

Black Sea-Caspian Region Cooperation: Security Challenges and Economic Developments

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The Black Sea-Caspian region has reemerged as a central arena of geopolitical contestation and connectivity in the 21st century. Stretching from Eastern Europe through the South Caucasus to Central Asia, it represents a strategic hinge between the Euro-Atlantic area, the post-Soviet region and Asian centres of production. This article examines the evolving security architecture and economic prospects of the Black Sea-Caspian macro-region, with particular emphasis on the prospects for multilateral cooperation among Ukraine and its strategic partners in this region – Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Romania. Drawing on realist, liberal institutionalist and constructivist perspectives in international relations, the study argues that the region is undergoing structural transformation driven by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, war in the Middle East, the reconfiguration of Eurasian trade routes and intensified energy diversification efforts. Institutional mechanisms such as the GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development and the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) have contributed to regional stability, while Western engagement has reinforced connectivity strategies. The analysis demonstrates that, although security dilemmas persist, expanding economic interdependence, infrastructure integration and normative convergence offer a pathway towards a more cohesive macro-regional order. The article concludes that the Black Sea-Caspian region is gradually transitioning from a fragmented geopolitical frontier into a dynamic, though still contested, centre of Eurasian connectivity.

Keywords: Black Sea, Caspian region, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Regional Cooperation.



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Introduction

The Black Sea–Caspian region occupies a pivotal position in the geopolitical architecture of Eurasia. Historically contested by imperial formations – including the Ottoman, Russian, Safavid and, later, Soviet regimes – the region has long functioned as both a frontier and a bridge. In the contemporary era, it constitutes a strategic intersection linking Europe, the South Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East. Its geopolitical importance derives not only from geography but also from the convergence of security competition, energy transit, infrastructure corridors and competing normative projects.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 profoundly reconfigured the political geography of this region. Then newly independent states – including Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova – began to construct sovereign institutions while navigating the gravitational pull of both Euro-Atlantic engagement and Russian influence. For much of the 1990s and early 2000s, the region remained characterized by ‘frozen conflicts’, fragile state-building processes and incomplete regional institutionalization.

Russia’s armed aggression against Ukraine, which started with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, marked a turning point in the Black Sea security environment. The peninsula’s militarization altered maritime balances and reshaped regional deterrence calculations. The full-scale invasion by Russia of Ukraine in 2022 represented an even more profound rupture. Beyond its devastating humanitarian and military consequences, the war has accelerated structural transformations across Eurasia. Supply chains have been redirected, energy systems diversified, sanctions regimes imposed and diplomatic alignments recalibrated.

Within this context, the longstanding Ukraine–Azerbaijan and Ukraine–Türkiye strategic partnerships, as well as the newly established Ukraine–Romania strategic partnership, have gained new significance. Although differing in size, capabilities and geopolitical positioning, these states share common interests in preserving sovereignty, diversifying economic linkages and strengthening connectivity, independent of coercive dominance.

This article addresses three core questions:

1. How has the war in Ukraine reshaped the regional security architecture of the Black Sea–Caspian region?

2. What role do regional institutional frameworks play in fostering cooperation and macro-regional identity?
3. Can expanding connectivity and economic integration mitigate enduring security dilemmas?

By integrating realist and constructivist approaches, the study argues that the region is undergoing a complex transformation driven by power shifts, institutional innovation and evolving identity narratives. The Black Sea–Caspian macro-region is not yet consolidated, but the cumulative effects of infrastructure integration, energy interdependence and normative alignment suggest the gradual emergence of a more cohesive strategic area.

Theoretical Framework: Power, Interdependence and Regionalism

The evolution of the Black Sea–Caspian region can be viewed through multiple theoretical lenses in international relations.

From a neorealist perspective, the region exemplifies a classic security dilemma. States seek to increase their security – through military modernization, alliance formation or strategic infrastructure – yet these measures may be interpreted as threats by others. Russia’s aggressive policies in the Black Sea region have intensified balancing behaviour among neighbouring states. Ukraine’s accelerated cooperation with NATO members, Türkiye’s enhanced naval posture, Romania’s integration into NATO and Azerbaijan’s diversification of security partnerships illustrate such dynamics.

Offensive realism offers a structural interpretation of Russia’s actions as attempts to maintain regional hegemony and prevent perceived encroachment by Western institutions.¹ Moscow’s consolidation of military assets in occupied Crimea, expansion of naval capabilities and use of energy leverage can be interpreted as strategies to secure strategic depth and deter the integration of neighbouring states into security structures perceived by Russia as hostile.

However, realism alone cannot fully capture the region’s evolving connectivity architecture. Liberal institutionalist theory emphasizes the role of complex interdependence and institutions in mitigating conflict.²

1 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (W. W. Norton, 2001), p. 29–54.

2 Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (1977), p. 24–37.

Economic linkages, shared infrastructure and multilateral frameworks increase the costs of confrontation. Organizations such as GUAM and the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) facilitate dialogue, trade coordination and normative convergence. Infrastructure corridors – especially the Trans-Caspian route – include states in shared networks of economic interest.

