

ROLE OF THE MIDDLE CORRIDOR IN CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGY РОЛЬ СЕРЕДНЬОГО КОРИДОРУ У ЗОВНІШНЬОПОЛІТИЧНІЙ СТРАТЕГІЇ КИТАЮ

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Abstract. *This article analyses the role of the Middle Corridor in the current foreign policy strategy of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The paper examines the definition of the Middle Corridor, its participating states and its geopolitical significance in the context of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine. In addition, the article discovers and analyses the role and impact of such countries as Türkiye, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan in the context of the Middle Corridor and the project's impact on their bilateral relations with the People's Republic of China. The article also touches upon the role and strategic interests of the EU within the Middle Corridor, as well as the possible challenges and perspectives in the context of overall success of the Middle Corridor strategy.*

Keywords: *The Middle Corridor, PRC, economic cooperation, logistical infrastructure, transit potential, geopolitical influence, alternative route.*

Анотація. *Дана стаття присвячена аналізу ролі Середнього коридору в сучасній зовнішньополітичній стратегії Китайської Народної Республіки (КНР). У статті розглядається визначення Середнього коридору, держави-учасниці та його геополітичне значення в контексті повномасштабної війни Росії в Україні. Крім того, у статті визначено та проаналізовано роль і вплив таких країн, як Туреччина, Азербайджан і Казахстан, у контексті Середнього коридору, а також вплив проєкту на двосторонні відносини цих держав з Китайською Народною Республікою. У статті також розглядаються роль і стратегічні інтереси ЄС в рамках Середнього коридору, а також можливі виклики і перспективи в контексті загального успіху стратегії Середнього коридору.*

Ключові слова: Серединний коридор, КНР, економічне співробітництво, логістична інфраструктура, транзитний потенціал, геополітичний вплив, альтернативний маршрут.

Introduction. The Middle Corridor, which is also known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), is a vital trade route that connects China and Europe through Southeast Asia, Kazakhstan, Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Türkiye. This route is an important linkage of the markets in China and Europe, providing the shortest route between Western China and Europe, compared to other trade routes, including the Northern Corridor which runs through *Russia* (Carafano, J.J., 2022). The Middle Corridor and its route have some similarities and resemblances of the ancient Silk Road: the historic Silk Road trade route ran through the south of the Caspian Sea and through Persia (which is modern-day Iran), the contemporary Middle Corridor goes past Iran through the ports in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan for transportation of goods across the Caspian Sea into the territory of Azerbaijan. From Azerbaijan's territory, the cargo with diverse goods is directed further to the west to the European countries via either Türkiye or Georgia (Stoll, H., 2024). The Middle Corridor in itself is a network of interconnected road, rail, and sea routes covering a number of infrastructure projects in the countries involved in the realization of the Initiative. For instance, the key components of the Middle Corridor include the Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor Initiative, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, as well as the Trans-Caucasus Trade and Transit Corridor (Chang, F.K., 2023).

Considering the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia and the significant geopolitical shifts and changes entailed by it, it is necessary to admit the profound impact it had on China's foreign policy strategies and the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative in particular. For instance, according to the research conducted by the World Bank, before Russia's war in Ukraine, around 86% of land trade between Europe and China transited through Russian territory alongside the so-called Northern Route, which is several railways from Chinese northern border to Belarus and the mainland of Europe (World Bank, 2023). However, given the USA's and the EU's sanctions against Russia, it had a direct impact on China not only in terms of its influence on the Russian infrastructure - being used as a transit route for goods to Europe from China it had its practical implications for implementing the Belt and Road Initiative, but also had an impact on overall China's foreign policy because of the risk of getting secondary sanctions for trade and cooperation with Russia and Russian entities during the ongoing war in Ukraine. That is why, the existing dependence on transit goods to Europe through Russian infrastructure and territory had a significant impact on the realization of the Belt and Road Initiative. Taking this into account, it was necessary to explore the possible alternative options and possible alternative trade routes. that would not endanger the volume of China's overall trade with Europe (Rizzi, A., 2024). In this regard, the idea of further developing the transit potential and cooperation through the Middle Corridor has become a viable alternative for both the People's Republic of China and the countries of Europe, as it provides the required alternative for transit through Russia and can provide the unimpeded trade between China and the EU, which is an important aspect of post-COVID-19 economic and transit recovery for both parties. Furthermore, from China's perspective, the further development of the Middle Corridor may help strengthen Chinese influence in the region through intensified economic and infrastructural projects, which will definitely impact the geopolitical influence of China on the countries involved in this route (Rizzi, A., 2024).

