

Structural Transformation in Eurasian Integration: The C6 Platform and the Strategic Geopolitics of the Middle Corridor

Hazel Çağın Elbir*

This article examines, from an academic perspective, a profound structural transformation in Eurasian geopolitics: the evolution of the Central Asia Five (C5) format into the 'C6' platform, with Azerbaijan's fully fledged participation, and the impact of this process on the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Middle Corridor, TITR). Global shocks between 2020 and 2022, particularly the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, accelerated the search for alternatives to traditional northern transport routes, thus making trans-Caspian connectivity a strategic necessity. Azerbaijan's admission, as a fully fledged participant, into the Central Asian consultative mechanism at the 7th Summit in Tashkent in November 2025 transformed the region from a mere arena of great power competition into a strategic actor capable of shaping its own destiny. This article analyses the institutionalisation process of the C6 structure, inter-state allied relations in the region, energy security parameters and Türkiye's catalytic role in this integration process. The findings demonstrate that the C6 format is not merely a logistical network but the institutional core of a new security and trade architecture in Eurasia.

Keywords: C6 Platform, Middle Corridor (TITR), Eurasian Integration, Geopolitical Economy, Organization of Turkic States (OTS).



* Hazel Çağın Elbir is an Analyst at the Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM, Türkiye).

Introduction

The modern revival of the historical Silk Road in the form of trade and energy corridors is fundamentally shaking the global geo-economic balance of the 21st century. The regions of Central Asia and the South Caucasus, which were seen as a strategic vacuum or passive arena of the ‘New Great Game’¹ after the Cold War, have today become central hubs of global supply chains and energy security. For decades, northern transit routes, primarily traversing Russian territory via the Trans-Siberian Railway and associated branches through Kazakhstan and Belarus,² served as the main overland link between Europe and China. However, the Russia–Ukraine war that began in 2022, and the sanctions imposed, redirected freight traffic between China and

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Europe towards the TITR, which offers a safer, shorter and more sustainable route.³

In this context, Azerbaijan has risen beyond being merely a transit country to become a ‘strategic gateway’ to the European Union for Central Asian countries and a reliable ally.⁴ Azerbaijan’s geographical location serves as a bridge connecting the rich hydrocarbon and critical mineral reserves east of the Caspian Sea to European markets.⁵ This geopolitical convergence, resulting from long-standing bilateral and multilateral cooperation, has transformed the region’s institutional architecture from the C5 (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) to the C6 format with Azerbaijan’s fully fledged participation.⁶

1 Smith, D.L., “Central Asia: A New Great Game?”, *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 1996, pp. 147-175, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00927678.1996.9933727> (Accessed: May 2, 2026).

2 *GIS Reports*, “Central Asia’s Middle Corridor gains traction at Russia’s expense”, August 29, 2022, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/tr/middle-corridor/> (Accessed: June 11, 2026).

3 Çetin, K., “ABD’nin Orta Asya’daki Girişimi: C5+1” – [“The United States’ Initiative in Central Asia: C5+1”], *Avrasya İncelemeleri Merkezi (AVİM)*, October 13, 2016, Available at: <https://avim.org.tr/tr/Yorum/ABD-NIN-ORTA-ASYA-DAKI-GIRISIMI-C5-1> (Accessed: May 2, 2026).

4 *TRT Avaz*, “C6: Birleşik Bir Bölge, Ortak Bir Gelecek Konferansı Bakü’de düzenlendi” – [“C6: A United Region, A Shared Future’ Conference Held in Baku”], February 19, 2026, Available at: <https://www.trtavaz.com.tr/haber/tur/turkistandan/c6-birlesik-bir-bolge-ortak-bir-gelecek-konferansi-bakude-duzenlendi/6997157b6c1f8b55084d6b52> (Accessed: May 3, 2026).