Constructivist approaches further emphasize the importance of identity, norms and shared narratives.³ Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Romania increasingly articulate foreign policies grounded in principles of territorial integrity, sovereignty and multipolar engagement. A collective memory of sovereignty challenges has fostered solidarity narratives that reinforce cooperation beyond mere material incentives.

Together, these perspectives suggest that the Black Sea–Caspian transformation reflects not only power competition but also institutional learning and identity formation. The region is shaped by a dynamic interplay between structural constraints and ambitious initiatives.

Geopolitical Significance of the Black Sea–Caspian Region

Geographically, the Black Sea–Caspian region constitutes a vital connective centre linking Europe to Asia and functioning as a bridge maker within the broader Eurasian landmass. Its geopolitical significance derives from a combination of maritime access, abundant energy resources, transit infrastructure and the presence of critical

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strategic bottlenecks. Control and management of these assets shape regional power dynamics, influence trade flows and affect the security calculations of both regional and global actors. As global supply chains become increasingly sensitive to disruption, the strategic weight of this interlinked maritime and land corridor continues to grow.⁴

The Black Sea occupies a particularly sensitive position at the intersection of NATO territory, the European Union's (EU) interests and Moscow's aggressive ambitions. It is bordered by NATO members Türkiye, Romania and Bulgaria, Western partners Ukraine and Georgia, but also Russia. Since 2014, when Russia's

3 Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999), p. 224–233.

4 Carol Weaver, *The Politics of the Black Sea Region: EU Neighbourhood, Conflict Zone or Future Security Community?*, (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 13–21.

military aggression against Ukraine began with its illegal annexation of Crimea, Moscow has significantly enhanced its military posture on the peninsula, deploying advanced missile systems and air-defence assets, and reinforcing its naval presence.⁵ The militarization of occupied Crimea altered the regional balance, expanding Russia's anti-access capabilities and projecting aggressive power across much of the sea.⁶ Consequently, the protection of marine lines of communication has become central to both military strategy and the safety of commercial shipping for Black Sea littoral states. Ensuring freedom of navigation, safeguarding grain exports and maintaining open maritime corridors are now integral components of regional stability.

The Caspian Sea basin, meanwhile, holds substantial hydrocarbon reserves that underpin its geopolitical relevance. Offshore energy development, particularly in Azerbaijan's sector of the sea, has enabled the construction of diversified export routes to European markets via Türkiye.⁷ At the same time, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan also contribute significantly to the basin's energy output, reinforcing its role as a major supplier within Eurasian energy networks. The clarification of the Caspian Sea's legal status through the 2018 Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea provided greater predictability in maritime governance, resource development and security arrangements.⁸ This legal framework has reduced uncertainty and facilitated more structured cooperation among littoral states, thus enhancing the basin's attractiveness for long-term investment.

Between these two maritime basins lies the South Caucasus – a geopolitical junction that connects northern Eurasia to Anatolia and Central Asia. This narrow corridor concentrates critical infrastructure that underpins East–West connectivity. Major pipelines, including the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Southern Gas Corridor, run

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5 Kornely Kakachia, Stephan Malerius, and Stefan Meister, eds., *Security Dynamics in the Black Sea Region: Geopolitical Shifts and Regional Orders* (Cham: Springer, 2024), p. 5–11.

6 Oleksandr Pavliuk and Ivanna Klympush-Tsintsadze, *The Black Sea Region: Cooperation and Security Building*, (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe / Routledge, 2004) p. 37–44.

7 Shirin Akiner, ed., *The Caspian: Politics, Energy and Security* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 119–134.

8 Yunis Gurbanov, *Geopolitics and Energy Diplomacy in the Caspian Region: Developments after the Downfall of the Soviet Union*, (Bielefeld: transcript Publishing, 2025), p. 182–190.

through the region alongside railways, highways and digital fibre-optic networks.⁹ As a result, power in this region increasingly derives from the management of connectivity — the ability to secure, regulate and optimize transit flows — rather than from territorial control alone. Infrastructure governance, resilience against hybrid threats and regulatory harmonization have become as strategically significant as conventional military positioning.

The transformation of trade routes in response to Moscow's war against Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Russia has further elevated the importance of the Black Sea–Caspian region. As northern corridors passing through Russian territory encounter political and logistical constraints, alternative East–West pathways are gaining prominence.¹⁰ This reconfiguration enhances the strategic value of transit networks linking the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea and onward to European markets. In this evolving landscape, the region is no longer a peripheral frontier but a central axis of Eurasian connectivity, where maritime security, energy flows and infrastructure governance converge to shape broader geopolitical outcomes.

