent-reluctant-to-reconnect-with-ethnic-uzbeks-abroad (Accessed: 30 September 2025).

7 International Organization for Migration, "Mapping Kyrgyz Diasporas, Compatriots and Migrants Abroad", 2021, Available at: https://kyrgyzstan.iom.int/resources/report-mapping-kyrgyz-diaspora-compatriots-and-migrants-abroad-0 (Accessed: 30 September 2025).

Figure 2. Dendrogram of Clusters



It is crucial to highlight that Kazakhstan stands apart from the mentioned state types, as it embodies distinct features of three: the global-nation state, the expatriate state, and the indifferent state.[8]

On the one hand, in terms of symbolic politics, the country engages in sustainable and mutually beneficial interactions with the diaspora, periodically conducting the World Kurultai of Kazakhs and organizing various events (such as small *kurultai* and business forums). The cultural policy is aimed at preserving linguistic and cultural identity.

On the other hand, Kazakhstan currently has no governmental body (ministry, committee, or department) responsible for working with the Kazakh diaspora but has a state-affiliated non-profit joint stock company, Otandastar Foundation, under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Highlights of Diaspora Policies

Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan's extensive diaspora, officially estimated to number around 50 million, is primarily managed through the State Committee of the

8 Official Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "Meeting of Kazakhstan's State Secretary with Kazakh diaspora youth in Türkiye", February 16, 2018, Available at: https://www.akorda.kz/en/secretary_of_state/secretary_of_state_news/meeting-of-kazakhstans-state-secretary-with-kazakh-diaspora-youth-in-turkey-1? (Accessed: 30 September 2025).

Republic of Azerbaijan for Work with Diaspora and the Support Fund for the Azerbaijani Diaspora (SFAD).[9] These institutions are pivotal in executing the government's diaspora policy, which includes cultural promotion, educational support, and promotion of Azerbaijan's soft power.

The State Committee actively organizes cultural events globally, in conjunction with the Heydar Aliyev Azerbaijani Cultural Center, to strengthen cultural ties and promote Azerbaijani heritage.[10] Moreover, the Azerbaijani government supports educational initiatives abroad, notably operating over 60 Sunday schools worldwide that offer education in the Azerbaijani language and history. Within the framework of the State Program for Educating Youth in Prestigious Higher Education Institutions of Foreign Countries (2022–2026), the Ministry of Education annually allocates 400 scholarships for bachelor's and master's degree programmes to further support the academic advancement of Azerbaijani youth abroad.[11] [12]

Legislatively, Azerbaijani law does not permit dual citizenship.[13] However, it acknowledges the Azerbaijani diaspora as an official overseas lobbying entity.[14] This recognition is evident in the governmental strategies[15] that involve diaspora communities in

9 Azerbaijan.az, *Number of Azerbaijanis Living Outside of Azerbaijan*, May 5, 2024, Available at: https://azerbaijan.az/en/related-information/207 (Accessed: 30 September 2025).

10 Azerbaijani Diaspora Support Fund, "Republic immigrants", May 28, 2020, Available at: https://diaspora.foundation/project/8-cumhuriyyet-muhacirleri (Accessed: September 30, 2025)

11 Azertag, *As part of the state program, the acceptance of documents for the 2024-2025 academic year has begun*, March 1, 2024, Available at: https://azertag.az/ru/xeber/v_ramkah_gosudarstvennoi_programmy_nachalsya_priem_dokumentov_na_2024_2025_uchebnyi_god-2937987 (Accessed: September 30, 2025)

12 State Committee on Work with Diaspora of the Republic of Azerbaijan, "History and purpose of establishment of the committee", May 3, 2024, Available at: https://diaspor.gov.az/ru/page/istoriya-i-cel-sozdaniya-14 (Accessed: September 30, 2025)

13 Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan in the Republic of Moldova, "Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on citizenship. Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan in the Republic of Moldova", May 16, 2024, Available at: https://chisinau.mfa.gov.az/ru/content/132/zakon-azerbaydzhanskoy-respubliki-quoto-grazhdanstve-azerbaydzhanskoy-respublikiquot (Accessed: September 30, 2025)

14 President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, "Ilham Aliyev attended the Third Congress of World Azerbaijanis", July 5, 2011, Available at: https://president.az/ru/articles/view/2709 (Accessed: September 30, 2025)

15 State Committee on Work with Diaspora of the Republic of Azerbaijan, "Regulations on the State Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan for Work with Diaspora", May 19, 2024, Available at: https://diaspor.gov.az/ru/page/regulation-15 (Accessed: September 30, 2025)

promoting Azerbaijan's geopolitical and economic interests on the global stage.[16]

Further substantiating this role, Azerbaijan has implemented specific initiatives aimed at cultivating young Azerbaijani leaders abroad through educational and professional development programmes. These programmes are designed not only to help individuals succeed but also to create a network of professionals aligned with Azerbaijan's national interests. Moreover, the Azerbaijani government frequently sponsors cultural festivals and business forums in foreign countries, which serve as platforms for networking among Azerbaijani expatriates and promote Azerbaijan's cultural heritage and investment opportunities.[17]

These coordinated efforts by various Azerbaijani institutions exemplify a multifaceted approach to diaspora engagement that integrates cultural promotion, educational support, legislative measures, and strategic diplomacy to enhance the nation's global standing and maintain robust ties with its extensive diaspora.[18] [19]

Kazakhstan

Although Kazakhstan's diaspora exceeds 5 million people globally,[20] specific legislation governing diaspora relations is lacking, as the law "On state support of the Kazakh diaspora" drafted in 2018–2019 was not submitted for consideration and adoption. the country's diaspora engagement policy has been mostly focused on repatriation programmes

16 Azerbaijan State News Agency, *Speech of President Ilham Aliyev at the 2nd Congress of World Azerbaijanis*, March 10, 2006, Available at: https://azertag.az/en/xeber/speech_of_president_ilham_aliyev_at_the_2nd_congress_of_world_azerbaijanis-560116 (Accessed: 30 September 2025).

17 Azerbaijan State News Agency, *Budapest hosts Azerbaijan-Hungary Business Forum*, June 30, 2023, Available at: https://azertag.az/en/xeber/budapest_hosts_azerbaijan_hungary_business_forum-3730787 (Accessed: 30 September 2025).

18 President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, "Ilham Aliyev Attended the Third Congress of World Azerbaijanis," July 5, 2011, Available at: https://president.az/en/articles/view/2709 (Accessed: September 30, 2025).

19 State Committee on Work with Diaspora of the Republic of Azerbaijan, "Regulations on the State Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan for Work with Diaspora", May 19, 2024. Available at: https://diaspor.gov.az/en/page/regulation-15 (Accessed: September 30, 2025).

20 Official Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "Meeting of Kazakhstan's State Secretary with Kazakh diaspora youth in Türkiye", May 7, 2024, Available at: https://www.akorda.kz/ru/secretary_of_state/secretary_of_state_news/vstrecha-gosudarstvennogo-sekretarya-gabdykalikovoi-s-molodezhyu-kazahskoi-diaspory-prozhivayushchei-v-turcii-1 (Accessed: September 30, 2025)

and cultural preservation, resulting in the establishment of Kazakh cultural centres overseas by the late 1990s to 2005. However, after the state programme for support of compatriots living abroad ended, diaspora engagement waned until a revival in 2016–2017.

Currently, the primary responsibility for engaging with the Kazakh diaspora and maintaining ties lies with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which oversees the Otandastar Foundation, the primary operator of state diaspora engagement policies. However, there is no specific department within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs dedicated to diaspora issues.

In practice, state support measures and mechanisms for engaging with the diaspora are implemented through public associations, such as the World Kazakh Association, which aims to unite the Kazakh diaspora worldwide through membership and fostering connections with ethnic Kazakhs.

Meanwhile, the Otandastar Foundation has been actively collaborating with government departments and implementing diaspora projects and programmes. Its responsibilities include international cooperation with Kazakh diaspora associations, projects to maintain and promote Kazakh culture and language, and organizing events such as the World Kurultai of Kazakhs and business meetings. Additionally, the Foundation assists ethnic returnees with adaptation and integration.[21] Primary methods of engaging with the Kazakh diaspora include organizing small gatherings known as *kurultai* (meetings), hosting business forums, and managing cultural centres such as the Kazakh House and Abai House.[22]

A novel initiative is the introduction of diaspora member cards known as *Ata zhol*, which provide Kazakh diaspora members with a 10-year visa for Kazakhstan, access to the country's social and healthcare systems, assistance in business projects, and opportunities for investment in Kazakhstan's economy.[23]

Kazakhstan's engagement with its diaspora has been characterized by fluctuating levels of attention and activity over the past three decades.

21 Otandastar Qory, *Goals and objectives of Otandastar Qory*, March 20, 2024, Available at: https://oq.gov.kz/statutory-tasks (Accessed: September 30, 2025)

22 Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of Population of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "The Ata Zholy Card Will Become Available from July 2023", June 6, 2023, Available at: https://www.gov.kz/uploads/2023/8/17/c5c33397402ac7b15d2a0acd449e49b9_original.5129437.pdf (Accessed: September 30, 2025).

23 Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of Population of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "The Ata Zholy card will become available from July 2023", June 6, 2023, Available at: https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/enbek/press/news/details/568500?lang=ru Uzbekistan News. (Accessed: September 30, 2025)

Initially driven by the need to bolster statehood through repatriation, the government's approach has evolved to recognize the diaspora's potential across various domains. However, a lack of specific legislation governing homeland–diaspora relations and the absence of a systematic approach to policy implementation have remained persistent challenges.

Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan's diaspora estimates suggest that there are over 764,000 ethnic Kyrgyz living abroad, as well as 740,500 Kyrgyz migrants.[24] The Council on Relations with Compatriots Abroad, operating under the auspices of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, serves as the principal advisory and consultative body addressing diaspora issues.[25]

The Council serves as a permanent consultative and advisory body. Its primary role is to facilitate the preparation of coordinated decisions regarding the development and execution of strategies that strengthen the ties of the Kyrgyz diaspora with the homeland. Additionally, the Council plays a role in ensuring the maintenance and preservation of the Kyrgyz people's language and spiritual and cultural heritage.[26]

Although Kyrgyzstan has established an institution for diaspora policy within its borders, it lacks a network of organizations outside its territory to effectively implement its policies. Interaction with the diaspora beyond the country depends partly on the activity of diaspora communities and organizations.[27]

Kyrgyzstan's diaspora engagement strategy emphasizes educational initiatives to preserve cultural heritage. The Kyrgyz diaspora, supported by entities like the European–Kyrgyz Union, has launched language

24 Joshua Project, "Kyrgyz in China", May 18, 2024, Available at: https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/12933/CH (Accessed: September 30, 2025)

25 Federal State Statistics Service of the Russian Federation, "National composition of the population of the Russian Federation. Federal State Statistics Service, May 15, 2024, Available at: https://rosstat.gov.ru/storage/mediabank/Tom5_tab1_VPN-2020.xlsx (Accessed: September 30, 2025)

26 Ministry of Justice of the Kyrgyz Republic, "Regulations on the Council for Relations with Compatriots Abroad under the President of the Kyrgyz Republic", May 17, 2024, Available at: https://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/46-3656/edition/1241/ru (Accessed: September 30, 2025)

27 International Organization for Migration, "Mapping Kyrgyz diasporas, compatriots and migrants abroad. International Organization for Migration", 2011, Available at: https://kyrgyzstan.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1321/files/documents/Report_Kyrgyz_diaspora_compatriots_migrants_abroad_2021_RUS.pdf (Accessed: September 30, 2025)

schools worldwide, including a significant initiative in 2015 to open language courses abroad.[28]

The country also implements a repatriation policy to facilitate the return of ethnic Kyrgyz (referred to as *kayrylman*) to their historical homeland. The state also supports their professional development through training and retraining programmes aimed at enhancing employability and integration into the labour market.

Türkiye

Among OTS countries, Türkiye has the most advanced policy directed at its compatriots abroad. Türkiye's diaspora, estimated at seven million individuals primarily residing in continental Europe, is governed by robust legislative and institutional frameworks. The main legislative instruments include a Presidential Decree, the 'Law on the Organization and Duties of the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities', and the 'Organization of Ministries, Relevant Related Institutions and Organizations, and Other Institutions and Organizations'.[29]

The key institution facilitating continuous dialogue with the diaspora is the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), which implements its policies along three principal directions.

The first is the preservation of diaspora identity and culture, particularly the native language, and more broadly, strengthening ties to the homeland and supporting their economic, social, cultural, and legal positions. The second direction involves research into kinship and related communities – referred to as *kardeş* – with whom Türkiye shares common historical and cultural ties. The third direction focuses on international student mobility. Such initiatives not only facilitate the exchange of knowledge but also foster a deeper cultural and academic connection between Türkiye and the global Turkish diaspora.

Türkiye, in its diaspora policy, has established external institutes dedicated to providing Turkish education and popularizing the Turkish language and cultural heritage. Türkiye supports cultural centres

28 Radio Azattyk, *Kyrgyz children learn their native language in Austria*, December 16, 2015, Available at: https://rus.azattyk.org/a/27431083.html (Accessed: September 30, 2025)

29 Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities, "Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities", May 2, 2024, Available at: https://ytb.gov.tr/kurumsal/baskanlik (Accessed: September 30, 2025)

named after Yunus Emre,[30] located in over 60 countries. These centres offer Turkish language education and organize cultural and artistic events. The funding of these centres is fully provided by the Turkish government and is supported by the foreign policy department. Centres also contribute to the development of Turkology departments and the teaching of the Turkish language abroad.

In addition to its cultural and educational initiatives, Türkiye supports a network of affiliated schools abroad, operated through the Turkish Maarif Foundation.[31] Furthermore, there is a postgraduate scholarship programme for studies abroad, implemented by the Ministry of National Education of Türkiye through the YLSY programme, aimed at educating Turkish citizens, including those with dual citizenship.[32]

Representatives of the Turkish diaspora are also eligible to participate in elections on an equal basis with Turkish citizens.[33] In August 2014, Turkish expatriates participated in a Turkish national election for the first time, during the presidential elections. According to the legislation, the right to vote is granted to every emigrant over the age of 18 who is registered on the electoral roll at a population registration institution or a Turkish diplomatic mission abroad. The largest number of registered voters was observed in Germany, with 1.4 million people, followed by countries such as France, the Netherlands, and Belgium.[34]

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan recognizes a significant population of ethnic Uzbeks, estimated at between 6 and 8 million globally, with 3 million in Central Asia, 2–4 million in Afghanistan, 1 million in Russia,[35] and

30 Yunus Emre Institute, "President's message", May 4, 2024, Available at: https://www.yee.org.tr/en/corporate/presidents-message (Accessed: September 30, 2025)

31 Turkish Maarif Foundation, "About us", May 4, 2024, Available at: https://www.afganturkmaarif.org/Home/en (Accessed: September 30, 2025)

32 Ministry of National Education of Turkey, "YLSY Selection and placement of candidates to be sent abroad for postgraduate education" (translation from Turkish), May 7, 2024, Available at: https://yyegm.meb.gov.tr/www/sss.php (Accessed: September 30, 2025)

33 Resmî Gazete, *Turkish citizenship law*, June 12, 2009, Available at: https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2009/06/20090612-1.htm (Accessed: September 30, 2025)

34 TRT Russian. *How will the Turkish diaspora vote in the upcoming elections?*, April 10, 2023, Available at: https://www.trtrussian.com/novosti-turciya/kak-tureckaya-diaspora-budet-golosovat-na-predstoyashih-vyborah-12679899 (Accessed: September 30, 2025)

35 TASS. *There are about 1 million migrants from Uzbekistan in Russia*, February 20, 2024, Available at: https://tass.ru/obschestvo/20032639 (Accessed: September 30, 2025)

approximately 68,000 in the United States,[36] along with almost 2.4 million Uzbek citizens living abroad. The governance of diaspora relations in Uzbekistan is underpinned by two principal documents: the 'Concept on cooperation with compatriots working and living abroad' and the 'Programme on further developing cooperation with compatriots living abroad'. These frameworks delineate the state's policy directives and affirm the government's dedication to nurturing and sustaining connections with its diaspora.[37] [38]

The organizational architecture for engaging with the Uzbek diaspora is structured around several key governmental bodies. The President of Uzbekistan sets the overarching policies for diaspora engagement, while the Cabinet of Ministers oversees their implementation. The Committee on Interethnic and Friendly Relations with Foreign Countries provides essential support for diaspora relations, complemented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which ensures the timely execution of these policies. Additionally, the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Special Education, the Ministry of Employment and Labor Relations, and the Agency for External Labor Migration each play critical roles within their specific competencies in diaspora engagement.

State-affiliated organizations such as the Vatandoshlar Foundation and the El-Yurt Umidi Foundation are instrumental in policy execution. The Vatandoshlar Foundation focuses on safeguarding the rights and well-being of Uzbek nationals abroad, providing essential support and legal aid, and fostering entrepreneurial connections with Uzbekistan. Meanwhile, the El-Yurt Umidi Foundation is engaged in training specialists abroad, enhancing diaspora connections, and recruiting skilled professionals to return to influential positions within Uzbekistan, thus boosting the nation's international reputation.

Uzbekistan is committed to forming diverse organizations and communities that integrate Uzbeks and Uzbekistani immigrants across various sectors to attract investment and expertise to the country. Initiatives include hosting forums for compatriots and establishing associations such as the Uzbekistan's Club and the World Youth

36 UPG North America, "Uzbeks in North America", May 15, 2024, Available at: https://upgnorthamerica.com/project/uzbeks-in-north-america/ (Accessed: September 30, 2025)

37 Irina, N. "Why is Tashkent reluctant to reconnect with ethnic Uzbeks abroad?", *The Diplomat*, February 9, 2024, Available at: https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/why-is-tashkent-reluctant-to-reconnect-with-ethnic-uzbeks-abroad/ (Accessed: September 30, 2025)

38 Uzbekistan News, *Data on the ethnic composition of the population of Uzbekistan has been published*, August 20, 2021, Available at: https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/08/20/ethnic-groups/ (Accessed: September 30, 2025)

Association of Uzbekistan. Recognizing its citizens abroad as key assets in these endeavours, Uzbekistan aims to leverage its soft power to enhance international cooperation and its national image.

Since gaining independence, Uzbekistan's approach to diaspora engagement has evolved significantly, marked by policies introduced in 2018 that emphasize the strategic importance of collaborating with its diaspora. These initiatives are designed to harness diaspora resources for national development, highlighting the critical need for effective implementation and coordinated action to optimize the impact of these international communities on Uzbekistan's development trajectory.

Potential routes to joint action

For united efforts to be fully effective, Turkic nations need to make concerted efforts to activate and enhance their diaspora policies. In this vein, the study particularly highlights a 'window of opportunity' for enhanced cooperation and coordination across the OTS, which could lead to more streamlined and effective diaspora engagement strategies.