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

This evolving regional architecture has been further strengthened by the active involvement of Türkiye, a NATO member and one of the founders of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). Türkiye plays a pivotal unifying role in the final integration of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) with Europe. Ankara's two-winged connectivity strategy – extending through the Balkans on one side and the South Caucasus on the other – enables regional countries to pursue multi-vector foreign policies while enhancing geo-economic diversification.⁷ Azerbaijan, for its part, also played a crucial role in the establishment of the OTS. Indeed, the Turkic Council was formally established on October 3, 2009, in Azerbaijan's Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic through the signing of the Nakhchivan Agreement.⁸ The emergence of the C6 platform signifies that the countries of the region have moved from being passive objects in the power competition between Russia, China and actors in the West to actively declaring their regional ownership.⁹ The dynamics outlined in this introduction will be analysed in depth in the following sections of the article through the lenses of institutional evolution, security cooperation and logistical infrastructure.

The Evolution of the C6 Platform: A New Regional Format

The process of the C6 platform is the natural and strategic expansion of the Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia mechanism initiated by the Central Asian states in 2018.¹⁰ Initially established to address technical issues, such as border problems and water sharing, this mechanism has gradually evolved into a broader integration vision under the influence of global geopolitical changes.¹¹ The regular invitation of Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev to these meetings and, finally, Azerbaijan's fully fledged

7 Nivedita Das Kundu, "Multi-Vector Policy in Central Asia: Formats and Prospects," *Valdai Club*, February 18, 2026, Available at: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/multi-vector-policy-in-central-asia-formats/> (Accessed: May 3, 2026).

8 Organization of Turkic States, *Nakhchivan Agreement on the Establishment of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States*, signed in Nakhchivan on 3 October 2009, Available at: <https://turkicstates.org/u/d/basic-documents/nakhchivan-agreement-on-the-establishment-of-the-cooperation-council-of-turkic-speaking-states-1-en.pdf> (Accessed: May 21, 2026).

9 *Ibid.*

10 Cutler, R.M., "Azerbaijan Joins Central Asia to Build a C6 Corridor Core", *The Times of Central Asia*, November 17, 2025, Available at: <https://timesca.com/azerbaijan-joins-central-asia-to-build-a-c6-corridor-core/> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

11 Cutler, *op.cit.*

Azerbaijan provides the shortest and most cost-effective route to Türkiye and Europe for Central Asian countries.

participation as a member at the 7th Summit held in Tashkent on November 16, 2025, introduced the concept of ‘Expanded Central Asia’ into the international literature.¹² This evolution is described by the countries of the region as “the birth of a single geopolitical and geo-economic region.” At the institutional level, the C6 is not limited to summits of heads of state; it has gained operational depth through sub-working groups established at the level of transport, energy, economy and foreign ministries.¹³ For example, the activities of the TITR Association and the efforts of member countries to digitalise customs procedures¹⁴ demonstrate that this new format has not remained on paper but has transformed into a concrete governance model that accelerates cargo flows in the field.¹⁵ Azerbaijan’s role in this structure has turned Central Asia’s landlocked disadvantage into a strategic advantage.¹⁶ Azerbaijan provides the shortest and most cost-effective route to Türkiye and Europe for Central Asian countries.¹⁷ Analysis suggests the dialogue between Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states has risen from simple cooperation to the level of “highly strategic partner”.¹⁸ In particular, the Treaty on Allied Relations (2024) between Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan and the Agreement on Strategic Partnership and

12 President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *Ilham Aliyev addressed 7th Consultative Meeting of Heads of State of Central Asia*, 16 November 2025, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/70592> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

13 *Caspian Policy Center*, “A New and Expanded Central Asia: C6 Steps for Trans-Caspian Growth,” May 3, 2026, Available at: <https://caspiantpolicy.org/research/category/a-new-and-expanded-central-asia-c6-steps-for-trans-caspian-growth> (Accessed: May 5, 2026).

14 Dayar, A., “Digitizing Customs: How eTIR is Transforming the Middle Corridor,” *Caspian Policy Center*, May 2, 2025, Available at: <https://caspiantpolicy.org/research/economy/digitizing-customs-how-etir-is-transforming-the-middle-corridor> (Accessed: May 5, 2026).

15 Korkmaz, S.C., “Middle Corridor Makes Progress Toward Operational Reality,” *Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor*, April 28, 2026, Available at: <https://jamestown.org/middle-corridor-makes-progress-toward-operational-reality/> (Accessed: May 5, 2026).