Prospects for Strategic Convergence: Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Romania

The active development of strategic cooperation in Ukraine–Azerbaijan and Ukraine–Türkiye relations, as well as the recent establishment of Ukraine–Romania strategic cooperation, reflects a growing recognition of shared vulnerabilities as well as complementary geopolitical and economic assets. Positioned along the Black Sea–Caspian axis, the four states control critical transit and security corridors that have become increasingly significant amid shifting regional power balances. Their prospective multilateral cooperation has not yet been formalized as an alliance structure; however, positive dynamics in Ukraine's bilateral relations with Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Romania demonstrate a pragmatic pattern of cooperation shaped by common security concerns, energy interdependence and connectivity ambitions. Such interactions illustrate how middle powers can flexibly coordinate in response to systemic uncertainty.¹¹

9 Yannis Tsantoulis, *The Geopolitics of Region Building in the Black Sea: A Critical Examination* (London: Routledge, 2021), p. 146–156.

10 Dan Dungaciu, ed., *The Geopolitical Black Sea Encyclopaedia* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), p. 9–12.

11 Yannis Tsantoulis, *The Geopolitics of Region Building in the Black Sea: A Critical*

Türkiye holds a distinctive geopolitical position as a NATO member with autonomous regional influence and strategic depth across multiple theatres. Its control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles under the Montreux Convention grants Ankara regulatory authority over naval transit between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, providing both leverage and responsibility in times of crisis.¹² Through careful application of this legal framework, Türkiye has managed access to the Black Sea in a manner that underscores its role as a gatekeeper of maritime security. At the same time, Ankara has pursued a calibrated foreign policy: firmly supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity while maintaining open channels of communication with Russia. This balanced approach enhances Türkiye's diplomatic manoeuvrability and reinforces its status as a pivotal regional mediator.

By investing in infrastructure, logistics and defence modernization, Azerbaijan enhances both national resilience and its value as a regional partner within broader connectivity initiatives.

Azerbaijan, for its part, has leveraged both its hydrocarbon potential and strategic geography to cultivate diversified partnerships across Eurasia. As a key energy supplier and transit state connecting the Caspian basin to European markets, it has strengthened ties with Western institutions while also engaging with regional organizations and neighbouring powers. This multifaceted diplomatic approach reflects a strong emphasis on strategic autonomy, allowing Baku to avoid overdependence on any single external actor.¹³ By investing in infrastructure, logistics and defence modernization, Azerbaijan enhances both national resilience and its value as a regional partner within broader connectivity initiatives.¹⁴

Romania, situated at the crossroads of central, eastern and southeastern Europe, has increasingly positioned itself as a strategic anchor on the Black Sea and a vital link between European and transatlantic structures. As a member of the EU and NATO, it contributes to regional security while facilitating energy diversification and transport connectivity in the wider Black Sea basin. Its ports, particularly Constanța, play a growing role in handling trade flows, including the transit of Ukrainian

Examination (London: Routledge, 2021), p. 63–67.

12 Ulusoy, K., “The montreux convention: a key for understanding the geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea”, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 2024, p. 1–18. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2024.2433800>.

13 Svante E. Cornell, *Azerbaijan Since Independence* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2011), p. 102–108.

14 Shirin Akiner, ed., *The Caspian: Politics, Energy and Security* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 121–125.

goods, amid Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine. At the same time, Romania is a key participant in the emerging Caspian Sea–Black Sea–Europe Green Energy Corridor, centred on a major submarine electricity cable project linking Azerbaijan and Georgia to Europe via the Black Sea. This initiative, agreed in 2022 with regional partners, envisions the transmission of renewable electricity – primarily wind and solar – through Georgia and onward to Romania, where it will be integrated into the European grid and further distributed across the continent. The planned high-voltage cable, stretching over 1,100 kilometres beneath the Black Sea, is expected to significantly enhance energy security, diversify supply sources and strengthen interregional connectivity while supporting Europe's green transition. By investing in infrastructure modernization, energy interconnectivity and defence capabilities, Romania enhances its role as both a logistical hub and an energy gateway, reinforcing regional resilience and deepening integration with broader Euro-Atlantic frameworks.

Ukraine, for its part, remains central to European and global stability due to its ongoing resistance to Moscow's military aggression, agricultural capacity, industrial base and long-term connectivity potential. As one of the world's major grain exporters, Ukraine plays a vital role in global food security, particularly for markets in the Middle East, Africa and Asia.¹⁵ Despite extensive war-related destruction, its agricultural exports continue to influence global supply chains, while its reconstruction process presents opportunities for modernization and integration into diversified transport corridors. Ukraine's infrastructure potential – from railway networks to digital systems – positions it as a critical node in post-war regional integration and East–West connectivity architectures.¹⁶

Ukraine's enhanced defence/industrial cooperation with Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Romania has the potential to result in tangible multilateral convergence. Ongoing Ukrainian–Turkish collaboration in unmanned aerial systems and related technologies illustrates how shared security needs can be transformed into practical industrial partnerships. Such cooperation strengthens deterrence capabilities, facilitates technological exchange and fosters interoperability among defence sectors.¹⁷ Beyond

15 Serhii Plokhyy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), p. 457–462.

16 Richard Connolly, *Russia's Response to Sanctions: How Western Economic Statecraft is Reshaping Political Economy in Russia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 221–225.