The purpose of the article is to evaluate the role of the Middle Corridor in the foreign policy strategy of the People's Republic of China, its geopolitical influence and role as an alternative transit trade route between China and Europe, analyse the role of states participating in the Middle Corridor and to review the challenges and perspectives for the future development of the Middle Corridor.

Literature review. While working on the research for the article, the authors analysed an article "Beijing's interest in the Middle Corridor" (Donnellon-May, G., 2023) by Genevieve Donnellon-May, a geopolitical and global strategy advisor interested in regional resource conflict and environmental governance in Asia and Africa, where she described China's strategic interest in the development and implementation of the Middle Corridor, as well as the potential benefits of this project, including

strengthening China's position in the region of Central Asia, establishing an alternative to the Northern Corridor trade route, which in the light of the sanctions against Russia is an important and favourable alternative to diversify transit routes. What is more, Felix K. Chang, a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, in his article "The Middle Corridor through Central Asia: Trade and Influence Ambitions" (*Chang, F.K., 2023*) provided an extensive analysis of the strategic geopolitical interests of the main parties that are involved in the realization of the Middle Corridor, including China and Türkiye. As for Ankara, this article gives a profound understanding of the key goals and interests that Türkiye has in terms of the implementation of the Middle Corridor, including strengthening its influence in the region of Central Asia, especially considering the common linguistic roots with these countries. In turn, Dr. Tuba Eldem from SWP's Centre for Applied Turkey Studies in her article "Russia's War on Ukraine and the Rise of the Middle Corridor as a Third Vector of Eurasian Connectivity" (*Eldem, T., 2022*) stressed the importance of geo-economic importance of the Middle Corridor as an alternative trading and transit routes for Türkiye in the Eurasia, which has become a significant factor in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Alberto Rizzi, a policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations in his work "Risk and reward: Why the EU should develop the Middle Corridor trade route" (*Rizzi, A., 2024*) analysed the role of the European countries and the European Union in the concept of the Middle Corridor, as well as the strategic objective and interests of the European countries in the overall implementation of the project, underscoring a geopolitical significance of the Middle Corridor and its potential to develop into a viable alternative trading route, that will enhance trade between China and the EU. In addition, the authors examined the work of Seymur Mammadov, who in his article "China and Azerbaijan enhance the potential of the Middle Corridor" (*Mammadov, S., 2024*) analysed the role of Azerbaijan in the Middle Corridor and the potential cooperation projects, aimed at developing and increasing the capacities of the relevant infrastructure links in Azerbaijan.

In addition, while working on the research for this article, the authors relied on materials presented in such media outlets as The Diplomat and Bloomberg, as well as official statements and publications on official sources of the European Commission (*European Commission, 2022 & European Commission, 2024*).

Main results of the research. Speaking about the benefits of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route for the People's Republic of China, first of all it is necessary to emphasize the speed factor: upon implementation of this project, cargos will be delivered from China to the EU market through the Middle Corridor in just 12 days, which is a significant breakthrough in terms of time-efficiency compared, for instance, with transit via the Indian Ocean, which takes around 22-37 days (Bloomberg). What is more, according to Genevieve Donnellon-May, China has other important benefits of the Middle Corridor, one of them being the possibility to diminish Chinese reliance and dependence on the current routes and essentially removing the risk of challenges and disruptions to the ongoing logistical projects and trade flows (*Donnellon-May, G., 2023*). Furthermore, according to the researcher, the Middle Corridor can potentially lead to an increased level of China's influence on a regional level in Central Asia and further strengthen Chinese position in the region through investments and more advanced political cooperation, resulting in the growing dependence of the region on China (*Donnellon-May, G., 2023*). Thus, strengthening of China's position in the Central Asia region can undoubtedly shift the balance of power and influence in the region more favourably for China, increasing its geopolitical influence in the region on a larger scale. Adding to this, it is essential to underline, that in the light of the anti-Russian sanctions regime due to Russia's war in Ukraine, the Middle Corridor presents a favourable alternative to diversify its trading and logistical routes, as well as reshape the regional cooperation and connectivity, and, ultimately, the geopolitical and infrastructural landscape to further benefit China (*Donnellon-May, G., 2023*).

Furthermore, Genevieve Donnellon-May stresses the fact that the Middle Corridor will help China have a greater access and possibilities for export of its goods to European markets, as well as in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Taking into account potential reduction of transportation time and costs, these factors have a significant impact on the possibility of the increased volume of trade between China, Central Asia and Europe, essentially making China and its exports even more

valuable and more important on the European market (*Donnellon-May, G., 2023*). Finally, implementation of different infrastructure projects within the Middle Corridor will not only increase bilateral and intra-regional trade, but will also enhance the overall economic growth for the countries involved in the project and, of course, China as a key beneficiary of the logistical and infrastructural potential of the Middle Corridor (*Donnellon-May, G., 2023*).