First, to further consolidate the efforts of OTS countries in promoting their interests abroad, Turkic countries could officially adopt and promote the term 'Turkic Diaspora.' This would involve fostering collective identity and visibility of their diaspora members, thereby enhancing their influence in host countries. Such efforts would not only unite the diaspora under a common banner but also elevate the profile of Turkic cultures and interests on the global stage, creating a stronger, unified voice in international affairs.

Second, given the shared cultural heritage and significant diaspora populations in similar regions (particularly in Europe and Central Asia), OTS countries could benefit from collaborative cultural events, joint educational programmes, and language promotion initiatives. These could take the form of Turkic cultural festivals, joint degree programmes among universities in the OTS countries, and summer schools focusing on Turkic languages and cultures, enhancing the cultural connection and educational opportunities for the diaspora youth.

Third, an annual OTS Diaspora Engagement Policy Summit could be established, providing a regular platform for policymakers, diaspora members, and stakeholders to exchange best practices, coordinate policy

measures, and launch joint initiatives. This summit could also serve as a mechanism for assessing policy execution and adjusting strategies as necessary to fit the evolving dynamics of the Turkic diaspora.

Over time, this summit could evolve into a World Turkic Congress, aiming to promote Turkic interests abroad. This Congress would not only bolster the collective efforts of the OTS countries but also serve as a global forum for advancing the economic, cultural, and political influence of the Turkic peoples worldwide.

By implementing these recommendations, OTS countries could not only promote their interests through a united diaspora but also enhance the sense of a shared Turkic identity and solidarity among their diaspora populations, which are increasingly influential on the global stage.

Conclusion

This study aimed to compare diaspora engagement policies across OTS member states, and the results show distinct national approaches ranging from Türkiye's advanced institutional model to Azerbaijan mobilizing its diaspora as a lobbying force, Uzbekistan's labour orientation, Kazakhstan's mixed framework, and Kyrgyzstan's limited cultural outreach.

The member states of the OTS demonstrate a broad spectrum of strategies ranging from integrative and cultural initiatives to politico-economic programmes and restrictive measures. Despite shared goals, such as preserving cultural heritage and strengthening national identity, each state employs a unique set of tools shaped by its historical, political, and socio-economic realities.

Türkiye, possessing the most advanced system of diaspora policy among OTS countries, effectively utilizes institutional and legislative mechanisms to forge strong ties with the Turkish diaspora. Institutions such as the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) actively promote cultural and educational initiatives, serving as instruments of soft power. Additionally, the ability to participate in elections makes the diaspora a significant political actor. This engagement comes with a trade-off, however. It enhances Türkiye's international influence at the cost of risking domestic political stability, particularly when diaspora interests conflict with the country's official policies.

Azerbaijan, home to one of the largest diasporas among OTS countries, stands out with its integrative model focused on cultural engagement

and support for educational initiatives. Programmes such as weekend schools and cultural festivals strengthen connections with Azerbaijanis abroad. Azerbaijan openly recognizes its diaspora as a lobbying force and actively involves it in promoting the country's interests internationally. In recent years, following the heightened relevance of the [now former] conflict with neighbouring Armenia, Azerbaijan has shifted its perception of the diaspora, emphasizing its role as the 'voice of Azerbaijan' in host countries.

Uzbekistan, by contrast, prioritizes economic integration and support for its citizens abroad, reflecting the large number of Uzbek labour migrants. A clear emphasis is placed on the transfer of financial resources, knowledge, and expertise. Through organizations such as the Vatan Foundation and the El-Yurt Umidi Foundation, the government facilitates investment and professional qualification opportunities for its compatriots, underscoring Uzbekistan's pragmatic approach. However, the political role of the diaspora remains minimal.

Kazakhstan demonstrates a complex yet equally noteworthy approach. Its policy combines elements of multiple frameworks, including those of a globally oriented national state and an emigrant state. Initiatives such as hosting the World Kurultai of Kazakhs and operating the Otandastar Foundation reflect efforts to preserve cultural identity and create platforms for engagement. However, the lack of comprehensive legislative regulation and a specialized governmental body reduces the effectiveness of these efforts, rendering the policy inconsistent.

Kyrgyzstan, despite having consultative bodies such as the Council for Relations with Compatriots, exhibits a weak institutional framework for engaging with its diaspora. Its policy is more focused on preserving cultural heritage than on systematic involvement in economic or political processes.

Despite differences in approaches, significant potential exists for coordination and joint efforts. Collaborative initiatives such as organizing cultural events, developing educational programmes, and creating a unified platform for diasporas would not only enhance their influence abroad but also contribute to the consolidation of Turkic identity. However, achieving these goals requires a cohesive strategy aimed at addressing institutional and legislative gaps, which will be key to maximizing the diaspora's contribution to national development and international cooperation.

A Geopolitical Europe in Action: Pragmatism and Partnership in EU-Central Asia Relations beyond the Samarkand Summit

Ikboljon Qoraboyev* and Nazym Umirzakova**

The European Union's engagement with Central Asia has entered a new phase shaped by pragmatism, reciprocity, and strategic calculation. In line with Ursula von der Leyen's vision of a "Geopolitical Europe", the EU has recalibrated its approach from a normative agenda toward interest-driven partnerships anchored in connectivity, critical raw materials (CRM), and energy security. The Samarkand Summit of April 2025 crystallized this transformation by institutionalizing a strategic partnership supported by substantial Global Gateway investment packages. This article examines how the EU's evolving geopolitical posture is articulated through four dynamics: the elevation of Central Asia's centrality in EU discourse, the prioritization of material interests with CRMs at the core, the discursive and policy shift from globalization to connectivity, and the rise of quid pro quo diplomacy in place of conditionality. While this pragmatic turn has enhanced predictability and mutual accommodation, it also entails significant risks. Transactional bargains can create strategic blind spots and expose the EU to unintended consequences in a region defined by multi-vector balancing. The analysis highlights both the promise and limitations of the EU's emerging geopolitical actorness in Central Asia, underscoring the need to balance strategic realism with long-term credibility. The study finds that the EU's recalibration toward a pragmatic and interest-driven partnership centred on connectivity, CRMs, and strategic reciprocity is contributing to the enhancement of its geopolitical actorness in Central Asia, while also bringing new challenges in sustaining strategic coherence and long-term engagement.

Keywords: European Union, Central Asia, Geopolitical Europe, critical raw materials, connectivity

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Introduction

The European Union (EU) is evolving into a more assertive geopolitical actor in Central Asia, in line with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's vision of a 'Geopolitical Europe'. This transformation has been driven by the return of hard politics and great-power rivalry in international relations, which has pushed the EU to recalibrate its foreign policy tools away from purely normative conditionality and toward a more interest-driven, strategic approach.

This shift became most visible during the first Central Asia-EU Summit, held in Samarkand on April 4, 2025, where official rhetoric and concrete political commitments revolved primarily around transport connectivity, critical raw materials (CRM), and energy security – rather than the EU's traditional normative agenda. Among the expert community, the summit was also interpreted as signalling the emergence of a *quid pro quo* dynamic, exemplified by Central Asia's symbolic endorsement of the EU's position on Northern Cyprus in exchange for major investment pledges.[1] Together, these developments reflect a profound reorientation of the EU policy: one that prioritizes pragmatic deals and reciprocal benefits over normative transformation. This manuscript examines how this transformation manifests in four key dynamics – Central Asia's centrality in EU strategic discourse, the prioritization of material interests with a focus on CRMs, the shift from globalization to connectivity, and the emergence of quid pro quo diplomacy.

While this shift toward a more pragmatic and interest-driven geopolitical approach has enhanced predictability in EU–Central Asia relations and recalibrated mutual expectations in a manner acceptable to both sides, it also introduces important limitations. Transactional diplomacy can create strategic blind spots and unintended consequences, especially in a region defined by multi-vector balancing and overlapping spheres of influence. Understanding this new reality requires not only mapping the material foundations of EU–Central Asia cooperation but also examining the constraints and long-term implications of the EU's emerging geopolitical posture.

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretative approach, drawing on official EU and Central Asian policy documents, summit declarations,

1 Qoraboyev, I., "Understanding Central Asia's position on Northern Cyprus", in I. Qoraboyev and Z.Bekshora (eds.), Cegreg Yearbook: Central Asia in Global and Regional Governance (Maqsut Narikbayev University), pp. 177–187.

and speeches. Through discourse analysis, it examines how narratives of Geopolitical Europe, connectivity, and partnership reframe the EU's engagement with Central Asia, highlighting the interplay of strategic, symbolic, and material dimensions. This approach allows us to situate policy shifts within broader geopolitical narratives and to uncover the implicit logic underpinning the EU's recalibration from normative conditionality toward pragmatic reciprocity. The article proceeds in four sections. The first section situates the EU–Central Asia relationship in the context of the Samarkand Summit, identifying this event as a key moment that highlights the shift from normative engagement toward a strategic partnership anchored in material and geopolitical considerations. The second section unpacks the core dynamics of this transformation across four interrelated processes. The third section places these developments within a broader comparative frame, drawing parallels between the EU's approach and China's 'March West' logic to illuminate the evolving geoeconomic rationality behind the EU's recalibration. The concluding section reflects on the implications of this pragmatic turn, emphasizing how it contributes to enhancing the EU's geopolitical actorness in Central Asia while introducing new challenges in sustaining strategic coherence and long-term engagement.