17 Antonio Missiroli et al., eds., *Defence Industrial Cooperation in the European Union: The State of Play*, (Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, 2016), p. 88–92.

the military dimension, these initiatives reinforce political solidarity and signal a commitment to sustained strategic coordination.

Taken together, a potentially strong multilateral alignment among Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Romania can constitute more than just ad hoc cooperation. It can represent a form of soft balancing within a multipolar regional environment, where coordination enhances resilience without formal bloc formation. Simultaneously, the ongoing expansion of economic ties, infrastructure collaboration and institutional dialogue indicates deepening interdependence. Prospective strategic convergence among Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Romania will therefore reflect an adaptive response to geopolitical transformation – one that integrates security considerations with economic integration and long-term regional connectivity.

Institutional Foundations: GUAM and BSEC

The GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development, established in 1997, brought together Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova as post-Soviet states seeking cooperative alternatives to Russian-led structures.¹⁸

While GUAM's operational capacity has often been limited, its symbolic significance is substantial. It institutionalizes principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and democratic governance. Particularly in the wake of Russia's war against Ukraine, GUAM's normative alignment has regained relevance as a platform for articulating shared security concerns and reinforcing political solidarity among its members.¹⁹

Institutions can persist even when their immediate material impact appears modest. They reduce transaction costs, facilitate information exchange and shape expectations of behaviour. GUAM contributes to regional cooperation by providing a framework within which member states can coordinate diplomatic positions and articulate common priorities in international forums. Its institutional logic is therefore primarily normative and political: it affirms a shared orientation towards

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18 Carol Weaver, *The Politics of the Black Sea Region*, (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 57–60.

19 Kornely Kakachia, Stephan Malerius, and Stefan Meister ed., *Security Dynamics in the Black Sea Region: Geopolitical Shifts and Regional Orders* (Cham: Springer, 2024), p. 142–147.

the Euro-Atlantic community and resistance to external domination.

The Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (**BSEC**), launched in 1992 and formalized by its Charter in 1999, represents a broader and more heterogeneous model of regional institutionalization. It encompasses member states from the Black Sea region and beyond, including both EU and NATO members, as well as post-Soviet countries.²⁰

Unlike GUAM, BSEC is not built upon explicit normative alignment or shared geopolitical orientation. Its mandate is primarily functional, emphasizing economic cooperation in areas such as trade, energy, transport, infrastructure and environmental protection. This technocratic focus allows states with divergent political positions to cooperate within a structured, depoliticized framework.²¹

Although BSEC has been criticized for limited enforcement capacity and modest political visibility, its endurance reflects a different form of institutional relevance. By sustaining regular ministerial meetings, working groups and a permanent secretariat, it preserves channels of dialogue even during periods of heightened regional tension. In a region marked by protracted conflicts and geopolitical competition, this continuity is itself significant.²²

From a theoretical perspective, BSEC closely reflects the liberal institutionalist model; institutions facilitate cooperation by reducing uncertainty, structuring expectations and lowering the costs of repeated interaction. While it does not function as a security alliance or a normative bloc, BSEC institutionalizes economic interdependence and maintains a multilateral platform capable of stabilizing regional interaction.²³

Thus, taken together, GUAM and BSEC illustrate two distinct yet complementary models of regional institutionalization in the Black Sea region. GUAM represents a grouping focused on sovereignty, democratic governance and strategic coordination among like-minded states, whereas BSEC embodies a functionally oriented, inclusive

20 Oleksandr Pavliuk and Ivanna KlympushTsintsadze ed., *The Black Sea Region: Cooperation and Security Building*, (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), p. 33–37.

21 Yannis Tsantoulis, *The Geopolitics of Region Building in the Black Sea*, (London: Routledge, 2021), p. 89–92.

22 Dan Dungaciu ed., *The Geopolitical Black Sea Encyclopedia*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), p. 215–218.

23 Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 27–32.

framework centred on economic cooperation and pragmatic engagement across geopolitical lines of division.

Where GUAM reinforces collective identity and shared political positioning, BSEC prioritizes continuity of interaction and economic interdependence. One advances regional cooperation through normative solidarity; the other sustains regional stability through functional cooperation.

Both institutions demonstrate that even organizations with limited coercive power can shape regional order. They reduce uncertainty, provide arenas for coordination and structure expectations – thereby contributing to the broader governance architecture in the Black Sea region.

The Organization of Turkic States and Expanding Integration

The OTS, founded in 2009 as the Turkic Council, represents an evolving framework of cooperation among Turkic countries across Eurasia. Its core members – Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan – are joined by observers, including Turkmenistan and Hungary, reflecting both cultural affinity and expanding geopolitical outreach. Since its institutional transformation and renaming, the OTS has deepened its organizational structure, signalling ambitions that extend beyond symbolic cultural solidarity towards structured political and economic coordination.²⁴

The OTS provides a multilateral platform for political dialogue, economic logistics and cultural exchange spanning Anatolia, the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Through regular summits, ministerial meetings and sectoral working groups, member states coordinate on trade facilitation, transport connectivity, digital transformation and educational initiatives. This institutionalization reflects a broader pattern of Eurasian regionalism that complements, rather than replaces, global multilateral engagement.²⁵ Instead of positioning itself in opposition to existing international structures, the OTS operates as a reinforcing layer of regional cooperation that enhances connectivity and policy alignment among its members.