Additionally, it is fundamentally important to analyse the role of the participating countries in the Middle Corridor project and other important actors like the EU, their influence on the overall implementation of the project, and their bilateral relations with the People's Republic of China through the realization of the Middle Corridor. For instance, analysing the role of Türkiye within the Middle Corridor, it is worth noting that this country has been at the forefront of the possible implementation of this project. According to Felix K.Chang, a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, Türkiye considers the implementation of this project crucial for strengthening its strategic influence and position in the region of Central Asia, especially through enhanced economic cooperation (*Chang, F.K., 2023*). For Ankara, this region with common linguistic roots with Turkic-speaking countries has become an important part of the foreign policy course, including within the concept of the Middle Corridor (*Chang, F.K., 2023*).

Dr Tuba Eldem from SWP's Centre for Applied Turkey Studies, emphasizes the geopolitical factor that from Türkiye's perspective, the concept of the Middle Corridor is attractive not only for its economic and transit benefits but also for potentially decreasing the role of Russia and Iran in the region of Central Asia, increasingly improving its strategic position on a regional level (*Eldem, T., 2022*). From the economic standpoint, Dr Tuba Eldem stresses Ankara's fundamental objective in creating an alternative route that connects Eurasia and enhances the overall regional cooperation along the Middle Corridor, which will have a significant impact on increasing the level of economic cooperation with other countries, including China, as well as increasing the country's transit potential (*Eldem, T., 2022*). As for the latter, in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and its impact on the logistical and transit infrastructure, Türkiye has become one of the key transit hubs in the world, taking into account Türkiye's beneficial geographical location that allows Türkiye the unimpeded trade with Europe, with Asia and Africa. That is why, considering the geographical and geopolitical factor, Türkiye has a key role in the overall implementation of the Middle Corridor and has a significant impact on its potential successful implementation. Additionally, from China's perspective, the possibility to enhance bilateral cooperation with Türkiye through the means of the Middle Corridor project, has a crucial impact and potential to improve bilateral cooperation in the political and economic fields and to further develop the existing and work on the potential trading routes, for which Türkiye might be a key factor to ensure success of the projects.

In terms of importance of the Central Asian region, it is necessary to analyse the role of the country that is the most involved in the implementation of the Middle Corridor in Central Asia – Kazakhstan. Essentially, the Middle Corridor starts on the eastern border of Kazakhstan with China, which already emphasizes the strategic geographical location in terms of a successful project implementation (*Duffy, S., 2023*). Currently, there are ongoing works on the new doubling of the Moynty-Dostyk railway, which connects Kazakhstan to China and plays a significant role for transit between China and Europe. It is expected that this railway will be commissioned in 2025 and it is expected to increase the overall transit capacity (*Raimondi, M., 2023*). Furthermore, Kazakhstan Railways (KTZ) has already begun construction of another project, that lies within the concept of the Middle Corridor – the project that will run north of Almaty between Zhetygen and Kazybek Beka, aimed at increasing and supporting the growing number of rail freights and allowing them to bypass Kazakhstan's largest city Almaty. What is more, the line through Almaty is one of the two main lines that are forming Kazakhstan's part in the Middle Corridor, becoming a crucial route for China's trade within the Belt and Road Initiative since 2022 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine (*Newton, J., 2023*). Additionally, the Deputy Minister of Transport of Kazakhstan Satzhan Ablaliev stated at a Kazakhstan-Azerbaijan Business Council meeting in Azerbaijan, that “in 2023, the volume of transportation along the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route increased by 65% to 2.94 million tons”. He also added, that “in 2024, it is planned to further increase this indicator by 43% to

4.2 million tons”. The Deputy Minister of Transport also mentioned that “as of January 2024, the volume of transportation along the Corridor has increased by 2.5 times compared to January 2023, noting the growth in transit of Chinese containers by almost 3 times” (*Railway Supply, 2024*). All these projects underline the significance of Kazakhstan in the successful implementation of the Middle Corridor, as Kazakhstan has an important geographical location that allows it to closely collaborate with China and exploit its geographical location for transit purposes. Additionally, Kazakhstan is an important member of the Belt and Road Initiative and is crucial for China in terms of export of energy resources, inter alia oil and gas, which underscores the importance of this country within the Middle Corridor.

Moving further, the region of the Caspian Sea presents an important transit point in the Middle Corridor when goods coming from China are going through Central Asia, and from there on the goods are transported across the Caspian Sea to Baku (*Duffy, S., 2023*). According to Seamus Duffy, this port is substantially limited by the number of container ships it has – only one (*Duffy, S., 2023*). That is why, he believes that to ensure the effective transportation of petroleum goods and other goods in containers, the expansion of the overall transport and transit capacities of the Caspian Sea have to be expanded (*Duffy, S., 2023*). Considering the logistical and transit potential of the Caspian Sea, its further development will undoubtedly benefit a larger number of countries, including the participants of the Middle Corridor.