The Central Asia–EU Summit in Samarkand: From Normative Engagement to Strategic Partnership

The first-ever Central Asia–EU Summit, held in Samarkand on April 3-4, 2025, marked a turning point in relations between Central Asia and the European Union. Against the backdrop of a shifting international order, the summit brought together European Council President António Costa, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, and the heads of state of all five Central Asian republics to redefine their partnership.[2]

During the summit, the EU and Central Asian leaders elevated their relationship to a strategic partnership, marking a decisive shift away from the traditional donor–recipient model toward one grounded in mutual strategic interests. The summit produced a series of concrete deliverables anchored in the €12 billion Global Gateway investment

2 European Council, "First EU–Central Asia Summit, 4 April 2025: Main results", April 4, 2025, Available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2025/04/04/ (Accessed: October 13, 2025)

package, which is structured around four priority areas: €3 billion for transport connectivity, €2.5 billion for CRMs, €6.4 billion for water/energy/climate projects, and €100 million for digital connectivity. Key outcomes included the endorsement of an EU–Central Asia Declaration of Intent on Critical Raw Materials, the announcement of a Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor Investors' Forum and the EU–Central Asia Economic Forum in Uzbekistan, and major investments in clean energy and climate resilience. The European Investment Bank (EIB) also signed a host-country agreement with Uzbekistan and announced a partnership with stakeholders in Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, where it will commit €365 million for sustainable transport and climate projects. It was also announced that the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) was working on a €7–8 billion project pipeline through to 2027 that will include transport connectivity, CRMs, and renewable energy.[3] Collectively, these decisions signal a qualitative transformation in EU–Central relations, embedding cooperation within a framework of connectivity, resource security, and shared geopolitical interests.

Ursula Von der Leyen emphasized that the EU's approach sought to distinguish itself from that of other major powers by linking investment with local development: "Some are only interested in exploiting and extracting. Europe's offer is different. We also want to be your partners in developing your local industries."[4] This framing reflects a broader shift in EU policy from normative mentorship to pragmatic, mutually beneficial cooperation, driven by strategic calculations as much as shared values.

The Samarkand Summit highlights the arrival of a more transactional phase of EU–Central Asia relations, in which we can see a clear shift from normative engagement to a pragmatic, connectivity-driven, and resource-focused agenda. The early phase, as evidenced in the 2007 EU Strategy, was dominated by a focus on values – human rights, the rule of law, and education – underpinned by political dialogue and institution-building. By 2019, however, the EU started to recognize

3 European Commission, "*EU–Central Asia Fact Sheet",* April 2025, Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/attachment/881028/EU-Central%20Asia_Factsheet_2025-04.pdf (Accessed: September 10, 2025); Gazeta.uz, *EU to allocate €12 billion investment package for Central Asia in four areas*, April 5, 2025, Available at: https://www.gazeta.uz/en/2025/04/05/ca-eu/ (Accessed: September 10, 2025).

4 European Commission, "The European Union and Central Asia establish a Strategic Partnership during groundbreaking summit", April 4, 2025, Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ac_25_990 (Accessed: September 10, 2025).

Central Asia's growing regional cohesion and its own need to adapt to a changing geopolitical environment. This recalibration placed greater emphasis on resilience, sustainability, and functional cooperation in areas such as climate adaptation and CRMs, while still maintaining a rules-based framework. The Samarkand Declaration of 2025 builds directly on this trajectory, but it represents a qualitative shift. It elevates EU–Central Asia ties to the level of a strategic partnership rooted in connectivity, green transition, security, and economic development. This signals not only a deepening of the EU's regional footprint but also a more explicit alignment of its engagement with broader geopolitical competition, especially vis-à-vis China and Russia. It is within this context that the EU's geopolitical logic becomes most visible, as recent policies and discourse reveal how the EU has repositioned Central Asia from a peripheral concern to a central node in its strategic map. From a Central Asian perspective, the Samarkand Summit represents the recognition of a new regional dynamic whereby Central Asia is able to articulate priorities with greater cohesion and strategic clarity.[5]

The EU's evolving engagement with Central Asia reflects a decisive shift toward a more explicit geopolitical posture. No longer defined primarily by its normative agenda, the Union has been recalibrating its approach to align with the region's rising strategic importance amid intensifying global competition.

Geopolitical logic of the EU engagement with Central Asia

The EU's evolving engagement with Central Asia reflects a decisive shift toward a more explicit geopolitical posture. No longer defined primarily by its normative agenda, the Union has been recalibrating its approach to align with the region's rising strategic importance amid intensifying global competition. This transformation is manifested in four interrelated dynamics: the rise of a centrality discourse; a sharpened focus on material interests, with CRMs at the heart; a pivot from globalization to connectivity; and the emergence of pragmatic quid pro quo arrangements replacing traditional conditionality. Taken together, these developments illustrate how the EU is repositioning itself as a pragmatic and strategic actor in Central Asia, pursuing partnerships grounded in mutual interest rather than unilateral prescriptions.

5 Aripov, A., "EU–Central Asia Summit offers a new model of mutually beneficial partnership", *The Diplomat*, April 11, 2025, Available at: https://thediplomat.com/2025/04/eu-central-asia-summit-offers-a-new-model-of-mutually-beneficial-partnership/ (Accessed: September 10, 2025).

Centrality Discourse

EU leaders have embraced a centrality discourse, as historically advocated by Central Asian states. In the post-pandemic era, EU leaders have increasingly emphasized Central Asia as a region of strategic priority, adjusting their rhetoric to reflect its rising geopolitical relevance. The EU's then High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, captured this shift in a 2022 statement, describing Central Asia as being "at the centre of events, in geo-strategic and geo-economic terms" and identifying the EU as a "partner of choice" for the region. According to him, "Central Asia was in the middle of nowhere, now it is in the middle of everything." This narrative has been echoed at the highest levels of the EU leadership.[6]

At the inaugural EU–Central Asia Summit in Samarkand (April 2025), Commission President Ursula von der Leyen declared: "In an uncertain world, we send a clear and powerful message: we are partners of choice, and we can rely on each other."[7] Such statements reflect a broader recognition of Central Asia as a pivotal arena for connectivity and strategic competition. EU officials now routinely describe Central Asia as critical to Europe's interests, as a transit corridor, energy supplier, and a source of regional stability. In 2023, the European Parliament labelled the region an area of 'strategic interest' for the EU in terms of security, connectivity, energy, and resource diversification.[8] In sum, the region has moved from the periphery to become a visible part of the EU's strategic discourse, with top officials reaffirming its importance and the EU's commitment to a deeper partnership.

Focus on Material Interests, with CRMs at the Heart

A defining feature of the EU's post-2020 engagement with Central Asia is its sharp focus on tangible material interests – CRMs, energy supplies, and transport corridors – which often take precedence over traditional

6 Borrell, J., "Central Asia's growing importance globally and for the EU", *European External Action Service*, November 20, 2022, Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/central-asia%E2%80%99s-growing-importance-globally-and-eu_en (Accessed: September 10, 2025).

7 European Commission, "Joint press release on the EU–Central Asia Summit", April 3, 2025, Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_983 (Accessed: September 10, 2025).

8 European Parliament, Report on the EU Strategy on Central Asia (A9-0407/2023), Brussels: European Parliament, Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2023-0407_EN.html (Accessed: September 10, 2025).

normative agendas. European leaders now increasingly highlight the region's strategic assets, including oil, gas, uranium, rare earths, and its pivotal geography. Energy cooperation has been central to these efforts: Kazakhstan already supplies over 13% of the EU's oil imports, and the President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, has pledged to increase this flow.

The EU also supports the Green Corridor, a joint Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan–Azerbaijan project to transmit green energy across the Caspian to Europe.[9] Meanwhile, with Russian transit routes becoming untenable, the EU is prioritizing the "Middle Corridor", the Trans-Caspian transport route linking Europe to Central Asia via the South Caucasus. Although the Samarkand EU–Central Asia Summit involved only the five Central Asian states, several flagship items on its agenda – such as the Middle Corridor and the new Coordination Platform for the Trans-Caspian route – are inherently dependent on South Caucasus partners. The Joint Declaration itself links successful implementation to "peace and stability in the South Caucasus" and explicitly endorses the establishment of a Coordination Platform for the Middle Corridor.[10] In practice, this emerging synergy is already visible.[11] Azerbaijan participated as a guest of honour in the two most recent Consultative Meetings of Central Asian Heads of State (Dushanbe 2023 and Astana 2024). Recent progress in Armenia–Azerbaijan normalization further increases the strategic significance of the South Caucasus for EU–Central Asia connectivity. It is therefore reasonable to expect that future EU strategic thinking will evolve toward more explicit and institutionalized EU–Central Asia–South Caucasus cooperation on connectivity.

At the heart of this material turn, however, lies the EU's growing emphasis on CRMs. CRMs were elevated to the top of the agenda

9 Avdaliani, E., "Europe battles to win favor in Central Asia," *Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA)*, April 15, 2025, Available at: https://cepa.org/article/europe-battles-to-win-favor-in-central-asia/ (Accessed: September 10, 2025).