24 Eugene Rumer, Dmitri Trenin, and Zhao Huasheng, *The New Geopolitics of Central Asia*, (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016), p. 174–178.

25 Alexander Cooley, *Central Asia in International Relations*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 203–208.

Economically, the organization supports efforts to harmonize customs procedures, promote investment flows and strengthen transcontinental transport corridors. Its agenda aligns closely with emerging East–West trade routes, including infrastructure initiatives, such as the Middle Corridor, that link Central Asia to European and Mediterranean markets. In this regard, the OTS contributes to a more integrated Eurasian economic space while preserving the sovereignty and independent foreign policy orientations of its member states.²⁶

For Azerbaijan and Türkiye, the OTS reinforces East–West connectivity and broadens access to expanding Central Asian markets. It enhances diplomatic coordination and creates opportunities for joint infrastructure, energy and logistics projects that strengthen these countries' roles as regional hubs. The institutional framework also amplifies their collective voice in broader Eurasian discussions, increasing strategic visibility and leverage.²⁷

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For Ukraine, engagement with OTS member states offers diversification of opportunities in trade, energy cooperation and post-war reconstruction partnerships. Closer interaction with this regional grouping could facilitate integration into broader supply chains that traverse the Caspian and Central Asian regions, thereby reinforcing Ukraine's East–West connectivity options. Even without formal membership, structured dialogue and sectoral cooperation with OTS countries could expand economic resilience and strategic flexibility.²⁸

The institutional consolidation of the OTS signals that Eurasian regionalism is becoming increasingly multidirectional, moving away from dominance by a single hegemonic centre. Power and influence across the region are diffusing among multiple cooperative frameworks, creating overlapping networks of connectivity and dialogue. In this emerging landscape, organizations like the OTS illustrate how regional integration can evolve through pragmatic coordination, shared infrastructure interests and incremental institutional development, thereby contributing to a more plural and interconnected Eurasian order.

26 Shirin Akiner ed., *The Caspian: Politics, Energy and Security*, (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 135–140.

27 Svante E. Cornell, *Azerbaijan Since Independence* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2011), p. 115–120.

28 Serhii Plokhyy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine*, (New York: Basic Books, 2015), p. 468–472.

Western Engagement and Strategic Connectivity

Western engagement in the broader Black Sea–Caspian region has increasingly centred on strategic connectivity, reflecting a recognition that infrastructure, trade corridors and energy networks are inseparable from geopolitical stability. The EU has advanced connectivity initiatives designed to link Europe more closely with Central Asia through the South Caucasus and Türkiye, thereby strengthening transcontinental transport and energy routes, such as TRACECA, Strategy on Black Sea Security, etc. These efforts are embedded in broader frameworks that prioritize sustainable infrastructure, regulatory alignment and secure supply chains. By promoting multimodal transport corridors and digital connectivity, the EU seeks to reduce logistical bottlenecks while reinforcing the region’s role as a bridge maker between Europe and Asia.²⁹ This stance was also reflected in the EU’s Black Sea Strategy, announced in May 2025.

Energy diversification has become a particularly urgent priority following significant reductions in Russian gas supplies to Europe. In this context, Azerbaijan’s exports have assumed greater prominence within Europe’s energy mix, contributing to supply security and price stabilization. Expanded gas deliveries through established corridors have not only enhanced Europe’s resilience but also elevated Azerbaijan’s strategic importance as a reliable energy partner. This shift was confirmed by the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy between the EU and Azerbaijan in July 2022. This illustrates how geopolitical shocks can accelerate structural transformations in regional energy relationships, in this case embedding Caspian resources more firmly within European markets.

At the same time, the United States has intensified diplomatic engagement in the South Caucasus, emphasizing the importance of stability, open transit corridors and post-conflict reconciliation. Washington’s approach underscores the view that unresolved conflicts and closed borders in this region hinder economic development and create vulnerabilities exploitable by external actors. By supporting dialogue initiatives, confidence-building measures and economic normalization, the United States seeks to foster in the South Caucasus a predictable regional environment conducive to trade and investment. Diplomatic involvement also signals a broader strategic interest in maintaining

29 Mark Leonard, *Connectivity Wars: Why Migration, Finance and Trade Are the GeoEconomic Battlegrounds of the Future*, (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2016), p. 54–60.