16 Cutler, *op.cit.*

17 Mukhigulishvili, G., “The Growing Importance of the Middle Corridor as an Energy Transport Route,” *The Hague Research Institute*, January 2024, Available at: <https://hagueresearch.org/the-growing-importance-of-the-middle-corridor-as-an-energy-transport-route/> (Accessed: May 5, 2026).

18 Beisenov, A., “C5 switches to C6: views from Central Asia,” *Topchubashov Center*, March 10, 2026, Available at: <https://top-center.org/en/analytics/3896/c5-switches-to-c6-views-from-central-asia> (Accessed: May 5, 2026).

Alliance Relations (2005) between Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan form the political backbone of the C6 structure.¹⁹

This development has also begun to reshape the perspectives of external actors towards the region. The C5+1 format, which the United States has been implementing since 2015, is increasingly being discussed in terms of a potential evolution into a C6+1 structure that would include Azerbaijan's participation. Meanwhile, the European Union has intensified its engagement with the region through its Global Gateway strategy, particularly by announcing significant financing for connectivity projects at the EU–Central Asia Summit. However, its institutional framework continues to operate primarily through the C5+1 format, prompting calls for an update to better reflect the emergence of the C6 platform.²⁰ Think tanks such as the Hudson Institute note that the C6 platform has the potential to become a strong diplomatic bloc capable of taking joint positions on platforms such as the United Nations General Assembly.²¹ Consequently, the C6 offers a new model of multilateralism in Eurasia, one in which regional interests are prioritised independently of external interventions.²²

Political and Security Cooperation

Political and security cooperation under the C6 platform has been built on the strategy of strengthening the national sovereignty of the member states and developing resilience against external pressures.²³ The Treaty on Allied Relations signed between Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan in 2024 represents the most advanced stage of political integration between

19 Aslan-Mammadli, A., “Alliance Relations Between Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan: A New Stage of Cooperation,” *Eurasia Review*, August 24, 2024, Available at: <https://www.eurasiareview.com/24082024-alliance-relations-between-azerbaijan-and-uzbekistan-a-new-stage-of-cooperation-oped/> (Accessed: May 5, 2026).

20 Huseynov, V., “Opinion: The European Union must recognise that the C5 have now become the C6”, *commonsplace.eu*, December 6, 2025, Available at: <https://www.commonspace.eu/opinion/opinion-european-union-must-recognise-c5-have-now-become-c6> (Accessed: June 11, 2026).

21 Moriyasu, K., “Trump Has Golden Opportunity to Launch C6+1 on Sidelines of UN,” *Hudson Institute*, April 7, 2026, Available at: <https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/trump-has-golden-opportunity-launch-c61-sidelines-un-ken-moriyasu> (Accessed: May 5, 2026).

22 Moriyasu, *op.cit.*

23 Saeedi, T., “C5 is now C6 – What will change?,” *News Central Asia*, November 28, 2025, Available at: <https://www.newscentralasia.net/2025/11/28/c5-is-now-c6-what-will-change/> (Accessed: May 5, 2026).

the two regions.²⁴ This spirit of alliance includes mutual and resolute support for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty rights on international platforms. In particular, Azerbaijan's full restoration of sovereignty over its formerly occupied territories has been viewed by Central Asian countries as a prerequisite for peace and connectivity in the region and has received strong support.

In the security dimension, the C5 countries are acting in coordination against common challenges, such as the fragile security environment in Afghanistan, cross-border terrorism, drug trafficking and cyber threats.²⁵ Azerbaijan's inclusion is expected to further strengthen these efforts. Although the US-supported C5+1 process allocated \$15 million in funding to enhance the border security capacities of regional countries,²⁶ the C6 format, in contrast, is not an externally imposed geopolitical blueprint. It is the natural outcome of the region's own reassessment of its geography, interests and long-term trajectory.²⁷ In this context, military training cooperation and defence industry partnerships (particularly among Türkiye, Azerbaijan and the Central Asian countries) have become cornerstones of the new security architecture.