10 Council of the European Union, "Joint Declaration following the First European Union–Central Asia Summit", April 4, 2025, Samarkand, Uzbekistan (Brussels: Council of the European Union, 2025), Available at: https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7745-2025-REV-1/en/pdf (Accessed: October 13, 2025)

11 AzeMedia, *From '5+1' to Six-State Unity: Azerbaijan's Central Asian Unity*, September 8, 2025, Available at: https://aze.media/from-51-to-six-state-unity-azerbaijans-central-asian-unity/ (Accessed: October 13, 2025); Times of Central Asia, *Sixth Consultative Meeting of Heads of Central Asian States Takes Place in Astana*, August 19, 2024, Available at: https://timesca.com/sixth-consultative-meeting-of-heads-of-central-asian-states-takes-place-in-astana/ (Accessed: October 13, 2025).

during the Samarkand Summit, reflecting both the EU's urgent need to reduce its 98% dependence on China for these resources[12] and Central Asia's potential to emerge as a strategic supplier.[13] The region holds an estimated 40% of global reserves of manganese, along with significant deposits of lithium, graphite, cobalt, and rare earth elements – resources essential for the EU's green and digital transitions.[14] During the Samarkand Summit, the EU endorsed a Joint Declaration of Intent on CRMs with all five Central Asian states and committed €2.4 billion for CRM-related projects within its €12 billion Global Gateway package.[15]

The EU has framed this agenda as a partnership model that goes beyond mere resource extraction, seeking instead to foster local value chains through investment in mining, refining, research, and workforce training. As the EU Commission's President von der Leyen underlined in Samarkand, the added value has to be local, signalling the EU's intent to distinguish its approach from the more transactional strategies of other external powers.[16] Yet despite initial steps – including memoranda of understanding with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – Europe faces stiff competition from China and structural obstacles in attracting private investment. The ultimate test for the EU will be its ability to translate these high-level commitments into concrete, mutually beneficial projects on the ground.

Connectivity over Globalization

The narrative has pivoted from normative globalization toward connectivity, emphasizing material exchange rather than normative

12 Vigna, A., The EU's Dependence on Chinese Rare Earths: Assessing the Potential for Trade Weaponization, Master thesis, European University Institute, 2023, Available at: https://hdl.handle.net/1814/76073 (Accessed: September 10, 2025).

13 Qoraboyev, I., "Critical Raw Materials as an Emerging Pillar of Central Asia's Geoeconomic Centrality", in I. Qoraboyev and Z. Bekshora (eds.), CEGREG Yearbook: Central Asia in Global and Regional Governance (Maqsut Narikbayev University), pp. 148-156.

14 Vakulchuk, R. and Øverland, I. "How Central Asia can help the global energy transition", *Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI)*, March 28, 2022, Available at: https://www.nupi.no/en/news/how-central-asia-can-help-the-global-energy-transition (Accessed: September 10, 2025).

15 Bouckley, K., "European Union commits €2.5 billion to critical minerals projects in Central Asia", *S&P Global Commodity Insights*, April 7, 2025, Available at: https://www.spglobal.com/commodity-insights/en/news-research/latest-news/metals/040725-european-union-commits-eur25-billion-to-critical-minerals-projects-in-central-asia (Accessed: September 10, 2025).

16 European Commission, 4 April, 2025, *op.cit*.

transformation. Accompanying this shift in priorities is a noticeable change in the EU's language – it has moved away from normative rhetoric, and 'connectivity' has displaced 'globalization' as the buzzword in its Central Asia policy. European officials now frame their engagement in terms of building links and networks, rather than exporting values. In late 2022, the then High Representative, J. Borrell, explicitly noted "connectivity is going to be the keyword for the future", thus aligning with the EU's Global Gateway initiative to boost digital, energy, and transport links worldwide.[17] EU action in Central Asia is increasingly integrated into the Global Gateway in terms of both policy and discourse. It was a primary instrument through which most of the commitments of the Samarkand Summit were framed. The language surrounding these efforts is pointedly pragmatic and inclusive – EU leaders emphasize partnership, mutual interest, and sustainable connectivity rather than the older discourse of democracy promotion. This is not to say that the EU has abandoned its values, but in official communications, the emphasis has clearly shifted. As noted by Anna Matveeva, "the EU's main priorities in Central Asia are connectivity, security, and geopolitics, which broadly match the countries' own priorities", implying that normative agendas have taken a back seat.[18] As noted in a recent report published by the Clingendael Institute:

European officials now frame their engagement in terms of building links and networks, rather than exporting values.

> However, even though this topic is still a priority for the EU in theory, this no longer seems to be the case in practice. Today, the talk of the town in Brussels is all about energy and trade – not human rights and democracy. Stability in Central Asia is valued more highly than democracy, and so the European Union maintains cordial ties with the Central Asian governments in spite of their autocratic style of governance and regular human rights abuses.[19]

Hence, the value-based initiatives of the EU are framed through the lexicon of connectivity in the report – for instance, promoting "people-to-people connectivity" via education and research programmes.

17 Borrell, *op.cit*.

18 Matveeva, A., "A new opening for EU–Central Asia relations?", *Carnegie Europe*, April 13, 2023, Available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/04/a-new-opening-for-eu-central-asia-relations?lang=en (Accessed: September 10, 2025).

19 Drost, N., Cretti,G. and van Giersbergen, B.*, "Central Asia emerging from the shadows: European Union–Central Asia relations in evolving Eurasian geopolitics"*, *Clingendael Institute*, January 2025, p. 69. Available at: https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2025/central-asia-emerging-from-the-shadows/ (Accessed: September 10, 2025).

Quid Pro Quo Replacing Conditionality

The EU's pragmatic approach has led to a clear quid pro quo dynamic, replacing previous normative conditionality. This shift from classic conditionality (demanding internal reforms for aid) toward more transactional quid pro quo arrangements was illustrated during the Samarkand Summit. The summit combined, on the one hand, EU and Central Asian leaders' reaffirmation of UNSC Res. 541 and 550 on Cyprus and, on the other, the announcement of a €12 billion investment package. This sequence could be seen as suggestive of a quid pro quo logic within the EU's pragmatic recalibration. Accordingly, this situation was perceived as Central Asia's endorsement of the EU stance on Cyprus in return for the EU's pledge of €12 billion in investment, which was a significant geopolitical development.[20] This shows that the EU is now willing to exchange, via quid pro quo transactions, economic or political incentives for Central Asian cooperation on strategic matters, without pushing for domestic reforms. In general, in this pragmatic quid pro quo dynamic, both sides exchange strategic assets to meet mutual geopolitical and economic needs. Central Asia offers the EU access to CRMs and energy resources – including major uranium, rare earth, and oil deposits – as well as vital geostrategic positioning along the Trans-Caspian Middle Corridor, allowing trade routes to bypass Russia. In return, the EU delivers substantial investment and diversification support, notably through the Global Gateway initiative and project financing via the EBRD and EIB, which strengthens infrastructure without creating debt traps. The EU's high-profile engagement also lends international legitimacy and geopolitical balancing power to Central Asian regimes.

What Central Asia Offers the EU	What the EU Offers Central Asia
- **Critical resources and energy**: Uranium, rare earths, 30% of the world's chromium, 20% of lead, oil and gas (Kazakhstan: 13% of EU oil; Turkmenistan's gas reserves) – which would support the EU's diversification away from Russia.	- **Investment and economic diversification**: €10 billion and €12 billion investment packages for infrastructure, energy, climate; EBRD/EIB support; helps diversify economies, avoids unsustainable debt.

20 Qoraboyev, I., "Understanding Central Asia's position.", *op.cit*.

What Central Asia Offers the EU	What the EU Offers Central Asia
- **Strategic location**: Land bridge for Europe–Asia trade (Middle Corridor); enables routes bypassing Russia; buffer for Afghanistan; helps contain terrorism/migration.	- **Connectivity and market access**: Integration into transport corridors; EU as a major trade and technology partner; access to European markets; support for WTO accession/trade preferences.
- **Geopolitical alignment and stability**: Supports rules-based order; diplomatic backing in international fora; moderate Islamic voice; regional stability helps EU security.	- **Political legitimacy and balanced diplomacy**: Strategic partnership status boosts international legitimacy; supports sovereignty and 'multi-vector' policy; EU offers cooperation without requiring a break from other partners.
- **Climate and energy transition**: Solar and wind potential, green hydrogen, hydropower; rare metals for renewables (e.g. nickel).	- **Technical expertise and governance support**: Capacity building, modern tech, regulatory advice; sustainable management (water, energy); support for education, rule of law, and public administration reform.

Table 1: What Central Asia and the EU bring to their partnership. Prepared by the authors.

The four dynamics outlined above converge on a single conclusion: while values remain in the EU rhetoric, material and strategic priorities now drive the Union's engagement with Central Asia. This is especially evident in the EU's two largest financial commitments to the region: the €10 billion and €12 billion investment packages pledged under the Global Gateway initiative. The €12 billion 'Team Europe' package, announced at the 2025 Samarkand summit, focuses almost entirely on infrastructure, energy, and resource security, and virtually no funding is earmarked for governance reform, civil society, or human rights. Similarly, the €10 billion package pledged in early 2024 for transport infrastructure underscores the EU's focus on 'hard connectivity' and strategic access. These allocations underline that, despite continued normative language, the EU's real actions in Central Asia are dominated by geoeconomic concerns – energy security, raw materials, and logistics – rather than normative transformation. Values remain in the discourse, but investment flows where strategic returns are clearest.

That said, the EU has not entirely abandoned its traditional normative agenda – at least not in words. Long-standing EU rhetoric about human

rights, rule of law, and democratic reform continues to appear in official discourse, largely by inertia or habit, albeit with diminished intensity and few enforcement mechanisms. Virtually every high-level EU–Central Asia communiqué still references these values. For instance, the joint press release of the Samarkand Summit dutifully affirmed that leaders are committed to "the promotion and protection of the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms." The EU Council's President, António Costa, similarly emphasized that the new strategic partnership would be "built on common values and interests," and that the EU will remain a "reliable, forward-looking partner… investing in [Central Asia's] long-term sustainable development."[21]

In practice, however, such references are largely symbolic, and the EU avoids directly confronting Central Asian states on human rights issues. The EU officials often explain this pragmatism by arguing that overt criticism would only alienate partners, insisting instead that the EU prefers to push for incremental normative change in private. Central Asian leaders also understand this dynamic, recognizing the EU's need to maintain a normative façade while appreciating its decision to avoid public pressure. As a result, both sides tacitly agree that any progress on norms will come slowly, and only within the bounds of their deepening strategic partnership.