The convergence of security and economic objectives underscores a fundamental reality: geopolitical stability and economic resilience are mutually reinforcing. balance and preventing the monopolization of influence by any single external power.³⁰

Western engagement thus reflects a dual strategic logic. On the one hand, it embodies realist balancing, aimed at countering or constraining Moscow's influence in a region historically shaped by Russian power projection. On the other hand, it advances a liberal vision centred on market integration, institutional cooperation and rule-based connectivity. Infrastructure financing, regulatory harmonization and renewable energy investments illustrate this integrated approach, combining geostrategic considerations with economic modernization. The convergence of security and economic objectives underscores a fundamental reality: geopolitical stability and economic resilience are mutually reinforcing. Durable connectivity projects require a secure political environment, while sustained stability is more achievable when underpinned by shared prosperity and interdependence.³¹

The Middle Corridor and Trade Reconfiguration

The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route – widely known as the Middle Corridor – has gained renewed strategic prominence amid disruptions of traditional northern Eurasian trade routes. Wars in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, geopolitical tensions, sanctions regimes and security uncertainties have exposed the vulnerabilities of overreliance on single transit corridors, prompting both regional and global actors to reassess trade geography. In this context, the Middle Corridor has emerged not merely as an alternative pathway but as a structurally significant axis of connectivity linking Asia and Europe through a diversified and politically adaptable framework.³²

By connecting China and Central Asia with the European Union via Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Türkiye (or the Black Sea), the corridor exemplifies a reorientation of transcontinental

30 Eugene Rumer, Dmitri Trenin, and Zhao Huasheng, *The New Geopolitics of Central Asia: Competing Perspectives*, (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016), p. 182–187.

31 Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 45–50.

32 Eugene Rumer, Dmitri Trenin, and Zhao Huasheng, *The New Geopolitics of Central Asia: Competing Perspectives*, (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016), p. 190–195.

trade flows. It integrates rail, maritime and road transport into a multimodal chain designed to optimize efficiency and reduce transit times. The Caspian Sea functions as a pivotal maritime link, while South Caucasus infrastructure provides the land bridge to European markets. This configuration reflects a broader shift towards flexible, logistical networks capable of adapting to geopolitical and economic disruptions.³³

Significant investment in infrastructure modernization has reinforced the corridor's viability. Upgraded port facilities along the Caspian coast, expanded railway capacity across Kazakhstan and the South Caucasus, and improved intermodal terminals have increased capacity and reduced bottlenecks. Customs digitalization and harmonized transit procedures have further enhanced efficiency by streamlining documentation processes and minimizing border delays. These technical improvements are essential to transforming the Middle Corridor from a geopolitical concept into a commercially competitive and reliable trade artery.

For participating states, the corridor strengthens strategic autonomy by reducing dependence on external transit monopolies and diversifying export routes. It also generates transit revenues, stimulates logistics sectors and encourages foreign direct investment in infrastructure and manufacturing.

For Europe, the Middle Corridor contributes to supply chain diversification, enhancing resilience against political or logistical disruptions along other routes. It aligns with broader European connectivity strategies that prioritize secure, transparent and sustainable infrastructure partnerships.³⁴

For Ukraine, prospective integration into this evolving network carries significant long-term implications. As reconstruction efforts advance, linking Ukrainian infrastructure to the Middle Corridor could accelerate economic recovery, attract investment and make the country an important part of a resilient East–West connectivity architecture. Participation would not only facilitate trade expansion but also symbolically anchor Ukraine within a diversified Eurasian transport ecosystem. In this sense, the Middle Corridor represents more than a logistical pathway; it embodies the strategic reconfiguration of

33 Shirin Akiner ed., *The Caspian: Politics, Energy and Security* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 128–132.

34 Mark Leonard, *Connectivity Wars: Why Migration, Finance and Trade Are the GeoEconomic Battlegrounds of the Future*, (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2016), p. 61–65.

trade, sovereignty and regional interdependence in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.³⁵

Energy Security and Diversification

Energy cooperation remains a foundational pillar of macro-regional integration, shaping not only economic interdependence but also broader geopolitical stability. In an environment marked by supply disruptions and shifting global energy dynamics, coordinated energy strategies enhance both resilience and strategic autonomy. The development of cross-border infrastructure and long-term contractual frameworks strengthens trust among partners while anchoring the region within wider European and Eurasian energy networks. In this context, energy security is not solely about supply volumes but also about reliability, diversification and adaptability to changing market and political conditions.³⁶

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A central component of this framework is the Southern Gas Corridor, which transports Azerbaijan's natural gas to European markets and plays a critical role in diversification efforts. By providing an alternative route for and source of natural gas, the corridor reduces overdependence on single suppliers and enhances Europe's energy resilience. Beyond its economic significance, the project represents a strategic linkage between the Caspian region and Europe, reinforcing infrastructure connectivity and long-term cooperation. Its continued expansion and optimization could further stabilize supply flows while supporting competitive energy pricing across participating states.