Another important pillar of political cooperation is the principle of 'peace through connectivity'. The C6 countries believe that ensuring

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the security of transport and energy corridors is the greatest guarantee of regional stability.²⁸ In this framework, the Caspian Sea is defined as a security zone, and cooperation among the littoral states functions as a balancing element that prevents the entry of external military forces into the region.²⁹

24 Aslan-Mammadli, *op. cit.*

25 Times of Central Asia, "Central Asia's "C5" Security Bloc Can Become a Reality," May 20, 2024, Available at: <https://timesca.com/central-asias-c5-security-bloc-can-become-a-reality/> (Accessed: May 5, 2026).

26 Kabar News Agency, "Tajikistan hosts C5+1 meeting between Central Asia states and the US," July 28, 2017, Available at: <https://en.archive.kabar.kg/news/tajikistan-hosts-c5-1-meeting-between-central-asia-states-and-the-us/> (Accessed: May 5, 2026).

27 Kushkumbayev, S., "C6: Central Asia and Azerbaijan form a new geopolitical core," *News.az*, February 18, 2026, Available at: <https://news.az/news/c6-central-asia-and-azerbaijan-form-a-new-geopolitical-core> (Accessed: May 5, 2026).

28 Moriyasu, *op.cit.*

29 Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea, signed at Aktau on August 12, 2018, Available at: https://tehranconvention.org/system/files/web/convention_on_the_legal_status_of_the_caspian_sea_en.pdf (Accessed: May 6, 2026).

In the diplomatic field, the C6 platform strengthens Azerbaijan's role as an infrastructure and political hub that provides Central Asia with enhanced access to Europe and Türkiye.³⁰ Türkiye's position within NATO, combined with Azerbaijan's broad network of alliances, serves as a strategic channel providing Central Asian countries with direct access to Europe. Political cohesion within the C6 platform is not merely a form of regional unity but also strengthens the collective position of the C6 states vis-à-vis global power centres.³¹

Economic Cooperation and Trade Integration

The economic integration of the C6 format focuses on both the qualitative and quantitative increase of trade volume among member countries. Comparative analyses conducted using the TOPSIS (Technique for Order of Preference by Similarity to Ideal Solution) method show that Kazakhstan has maintained its position as Azerbaijan's strongest economic partner in every period, while Uzbekistan has become the fastest-rising second partner following reforms since 2016. These data prove that the economic centre of gravity of the C6 platform is steadily strengthening and that intra-regional trade is diversifying.³² The volume of trade carried out via the Caspian Sea increased by 86% between 2021 and 2023, reaching 2.8 million tonnes. Azerbaijan has become the main transit hub for wheat, fertiliser and energy resources coming from Central Asia to world markets.³³ In particular, the agreement on the transportation of Kazakhstan's oil through the Baku–Tbilisi–

30 Kardaş, S., "The green great game: Crafting an EU-Central Asia energy alliance," *European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)*, January 14, 2026, Available at: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-green-great-game-crafting-an-eu-central-asia-energy-alliance/> (Accessed: May 6, 2026).

31 Seyidli, H., "C6 as a new configuration: Azerbaijan between the Caucasus and Central Asia," *Politicon*, February 19, 2026, Available at: <https://www.politicon.co/en/essays/213/c6-as-a-new-configuration-azerbaijan-between-the-caucasus-and-central-asia> (Accessed: May 6, 2026).

32 Şirinov, F., "Azerbaycan'ın Orta Asya Türk Cumhuriyetleri ile Ekonomik İlişkilerinin TOPSİS Yöntemiyle Karşılaştırmalı Analizi: 1997-2023 Dönemi [Comparative Analysis of Azerbaijan's Economic Relations with Central Asian Turkic Republics Using the TOPSİS Method: 1997-2023 Period]," *Uluslararası Ekonomi Siyaset İnsan ve Toplum Bilimleri Dergisi*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2026, pp. 165-180, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59445/ijephss.1761539> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

33 Satubaldina, A., "World Bank Presents Key Findings of Latest Study on Middle Corridor in Tbilisi," *The Astana Times*, March 1, 2024, Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2024/03/world-bank-presents-key-findings-of-latest-study-on-middle-corridor-in-tbilisi/> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline and annual shipments exceeding one million tonnes constitute the concrete manifestation of economic integration in the energy dimension.³⁴ At the institutional level, the Turkic Investment Fund (TIF), established under the auspices of the Organization of Turkic States, provides financial support for infrastructure and industrial projects among Central Asian countries, thereby encouraging regional capital flows.³⁵ Furthermore, the simplification of customs procedures and the Simplified Customs Corridor agreement have facilitated intra-regional trade by reducing trade costs.³⁶ In particular, the Joint Intergovernmental Commission (JIC) established between Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan aims to expand trade beyond raw materials to include higher value-added sectors, such as food, textiles and technology.³⁷