Parallels with China's BRI

Paradoxically, the EU's deepening geopolitical engagement in Central Asia highlights an unresolved tension within European foreign policy: its growing assertiveness in a distant strategic theatre stands in contrast to its persistent struggles to achieve strategic autonomy in its own neighbourhood, particularly in relation to the United States. This paradox mirrors, in many ways, the logic underpinning China's March West strategy. First articulated in the early 2010s by scholars such as Wang Jisi, March West emerged as China's response to intensifying strategic rivalry with Washington in the Asia-Pacific region. At the time, China interpreted the U.S. 'Pivot to Asia' (later rebranded as the 'Indo-Pacific Strategy') as an effort to encircle and contain its rise, especially through deepened security ties with Japan, South Korea, India, and Southeast Asian partners. Confronted with this challenge, Chinese strategists urged China to look westward – to South Asia,

21 European Commission, April 3, 2025, *op.cit*.

Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Caspian region – where U.S. influence was comparatively limited and geopolitical competition less acute.[22]

This westward reorientation subsequently provided the intellectual and strategic foundations for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013. Central Asia, in particular, became the keystone of China's westward push, enabling this country to project economic power, secure access to vital energy and raw materials, and stabilize its own western frontier, especially Xinjiang. Unlike the Asia-Pacific region, defined by sharp strategic confrontation, Central Asia was seen by China as a zone of opportunity rather than conflict – a space where it could expand influence through infrastructure, finance, and diplomatic engagement rather than direct military rivalry. In this sense, the March West embodies a broader geopolitical logic: invest resources where resistance is low and returns are high.[23]

The EU's recent recalibration toward Central Asia follows a similar rationale. Constrained by the entrenched security order in Eastern Europe and by the limitations of its influence in global governance forums, the EU has turned to Central Asia as a strategic arena where it can assert geopolitical actorness in a comparatively less contested environment. Much like China's March West, this approach enables the EU to pursue its geoeconomic priorities – energy diversification, connectivity, and CRMs – while presenting itself as a stabilizing partner in a region still open to multipolar engagement.

Conclusion

This article set out to examine how the European Union's transformation into a more pragmatic and interest-driven actor in Central Asia manifests across four key dynamics: the elevation of Central Asia's centrality in EU strategic discourse; the prioritization of material interests, with a focus on CRMs; the shift from globalization to connectivity; and the emergence of quid pro quo diplomacy in place of traditional conditionality. In a region defined by strategic balancing and resource competition, the honest acknowledgment of mutual geopolitical

22 Jisi, W., "Marching westwards: The rebalancing of China's geostrategy", in S. Baogang (ed.), *The World in 2020 according to China: Chinese foreign policy elites discuss emerging trends in international politics* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 45–67.

23 *Ibid*.

interests now provides a firmer and more sustainable foundation for EU–Central Asia relations than the EU's earlier reliance on normative conditionality. The EU's current shift toward pragmatic engagement, anchored in critical minerals, energy security, and connectivity, can deliver more tangible results for both sides than previous attempts to induce democratic reform, which often generated only superficial compliance or quiet resistance from regional governments. By prioritizing strategic deliverables over prescriptive reforms, Brussels may be trying to reposition itself as a credible geopolitical actor in a region long accustomed to transactional diplomacy.

That said, the EU's growing dependence on a quid pro quo logic also carries inherent risks. The Northern Cyprus episode is a striking example of how transactional diplomacy can trigger unintended consequences, including friction with important partners such as Türkiye. In a region where external alignments are finely calibrated and every move is closely scrutinized by competing powers, narrowly framed quid pro quo arrangements may limit the EU's ability to manoeuvre in future negotiations and risk entangling it in disputes that complicate its broader strategic agenda. This underscores the need for the EU to complement its transactional approach with a more anticipatory strategy that accounts for the long-term geopolitical ripple effects of such deals.

Moreover, while the EU increasingly presents itself as a defender of the rules-based international order, it is not the only power articulating this language in Central Asia. China, too, has consistently invoked the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in its dealings with the region – albeit from an entirely different normative and discursive standpoint. This convergence, despite profound differences in political systems and governance models, has allowed Central Asian states to continue practising multi-vector diplomacy, skilfully balancing their relationships with external actors to avoid dependence on any single partner. As a result, the EU's narrative of rules-based partnership resonates only insofar as it can coexist with, rather than displace, these parallel frameworks promoted by other powers.

In sum, the EU's material presence in Central Asia has never been stronger, but its normative influence is now more symbolic than operative. The long-standing language of values persists in official discourse largely by inertia, while the bulk of investment and political attention flows toward geostrategic and economic priorities. The challenge for the EU, moving forward, will be to reconcile these

two dimensions: to sustain its pragmatic, interest-driven engagement while embedding it within a credible long-term framework that preserves the values and principles that remain central to the European project. Striking this balance will determine whether the EU's current momentum in Central Asia represents not merely a tactical adjustment, but the emergence of a durable European geopolitical strategy. If the EU succeeds in integrating strategic realism with principled long-term commitments, it may yet transform its deepening partnership with Central Asia into a cornerstone of its emerging geopolitical actorness.

Development Road and its Potential Linkage with the Zangezur Corridor

Lala Khalilzade*

In recent years, Iraq has launched the Development Road Project, a major logistics and transport initiative designed to transform the country into a regional transit hub. This study examines the strategic, economic, and geopolitical implications of the project for Iraq and Türkiye, situating it within broader regional connectivity frameworks such as the Middle Corridor. Special attention is given to the potential integration of the Zangezur Corridor, a proposed route that could link Azerbaijan with Türkiye via Armenia. The analysis reveals that this integration could significantly improve East–West connectivity, diversify transit options, and support economic stability and regional cooperation. The study concludes by assessing the potential benefits and challenges facing the project in a complex geopolitical environment.

Keywords: Development Road Project, Iraq, Türkiye, Zangezur Corridor, Middle Corridor, Geopolitics, Regional Connectivity, Infrastructure Diplomacy.

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Introduction

The changing geopolitical and economic dynamics of the Middle East and Eurasia have necessitated the emergence of new transport and logistics corridors that can reduce dependency on maritime routes and strengthen overland trade. In this context, the Development Road Project, launched by Iraq in 2023, represents a bold strategic initiative aimed at enhancing the country's role as a transit corridor between the Gulf region and Europe via Türkiye. The project holds the potential to diversify Iraq's economy, attract foreign investment, and reassert its role in regional geopolitics.

This study analyses the Development Road Project through a geopolitical lens, exploring its implications for Iraq, Türkiye, and regional connectivity. A particular focus is placed on the potential integration of the Zangezur Corridor into the Middle Corridor network, which could enhance East–West transit capacity across the South Caucasus region. By situating the Development Road Project within broader transregional developments, this study contributes to the expanding body of research on infrastructure diplomacy, economic corridors, and Eurasian connectivity.

The Development Road Project: Overview

In July 2025, land-based transportation between Iraq and Kuwait resumed for the first time in over two decades, signalling a significant shift in regional logistics dynamics. A newly operational corridor enabled trucks carrying goods from Türkiye to Kuwait to transit through Iraq, passing the Al-Abdali border crossing between Iraq and Jordan and completing customs procedures at the Sulaymaniyah dry port in northeastern Iraq's Kurdistan Region. This route reduced cargo delivery times from 45 days by sea to just 4 days by land.

This logistical achievement marked not only the operational launch of Iraq's Development Road Project but also the country's re-emergence as an important transit route between the Gulf and Eurasian markets. As a strategic initiative, the Development Road aims to position Iraq as a vital transit hub linking the Middle East, Europe, and Asia – offering benefits that extend beyond logistics to broader economic and geopolitical dimensions.[1]

1 Bazaartimes, *Turkey revives Gulf trade routes: New land corridor cuts shipping time*

First proposed in 2023, the Development Road Project envisions the construction of approximately 1,200 km of rail and highway networks extending from the Grand Faw Port in southern Iraq to the Turkish border.[2] On the Turkish side, it includes an additional 130 km of new railway and 300 km of roadway infrastructure. As of 2025, some segments of the project are in the planning and early development stages, with investment expected from a combination of the Iraqi and Turkish governments alongside potential international investors. With an estimated total investment of US$22 billion – US$16 billion for rail and US$6 billion for roads – the project is one of the most ambitious transport ventures in the region.[3]

In April 2024, Iraq, Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar signed a Joint Cooperation Memorandum for the project. This multilateral agreement underscores the project's transregional scope and its alignment with broader connectivity initiatives, particularly the Middle Corridor. Upon reaching Türkiye, the Development Road will link to this corridor via the cities of Sivas and Erzurum in Türkiye, thereby enhancing regional freight capacity. The project is expected to reduce the duration of cargo delivery from 33 days by sea to 15 days by land and to generate approximately US$4 billion in annual revenue.[4]

Objectives and Implementation Phases

Strategic objectives: The Development Road Project is designed to fulfil a set of interrelated economic, strategic, and geopolitical goals: connect Iraq's southern hinterland to the border with Türkiye, transforming Iraq into a regional transport hub; diversify Iraq's economy by reducing dependency on oil revenues; facilitate Iraq's integration into Eurasian transit networks; boost bilateral trade and cooperation between Iraq and

from 45 days to 4, July 11, 2025, Available at: https://bazaartimes.com/turkey-revives-gulf-trade-routes-new-land-corridor-cuts-shipping-time-from-45-days-to-4/ (Accessed: August 13, 2025).