Ukraine's extensive underground gas storage facilities and well-developed transmission networks present additional opportunities for synergy within a diversified regional system. With one of the largest storage capacities in Europe, Ukraine can function as a strategic regulator, enhancing seasonal flexibility and emergency preparedness. Joint utilization of these facilities, combined with modernization of

³⁵ Yannis Tsantoulis, *The Geopolitics of Region Building in the Black Sea: A Critical Examination*, (London: Routledge, 2021), p. 112–116.

³⁶ Jan H. Kalicki and David L. Goldwyn ed., *Energy and Security: Strategies for a World in Transition*, (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press / Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), p. 78–83.

transmission infrastructure, could increase efficiency, reduce bottlenecks and strengthen cross-border energy integration. Such cooperation would not only bolster national energy security but also contribute to a more interconnected and shock-resistant regional market.³⁷

At the same time, renewable energy initiatives are reshaping the long-term trajectory of regional energy cooperation. Offshore wind power plants in the Caspian Sea and emerging green hydrogen projects demonstrate a forward-looking commitment to sustainable development. These initiatives align the region more closely with European decarbonization objectives and climate policies, thus opening avenues for technological investment, innovation and green financing. The coexistence of hydrocarbons and renewables highlights a hybrid energy identity – one that balances immediate supply needs and export revenues with long-term sustainability goals. By integrating traditional energy resources with the clean energy transition, the region can maintain economic stability today while positioning itself competitively within the evolving global energy landscape.³⁸

Security Cooperation and Hybrid Threats

Security cooperation has become increasingly vital in an era defined by complex and evolving hybrid threats. Hybrid threats – including cyber operations, disinformation campaigns, infrastructure sabotage and other non-conventional tactics – have intensified in both frequency and sophistication. These challenges blur the lines between war and peace by targeting not only military assets but also civilian infrastructure and public trust. As a result, the protection of critical infrastructure such as pipelines, ports, energy corridors, transportation hubs and digital systems has become a shared strategic priority for regional partners seeking to safeguard stability and economic continuity.³⁹

37 Andreas Goldthau ed., *The Politics of Energy Security: Theories and Cases*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), p. 102–107.

38 Indra Overland, *The Geopolitics of the Global Energy Transition* (Cham: Springer, 2019), p. 145–150.

See also: Agreement on Strategic Partnership in the Development and Transmission of Green Energy signed by Azerbaijan, Georgia, Romania and Hungary in 2022, Agreement to develop and transmit green energy signed by Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan in 2024.

39 Williamson Murray and Peter R. Mansoor ed., *Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 201–205.

In response to these risks, enhanced intelligence sharing and deeper cybersecurity coordination play a central role in strengthening collective resilience. Timely exchange of information on emerging threats allows governments to anticipate vulnerabilities and respond proactively rather than reactively. Joint monitoring systems, coordinated incident response mechanisms and regular consultations among security agencies improve preparedness against cyber intrusions and coordinated disinformation efforts. Maritime patrol cooperation further reinforces this security architecture by ensuring situational awareness and rapid response capabilities in strategically sensitive waters.⁴⁰

The complementary strengths of regional actors contribute significantly to this cooperative framework. Türkiye's advanced defence-industry capabilities provide production capacity, technological expertise and operational experience across multiple domains. Ukraine's technological innovations, particularly in digital systems and unmanned technologies, add adaptive and battle-tested solutions to emerging security challenges. Azerbaijan's and Türkiye's modernization initiatives and investments in defence reform enhance interoperability and regional readiness. Romania's strategic position on the Black Sea and its role as a member of both NATO and the EU contribute to the development of critical infrastructure, logistical connectivity and integration with Euro-Atlantic defence frameworks. Together, these capabilities can form a synergistic foundation that increases deterrence while promoting long-term defence integration.

Maritime security in both the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea remains essential for safeguarding trade flows, energy exports and supply chains that are critical to regional and global markets. These waterways serve not only as economic lifelines but also as strategic corridors whose stability directly affects broader geopolitical dynamics. Coordinated naval exercises, joint training programmes and standardized communication protocols reduce the risks of miscalculation and unintended escalation. Confidence-building mechanisms, including transparency measures and regular dialogue among military and civilian authorities, further strengthen predictability and trust. Through sustained cooperation and strategic coordination, regional actors can better mitigate hybrid threats while reinforcing collective security and economic resilience.⁴¹

40 Thomas Rid, *Cyber War Will Not Take Place*, (London: Hurst & Company, 2013), p. 89–94.

41 Charles King, *The Black Sea: A History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 98–102.

Towards a Cohesive Macro-Region

Connectivity initiatives, expanding institutionalization and growing strategic convergence collectively point towards the gradual consolidation of a cohesive macro-region across the Black Sea–Caspian region. What was once a fragmented geopolitical landscape marked by competing spheres of influence is increasingly characterized by overlapping networks of infrastructure, trade and policy coordination. The expansion of multimodal transport corridors, energy interconnections and digital platforms reflects a structural shift from isolation towards managed interdependence. Rather than emerging through a single treaty or supranational body, this macro-regional consolidation is unfolding through practical cooperation and shared economic incentives.