However, despite this positive momentum, the economies of the C6 countries continue to remain heavily dependent on hydrocarbon exports. According to the World Bank, this structural dependence exposes the region to external price shocks and limits long-term sustainable growth. This heavy reliance can be effectively balanced through fostering deeper partnerships in green energy, digital trade and high-value-added industrial production among the C6 countries.³⁸ Consequently, the C6 economic space can be transformed from a mere transit route into a vast economic basin with a population exceeding 600 million.

Connectivity as the Backbone of C6: The TITR and Beyond

Transport connectivity constitutes the existential backbone of the C6 platform and modern Eurasian integration. The TITR, which extends from China through Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus

34 Staff Report, “Kazakhstan to transport 1.5 million tons of oil via Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline,” *The Astana Times*, November 18, 2022, Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2022/11/kazakhstan-to-transport-1-5-million-tons-of-oil-via-baku-tbilisi-ceyhan-pipeline/> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

35 Yılmaz, E., “Türk Yatırım Fonu üye devletler arasındaki ticareti geliştirecek” – [“The Turkic Investment Fund Will Promote Trade Among Member States,”] *Anadolu Agency*, May 25, 2024, Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/ekonomi/turk-yatirim-fonu-uye-devletler-arasindaki-ticareti-gelistirecek/3230024> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

36 Organization of Turkic States, *Customs Cooperation, Areas of Cooperation*, Available at: <https://turkicstates.org/en/areas-of-cooperation-detail/3-customs-cooperation> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

37 Abuova, N., “16 Agreements Consolidate Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan Partnership,” *The Astana Times*, October 22, 2025, Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2025/10/16-agreements-consolidate-kazakhstan-azerbaijan-partnership/> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

38 World Bank, “Azerbaijan Country Overview”, Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/ext/en/country/azerbaijan> (Accessed: June 11, 2026).

and Türkiye to Europe, is approximately 2,000 km shorter than the Northern Corridor passing through Russia and has the potential to reduce transit time to 15 days.³⁹ Following the Russia–Ukraine war, the increased risk of the northern route has directed cargo operators towards this multimodal route, resulting in a record 90% increase in transport volume through Azerbaijan.⁴⁰ Azerbaijan has implemented multi-billion-dollar projects, such as the Alat International Sea Trade Port and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars (BTK) railway, to ensure the functionality of this corridor.⁴¹ While the Alat Port serves as the most modern logistics centre of the Caspian Sea and plays a critical role in the transfer of cargo from Central Asia, the BTK railway has established an uninterrupted linkage for rail connection between Beijing and London.⁴² Kazakhstan has increased trans-Caspian capacity by modernising the ports of Aktau and Kuryk,⁴³ while new railway lines established with Uzbekistan (such as the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan line) have strengthened the feeder arteries of the corridor.

The European Union has committed €10 billion of investment for the development of the TITR under its Global Gateway initiative.⁴⁴ The

Azerbaijan has implemented multi-billion-dollar projects, such as the Alat International Sea Trade Port and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars (BTK) railway, to ensure the functionality of this corridor.

39 Nifti, E., “How to Maximize the Middle Corridor: A Guide to Infrastructure Priorities, Barriers, and Investments,” *Caspian Policy Center*, May 21, 2024, Available at: https://api.caspianpolicy.org/media/ckeditor_media/2024/05/29/how-to-maximize-the-middle-corridor.pdf (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

40 Cutler, R.M., “Russia-Azerbaijan thaw reshapes Middle Corridor prospects,” *Asia Times*, October 14, 2025, Available at: <https://asiatimes.com/2025/10/russia-azerbaijan-thaw-reshapes-middle-corridor-prospects/> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

41 Shahbazov, F., “Advancing Middle Corridor Integration: Azerbaijan’s Growing Role as Key Trade Gateway,” *The Astana Times*, February 12, 2026, Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2026/02/advancing-middle-corridor-integration-azerbajians-growing-role-as-key-trade-gateway/> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