2 Rawabet - Center for Research and Strategic Studies, *The Turkish-Iraqi Development Road Project: A major development investment on the trade map*, April 27, 2024, Available at: https://rawabetcenter.com/archives/173795 (Accessed: August 15, 2025).

3 Middle East Council on Global Affairs, *Iraq's Development Road Project: A Path Toward Prosperity or Instability?*, October 31, 2025, Available at: https://mecouncil.org/article/iraq-development-road-prosperity-or-instability/ (Accessed: August 13, 2025).

4 Middle East Council on Global Affairs, *Development Road Project – Views from the Council*, May 9, 2025, Available at: https://mecouncil.org/opinion/development-road-project-council-views/ (Accessed: August 18, 2025)

Türkiye; and create thousands of new jobs during both the construction and the operational phases.

Implementation phases: The Development Road Project is structured into three major implementation phases, reflecting a gradual expansion of both capacity and strategic outreach. The first phase, expected to be completed by 2028, envisions the transportation of approximately 1.4 million containers annually, corresponding to nearly 25 million tons of cargo, alongside passenger traffic projected to reach 14 million tons of cargo. The second phase, anticipated by 2038, aims to significantly increase container throughput to 7.5 million units annually, equating to around 33 million tons of freight. Finally, the third phase, targeted for completion by 2050, entails the geographic extension of the corridor toward the Mediterranean and European markets, ultimately transforming the Development Road into a principal economic artery linking the Gulf region to continental Europe.

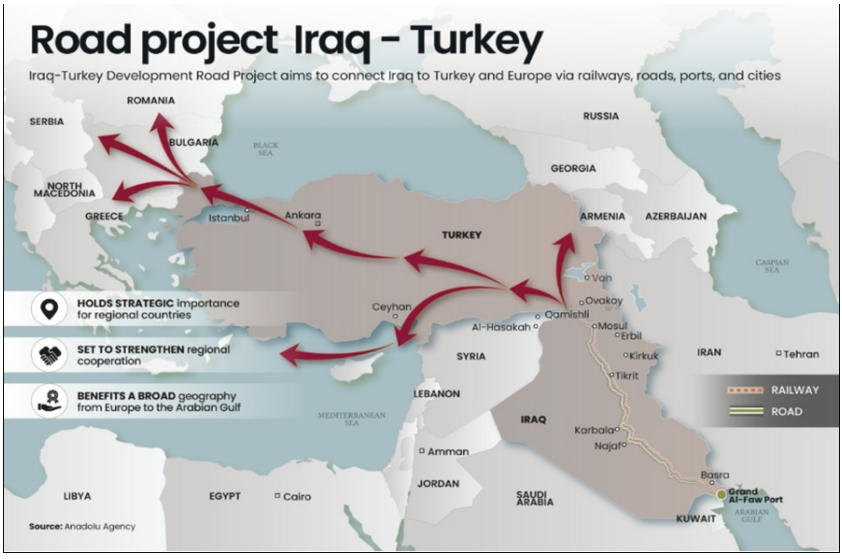

Figure 1. *The Iraq–Türkiye Development Road Project and its integration with regional trade routes. Source: Anadolu Agency, 2024.*[5]

5 Anadolu Agency, *Türkiye-Iraq Development Road Project: Enhancing regional connectivity, trade*, September 16, 2023, Available at: https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkiye-iraq-development-road-project-enhancing-regional-connectivity-trade/2993555 (Accessed: August 13, 2025)

Strategic Importance of the Development Road Project for Iraq

The Development Road Project carries deep strategic significance for Iraq in several interrelated domains: trade, geopolitics, and economic diversification.

Trade and transit challenges: Despite possessing vast oil and natural gas reserves, Iraq's access to international markets has long been constrained. Following the Gulf War and subsequent border changes, Iraq was left with only a 58-kilometer coastline – marshy, shallow, and unsuitable for large-scale maritime exports. As a result, the country has been forced to rely on the ports of neighbouring states – primarily Türkiye (Ceyhan), Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia – for the export of oil and other goods. In this context, the construction of the Grand Faw Port, along with the Development Road, is a strategic effort to overcome these limitations. The project aims to give Iraq more control over its trade routes, reduce transit dependency, and establish a self-sufficient export infrastructure connected to Europe via Türkiye.

Geopolitical relevance and regional role: The geopolitical environment further amplifies the relevance of the project. The Red Sea crisis, triggered by the outbreak of the Hamas–Israel war in October 2023 and subsequent Houthi attacks on commercial shipping, has disrupted global maritime trade. Many vessels have been forced to reroute around the Cape of Good Hope, located at the southern tip of South Africa, increasing the duration of delivery and related costs. The Development Road presents an overland alternative aligned with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), bypassing maritime chokepoints. It will enable cargo movement from the Gulf to Türkiye – and onward to Europe – within an estimated 25 days, significantly faster than the current maritime routes via the Cape, which take around 35–45 days on average.[6] Strategically, this elevates Iraq's role as a land bridge within the emerging Eurasian logistics architecture. While Chinese investment in Iraq has historically lagged behind that in other Gulf states, the Development Road could become a catalyst for enhanced Sino-Iraqi cooperation under the BRI framework.

Economic diversification and domestic development: The project also addresses Iraq's urgent need to diversify its economy. The expected annual revenue from the project stands at around US$4 billion, while it is estimated to create over 100,000 direct and indirect jobs

6 Daily Sabah, *Development Road project to contribute to reducing logistics costs*, April 23, 2025, Available at: https://www.dailysabah.com/business/transportation/development-road-project-to-contribute-to-reducing-logistics-costs (Accessed: August 13, 2025)

during construction and operational phases.[7] Furthermore, improved connectivity is expected to stimulate industrialization, production, and export potential. Beyond freight, the project could promote social and cultural exchange, foster regional stability, and strengthen Iraq's integration with neighbouring markets.

Strategic autonomy and regional competition: Finally, the Development Road enhances Iraq's strategic autonomy by reducing its dependence on external transport corridors. However, this shift may also generate tensions with competing regional infrastructure projects and ports, such as Iran's Chabahar Port, Kuwait's Mubarak Al-Kabeer Port, and the UAE's Jebel Ali Port, which currently serve as Iraq's primary maritime gateways. In this regard, Iraq must navigate the fine balance between cooperation and competition in regional infrastructure diplomacy by engaging in transparent partnerships, aligning its projects with regional connectivity frameworks, and avoiding zero-sum rivalries.

Strategic and Economic Implications for Türkiye

Türkiye plays a pivotal role in regional connectivity and energy diplomacy, serving as a critical transit point between Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. The Development Road Project reinforces this role by deepening Türkiye's strategic position in both the economic and the geopolitical domain.

Strategic relevance and energy transit: Amid Europe's ongoing efforts to diversify its energy sources and reduce dependence on Russian oil and gas, Türkiye has emerged as an essential corridor for energy exports from the South Caucasus – particularly Azerbaijan – and the Gulf. Major energy infrastructure projects – including the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), TurkStream, and the Ceyhan oil terminal – position Türkiye as a key actor in regional energy transit. The Development Road, which links the Gulf to Europe via Iraq and Türkiye, will further solidify Türkiye's role as a strategic energy and logistics hub. The project also enables Türkiye to enhance its land-based access to markets in Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, and other Gulf countries, offering an alternative to the maritime and costly air transport routes that have traditionally dominated trade in this corridor.

7 AlarabyTv_News, *Iraq: The Challenges of the "Development Road" Project and Its Role in Supporting the Economy*, September 15, 2025, Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYV_942J-to (Accessed: August 14, 2025)

Additionally, Türkiye aims to capitalize on the revitalization of the Kirkuk–Ceyhan Oil Pipeline. According to a decision announced on July 22, the long-standing agreement on this pipeline, originally signed in 1973, will expire in July 2026. Türkiye has described the pipeline's underutilization as a "major missed opportunity", and both Türkiye and Iraq are currently in discussions to renew the agreement with higher capacity and revised pricing mechanisms. If implemented, the pipeline could increase its capacity from 500,000 barrels per day to 2.2 million barrels per day, aligning with the broader goals of the Development Road initiative.

Economic and trade benefits: Bilateral trade between Türkiye and Iraq has seen a substantial increase over the past two decades, rising from approximately US$1 billion in the early 2000s to over US$20 billion by 2024.[8] With the completion of key infrastructure components under the Development Road Project, this volume is expected to grow further. The Development Road route will pass through 11 Iraqi provinces, with an additional 7 located in close proximity – creating broad market access for Turkish goods. The resulting trade expansion is anticipated to enhance Türkiye's position as a trans-Eurasian logistics hub, especially within the framework of the Middle Corridor.[9]

Investment potential and private sector engagement: Turkish companies stand to benefit significantly from the project, not only through transportation and logistics contracts but also across broader industrial sectors. Among the 26 signed agreements within the project's framework – among Turkish companies, the Iraqi government, and relevant regional partners – are contracts for water resource management, agriculture, and industrial development.[10] Turkish engineering and construction firms are already involved in project design and execution, providing specialized expertise in infrastructure

8 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Relations between Türkiye and Iraq*, April 23, 2024, Available at: https://www.dailysabah.com/business/transportation/development-road-project-to-contribute-to-reducing-logistics-costs (Accessed: August 13, 2025)

9 Iraqinews, *Iraq's imports from Turkey reach $13 billion in 2024*, February 4, 2025, Available at: https://www.iraqinews.com/iraq/iraqs-imports-from-turkey-reach-13-billion-in-2024/ (Accessed: August 21, 2025)

10 Forbesmiddleeast, *Turkiye And Iraq Sign 26 Agreements During Erdogan's Rare Visit, Boosting Security, Economic And Trade Ties*, April 22, 2024, Available at: https://www.forbesmiddleeast.com/featured/politics-security/turkiye-and-iraq-sign-26-agreements-during-erdogans-rare-visit-boosting-security-economic-and-trade-ties (Accessed: August 21, 2025)

development.[11] Furthermore, the establishment of industrial zones and manufacturing centres along the corridor opens avenues for long-term economic engagement. These investments are expected to increase Türkiye's soft power and influence across the wider region, particularly regarding Iraq's rebuilding and modernization efforts.