Digital customs systems, harmonized technical standards and integrated logistics platforms play a central role in this transformation. The adoption of electronic documentation, interoperable transit regimes and streamlined border procedures reduces transaction costs and shortens delivery times. Such measures enhance predictability for investors and traders, making cross-border commerce more competitive and resilient. As regulatory frameworks converge and supply chains become more tightly interwoven, economic interdependence deepens, creating tangible benefits for participating states. Infrastructure modernization and institutional coordination thus reinforce each other, generating cumulative momentum towards regional integration.

This expanding interdependence carries important security implications. As trade volumes grow and infrastructure networks become mutually beneficial, the economic cost of disruption or conflict rises significantly. States embedded in shared transit corridors, energy systems and digital markets acquire incentives to preserve stability and avoid escalation. In this sense, connectivity can function as a stabilizing force, embedding geopolitical relations within a framework of material interdependence. However, such dynamics do not eliminate power politics altogether. Unresolved territorial disputes, fragile ceasefires and asymmetric military capabilities continue to impose realistic constraints on deeper integration. Wars in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, strategic mistrust and external rivalries remain structural features of the regional environment.⁴²

42 John R. O Neal and Bruce Russett ed., *Economic Interdependence and War*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 56–61.

The long-term durability of macro-regional consolidation therefore depends on several interlinked variables. Post-war reconstruction and stabilization in Ukraine will be decisive in restoring full East–West connectivity and reinforcing confidence in regional trade corridors. Sustainable peace consolidation in the South Caucasus is equally critical for safeguarding transit routes and ensuring predictable cross-border cooperation. Above all, sustained political commitment to cooperative frameworks – including investment in institutions, transparency mechanisms and dispute-resolution processes – will determine whether incremental connectivity evolves into a resilient macro-regional order.⁴³

In sum, the trajectory towards a cohesive Black Sea–Caspian macro-region is neither automatic nor irreversible. It is shaped by the interplay of economic pragmatism and geopolitical constraints. If reconstruction, reconciliation and institutional deepening proceed in parallel, the region may increasingly function as an integrated strategic area, defined less by fragmentation and rivalry, and more by structured interdependence and shared development.

Conclusion

The Black Sea–Caspian region stands at a historic inflection point. Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine did not merely disrupt an existing order; it catalysed a deeper structural transformation of Eurasian geopolitics. Long-standing assumptions about trade routes, energy dependence and regional hierarchies have been fundamentally reassessed. In response, processes that had previously advanced incrementally – trade reconfiguration, energy diversification and institutional innovation – have accelerated with new urgency. What once appeared as a gradual adaptation has become a strategic imperative, reshaping the geopolitical landscape from Eastern Europe to Central Asia.

At the same time, renewed instability and war in the Middle East have further reinforced the strategic relevance of alternative connectivity routes. Disruptions to traditional maritime corridors, heightened security risks and uncertainty surrounding key choke points have underscored the vulnerability of established global supply chains. In this context, the Middle Corridor has gained additional prominence as a comparatively stable, diversified and geopolitically balanced route linking Asia to Europe. By bypassing conflict-prone areas while integrating the Black

43 Charles King, *The Black Sea Region: Cooperation and Conflict in the Eurasian Periphery*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 215–220.

Sea, the South Caucasus, the Caspian Sea and Central Asia into a coherent transit framework, it has emerged not only as a response to regional crises but also as a critical pillar of a more resilient Eurasian connectivity architecture.

Within this evolving environment, potential multilateral cooperation among Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Romania can demonstrate the importance of regional actors amid systemic turbulence.

Rather than being passive arenas of great-power competition, these states have pursued balancing strategies, diversified partnerships and pragmatic institutional engagement. Connectivity initiatives – spanning transport corridors, energy infrastructure and digital systems – illustrate how material interdependence can serve both economic and strategic objectives. Through coordinated action and complementary capabilities, they can contribute to the emergence of a more networked and multidirectional macro-regional order.

At the same time, this transformation remains contingent and uneven. The durability of new trade corridors depends on infrastructure resilience and sustained political coordination. Energy diversification requires long-term investment, regulatory stability and alignment with global decarbonization trends. Institutional innovation must be reinforced by credible commitments to sovereignty, territorial integrity and peaceful dispute resolution. Without these normative and structural foundations, connectivity gains could remain vulnerable to renewed geopolitical shocks.

The trajectory ahead is, therefore, uncertain, shaped by the resistance of Ukraine to Moscow's aggression and the country's reconstruction efforts, as well as the consolidation of peace in the South Caucasus, the war in the Middle East and the strategic choices of regional and external powers. Nevertheless, the direction of change is increasingly evident. If integration deepens, infrastructure expands and cooperative frameworks solidify, the Black Sea–Caspian region may gradually evolve from a historically contested frontier into a dynamic hub of Eurasian connectivity. Anchored in resilience, interdependence and strategic partnerships, it could become not merely a transit zone between different parts of Eurasia, but a coherent macro-region capable of shaping its own geopolitical and economic destiny.

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