42 Bayramli, R., “Middle Corridor Expands with PRC’s Growing Role and TRIPP Agreement,” *AIR Center*, September 25, 2025, Available at: <https://aircenter.az/en/single/middle-corridor-expands-with-prcs-growing-role-and-tripp-agreement-1909> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

43 Birbayeva, A., “Transit Along Trans-Caspian Route Triples Over Five Years as Kazakhstan Expands Port Infrastructure,” *The Astana Times*, April 23, 2026, Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2026/04/transit-along-trans-caspian-route-triples-over-five-years-as-kazakhstan-expands-port-infrastructure/> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

44 European Commission, “Global Gateway: €10 billion commitment to invest in Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor connecting Europe and Central Asia announced at Investors Forum,” January 29, 2024, Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_501 (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

EBRD has identified a total infrastructure need of €18.5 billion for the corridor to operate at full capacity,⁴⁵ stating that these funds will be used for the modernisation of railway systems and the elimination of bottlenecks.⁴⁶ The United States, for its part, recognises the TITR as a strategic priority within the framework of critical minerals dialogue and energy security, and has expressed support for the process, with a potential C6+1 format being one possibility for further enhancing coordination between the involved parties.

One of the most-discussed strategic concepts is the Zangezur Corridor. This route, which will connect the main part of Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and Türkiye, has the potential to increase the freight capacity of the TITR by 15 million tonnes and to end regional fragmentation.⁴⁷ The United States and some international actors view this corridor as an alternative exit route to the Strait of Hormuz and emphasise its peaceful economic potential through initiatives such as the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP).

The success of the corridor depends not only on physical routes but also on ‘soft connectivity’,⁴⁸ specifically customs harmonisation and digitalisation. The C6 countries are accelerating border crossings with applications such as ‘e-Permit’ and ‘e-CMR’, and are working on blockchain-based customs systems.⁴⁹ Türkiye and Uzbekistan have taken a leading role in this field and have minimised bureaucratic

45 Nuttall, C., “\$18.5bn needed for Middle Corridor infrastructure in Central Asia, says EBRD expert,” *IntelliNews*, May 30, 2024, Available at: <https://www.intellinews.com/18-5bn-needed-for-middle-corridor-infrastructure-in-central-asia-says-ebrd-expert-327464/> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

46 European Commission and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), “Sustainable Transport Connections between Europe and Central Asia,” June 2023, Available at: https://transport.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-06/Sustainable_transport_connections_between_Europe_and_Central_Asia.pdf (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

47 Caspian Post, “Zangazur Corridor to Increase Middle Corridor Capacity by 15 Million Tons,” August 26, 2025, Available at: <https://caspianpost.com/politics/zangazur-corridor-to-increase-middle-corridor-capacity-by-15-million-tons> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

48 Bondaz, A., “Promoting Soft Connectivity: China’s Standards-Setting Reforms and International Ambitions,” *Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique (FRS)*, Research Paper No. 2021/12, March 2021, Available at: <https://www.frstrategie.org/en/publications/recherches-et-documents/promoting-soft-connectivity-china-s-standards-setting-reforms-and-international-ambitions-2021> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

49 Organization of Turkic States, “Transport Cooperation, Areas of Cooperation,” Available at: <https://turkicstates.org/en/areas-of-cooperation-detail/4-transport-cooperation> (Accessed: May 13, 2026).

obstacles through ‘green corridors’.⁵⁰ Middle Corridor Multimodal Ltd., a joint logistics company established by Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Georgia, aims to reduce costs by offering a one-stop-shop service to operators.⁵¹ Ultimately, the TITR is transforming the C6 countries from mere figures in global trade into active founders and managers of the East–West axis.

Challenges, Risks and Future Prospects

Although the C6 platform and the TITR offer great potential, they face certain challenges that must be overcome for sustainability. The first and most concrete challenge is infrastructure deficiencies and the logistical complexities of multimodal transportation. The limited number of ships crossing the Caspian Sea, long loading and unloading times, and technical incompatibilities at ports still lead operators to prefer more expensive sea routes. Additionally, differing customs legislation and tariffs among the countries along the corridor reduce predictability in cargo flows.