Potential integration of the Zangezur Corridor into the Development Road Project

The Development Road Project, while primarily framed within Iraq–Türkiye cooperation, holds broader significance for transregional connectivity. One of the most promising prospects for regional integration, envisioned as part of the second stage of the Development Road Project, is its potential linkage with the Zangezur Corridor, currently a proposed route connecting mainland Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic via Armenia's southern province and further extending into Türkiye.

Strategic rationale behind the Zangezur Corridor: The idea of the Zangezur Corridor gained momentum following the Second Garabagh War in 2020, which ended with the liberation of the internationally recognized territories of Azerbaijan. In this context, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev has repeatedly emphasized the strategic necessity of establishing a land connection between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan through Armenia's southern regions – reviving the historic route that existed before the Soviet-era territorial rearrangements in the 1920s.[12]

The Zangezur Corridor is not just a national priority for Azerbaijan; it also fits into the broader vision of East–West connectivity across the South Caucasus. If realized, it would provide a shorter and more direct route across the Caspian Sea to Türkiye and Europe, enhancing the operational efficiency of the Middle Corridor.[13]

11 Erem Business, *Iraq announces first phase of Development Road to be launched mid-2025*, January 26, 2025, Available at: https://www.erembusiness.com/economy/gi3wjh6 (Accessed: August 21, 2025)

12 Anadolu Agency, *Zangezur corridor to provide new link between Turkey, Azerbaijan*, June 6, 2021, Available at: https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/zangezur-corridor-to-provide-new-link-between-turkey-azerbaijan/2260088 (Accessed: August 21, 2025)

13 Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure, *Zengezur Corridor to support the Middle Corridor*, June 1, 2025, Available at: https://www.uab.gov.tr/haberler/zengezur-koridoru-orta-koridor-u-destekleyecek (Accessed: August 22, 2025)

Integration with the Development Road: The potential integration of the Zangezur Corridor with Iraq's Development Road Project could significantly reshape regional logistics. The Development Road, by connecting the Gulf to Türkiye, already offers a land-based alternative to congested and risky maritime routes. If integrated with the Zangezur Corridor, this network could evolve into a seamless cross-regional transit chain linking the Persian Gulf, Iraq, Türkiye, the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and Europe.

Such integration would produce several strategic outcomes: diversification of routes, reducing overreliance on the Red Sea and Suez Canal; shortened transit times, creating faster alternatives to both maritime shipping and existing overland corridors; and increased competitiveness, strengthening the Middle Corridor by expanding its access points and improving its efficiency.

Currently, two main land routes operate along the Middle Corridor: the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars (BTK) railway and the Central Asia (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan)–Iran–Türkiye transit route.

A future linkage between the Development Road and the Zangezur Corridor would offer an even more direct and efficient option, bypassing some of the current bottlenecks. As Türkiye's Minister of Transport and Infrastructure, Abdulkadir Uraloğlu, emphasized: "Among all these routes, the shortest and most efficient path will be through Zangezur – the opening of this corridor will further strengthen the Middle Corridor."

Regional dynamics and diplomatic considerations: Iraq and the UAE – key stakeholders in the Development Road Project – maintain diplomatic ties with both Armenia and Azerbaijan, potentially positioning them as facilitators in future regional connectivity and transport negotiations between the two countries. Potential integration of the Zangezur Corridor into the Development Road framework could not only improve regional connectivity but also serve as a tool for confidence building and economic cooperation in the post-conflict South Caucasus.

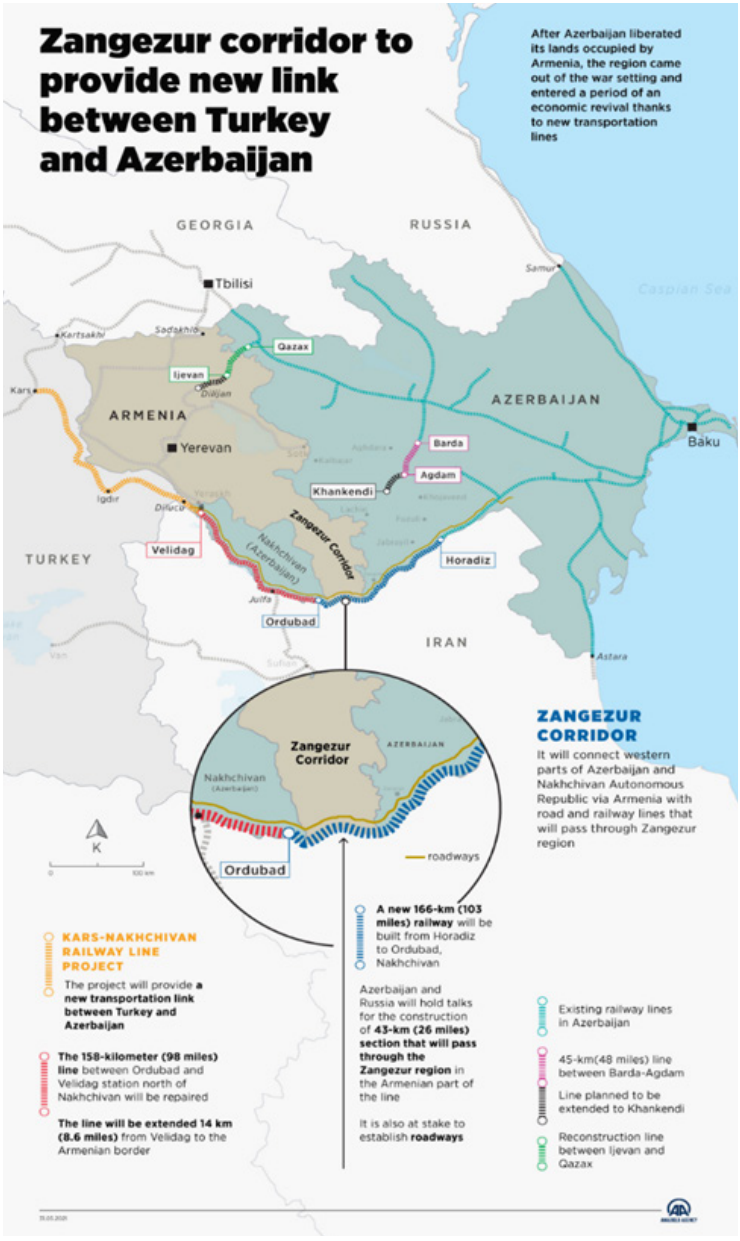

Figure 2. *The Zangezur corridor, a strategic transport link connecting Turkey and Azerbaijan via Armenia. Source: Anadolu Agency, 2021.*[14]

14 Anadolu Agency, *Zangezur corridor to provide new link between Turkey, Azerbaijan*, June 1, 2021, Available at: https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/zangezur-corridor-to-provide-new-link-between-turkey-azerbaijan/2260088, (Accessed: August 22, 2025)

Conclusion

Above all, the development road is a bold and necessary project for Iraq, a country that for decades has faced civil wars, ethnic and sectarian conflicts, and geopolitical crises. With this initiative, Iraq will regain its role as a strategic hub for transit freight. The realization of the project is expected not only to benefit Iraq and its partners but also to become a key catalyst for the overall economic progress of the region.

Moreover, the implementation of this initiative will significantly enrich the logistics landscape in the Middle East. The restoration of Iraq's role as a logistical corridor between the eastern and southern Gulf will not only strengthen regional economic ties but also create a platform for raising interstate cooperation to a new level.

For Türkiye, a key strategic aspect of the Development Road Project is that it serves as an alternative to the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), from which Türkiye was excluded despite being a major regional participant. The project further ensures Türkiye's continued role in Europe–Asia trade, reinforcing its position as a critical transit hub and diversifying regional transport options.

Another factor enhancing the importance of the project is the complex geopolitical environment and ongoing wars in the region, which have created the need for more efficient and secure transport hubs. The Development Road also offers a faster delivery route compared to parallel corridors.

Türkiye views the Kirkuk–Ceyhan Oil Pipeline not merely as an oil transport facility in its current state but also as a foundation for broader and more strategic cooperation between Türkiye and Iraq in the fields of energy and infrastructure.

Alongside the advantages the project promises, potential challenges cannot be ruled out. Possible terrorist attacks, internal instability, and conflicts within Iraq, as well as structural issues such as political disputes, could slow down or constrain the process. In addition, the operation of the Grand Faw Port may reduce the strategic significance of other regional ports, potentially giving rise to competition and geopolitical tensions. For this reason, certain risks concerning the project's sustainability and the stability of investments must also be taken into account.

Overall, the Development Road should be viewed as a strategic opportunity for reshaping the logistics and connectivity landscape of the wider Middle East and Eurasia. If supported by robust political will, multilateral cooperation, and sustained investment, the project could become a cornerstone of regional economic integration and a model for post-conflict reconstruction and modernization.

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Caucasus Strategic Perspectives, Volume 7, Issue 1, Summer 2026

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Deadline: 1 April 2026

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