Geopolitical challenges constitute the most significant vulnerability. Russia may perceive the region’s efforts to achieve strategic autonomy and the rise of a route competing with the Northern Corridor as a threat to its sphere of influence and may deploy political and economic pressure tools.⁵² In contrast, while China continues to support the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it does not view the Middle Corridor (TITR) as a rival project. Rather, Beijing views the TITR as a complementary route that can diversify its energy supply options and strengthen overland connectivity.⁵³ This perspective is reinforced by deepening cooperation

50 Dunyo Information Agency, “Uzbekistan Strengthening cooperation within the Turkic World and new horizons of development,” *Eurasia Magazine*, May 12, 2026, Available at: <https://eurasiamagazine.com/uzbekistan-strengthening-cooperation-within-the-turkic-world-and-new-horizons-of-development> (Accessed: May 14, 2026).

51 Omirgazy, D., “Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan Create Joint Venture to Develop Middle Corridor’s Multimodal Service,” *The Astana Times*, October 27, 2023, Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2023/10/azerbaijan-georgia-kazakhstan-create-joint-venture-to-develop-middle-corridors-multimodal-service/> (Accessed: May 14, 2026).

52 Valansi, K., “Why the Middle Corridor matters amid a geopolitical re-sorting,” *Atlantic Council*, June 2, 2025, Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/ac-turkey-defense-journal/why-the-middle-corridor-matters-amid-a-geopolitical-resorting/> (Accessed: May 14, 2026).

53 Guliyev, V., “Hormuz Blockade Pushes China Toward Continental Energy Suppliers and Overland Routes,” *Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center)*, May 15 2026, Available at: <https://aircenter.az/en/single/hormuz-blockade-pushes-china-toward-continental-energy-suppliers-and-overland-routes-2116> (Accessed: June 1, 2026).

between China and the C6 countries, particularly with Azerbaijan, a strategic partner for official Beijing in the region.

In terms of future prospects, the success of the C6 format depends on ‘institutional deepening’. Cooperation must be expanded, not only in transport and energy, but also in digital economy, education and the green energy transition. Azerbaijan’s hosting of the 2024 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP29) and the planned ‘Green Energy Corridor’ across the Caspian represent a critical opportunity for the region’s integration with sustainable development goals. If the C6 countries can close the \$18.5 billion infrastructure gap and conduct balanced diplomacy with external actors (EU, U.S. and China), it is projected that the cargo volume on the corridor will triple, and transit times will decrease to as low as 13 days by 2030.⁵⁴

Conclusion

In conclusion, Azerbaijan’s fully fledged participation in the C6 format signifies the breaking of the ‘Caspian barrier’ and the establishment of a strategic ‘Caspian bridge’ on the geopolitical map of Eurasia. This institutional transformation has turned Central Asia and the relevant part of the South Caucasus into a single geo-economic basin and enabled the countries of the region to declare their own strategic subjectivity by moving away from the shadow of great powers such as Russia and China. The institutionalisation of the TITR is not merely a transport project but the operational embodiment of the ‘Turkic world vision’ on the ground.

While Azerbaijan has become the ‘strategic node’ of this new architecture through its massive infrastructure investments and alliance policies, Türkiye has consolidated its role as the ‘catalyst actor’ that provides the corridor’s final connection to Europe and supports regional security at NATO standards. The EU’s Global Gateway strategy and the potential C6+1 format involving the United States increase the international legitimacy and resilience of this new regional reality. However, sustainable success requires the elimination of infrastructure bottlenecks, the full digital harmonisation of customs procedures and the preservation of intra-regional political stability.

54 European Commission and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), *Sustainable Transport Connections between Europe and Central Asia*, June 2023, Available at: https://transport.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-06/Sustainable_transport_connections_between_Europe_and_Central_Asia.pdf (Accessed: May 14, 2026).

Ultimately, the C6 platform offers a model of ‘security through connectivity’ for peace and prosperity in the multipolar world of the 21st century. This model is poised to become one of the most fundamental dynamics shaping the economic and political future of Eurasia in the coming decades by positioning the region as an indispensable island of stability in global trade.