Speaking about Azerbaijan, over the years this country has become an important part of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative due to Azerbaijan’s beneficial geographical location and significant transit potential. Moreover, Azerbaijan, possessing significant oil and gas reserves and being an influential actor in the energy projects market, becomes China’s important bilateral partner, that is why Azerbaijan's participation in the Middle Corridor is a vital element of the Middle Corridor infrastructure. According to Seymur Mammadov, both Azerbaijan and China cooperate actively to implement the Middle Corridor and develop the necessary infrastructure links, which are ultimately an important part of the overall Belt and Road Initiative. Thus, in 2023 a memorandum of understanding was signed by representatives of the Qingdao Port and Baku International Sea Trade Port to develop the relevant port infrastructure, increase cargo volumes and overall transit flows, essentially creating new possibilities for transit and transport of goods from China through Azerbaijan (*Mammadov, S., 2024*). Furthermore, Seymur Mammadov stressed, that the Baku International Sea Trade Port is currently undergoing modernization, which will enable the port to work with up to 25 million of cargo and 500,000 TEU per year, which will signal a significant increase in Azerbaijan's maritime freight transport capacities and will enhance the logistical and infrastructural efficiency in the region (*Mammadov, S., 2024*). Furthermore, there are ongoing efforts to expand the capacities of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway corridor up to 5 million tons per year, which will be an important factor in terms of increasing the overall transport and transit capacities of the Middle Corridor (*Mammadov, S., 2024*). Given the geographical location and transit potential and capacities of Azerbaijan, alongside a significant number of energy resources, for these reasons Azerbaijan becomes a crucial part of the Middle Corridor. For China, the abovementioned reasons underscore the importance of strategic bilateral relations with Azerbaijan, which will facilitate further development of key Chinese infrastructure projects, including the Belt and Road Initiative.

Analysing the role of the European countries and the European Union in particular in the overall concept of the Middle Corridor, it can be said that European countries are one of the primary beneficiaries of the successful realization of the project, especially in the context of enhancing trade cooperation with Azerbaijan, Türkiye, countries of Central Asia and, of course, China. In the wake of the sanctions imposed by the European Union on Russia, it was clear that there was a need to develop an alternative route through Central Asia, thus decreasing the dependence on the transit of goods and services through Russia and its territory. As a result and in support of this measure, the EU made a €10 billion commitment to invest in the related infrastructure of the Trans Caspian Transport Corridor through its Global Gateway initiative (*European Commission, 2024*). According to Alberto Rizzi, a policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, through the implementation and facilitation of the Middle Corridor and related infrastructure, the EU has the potential and possibility

to place itself as an important actor in the region, especially from the economic perspective (Rizzi, A., 2024). Furthermore, there is potential in terms of energy cooperation and partnerships within the Middle Corridor, including the expansion of existing energy partnerships and cooperation with Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. For instance, in 2022 the EU and Azerbaijan signed a Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy, aiming at strengthening the existing level of cooperation between the EU and Azerbaijan, especially in terms of energy cooperation (*European Commission, 2022*). Taking into account the uncertainty regarding energy stability and energy prices in the world and the EU in particular, alongside the necessity to find alternatives to transit and trade through Russian territory, further development of the Middle Corridor has a significant potential for development and its successful implementation for the European countries (*Eldem, T., 2022*). The Middle Corridor provides a necessary alternative transit and transportation route, which would not only increase the level and volume of economic cooperation between all the parties involved but will also contribute to the bilateral relations between China and the EU through a shared interest in the successful development of an alternative transit corridor.

Speaking about the current challenges for the implementation of the Middle Corridor, the first main challenge is the multimodality of the route, meaning the route consists of both land routes and sea lines at the same time and there have been no tangible efforts in terms of synchronizing the transit capacities of the participating countries (*Avdaliani, E., 2023*). As for another challenge, according to Emil Avdaliani, a professor of international relations at European University in Tbilisi, Georgia, currently "there is close to no joint tariff coordination and relevant infrastructure to process the number of goods shipped through Russia" (*Avdaliani, E., 2023*). Despite the growing interest in the Middle Corridor from different actors worldwide, the issue of the relatively low capacities of this route is among the central ones and therefore there are ongoing discussions on the possibilities and potential projects to enhance the relevant infrastructure to increase the volume of trade through the Middle Corridor. Furthermore, according to Emil Avdaliani, there are significant geopolitical factors that might affect further development and intensification of cooperation under the Middle Corridor – instability in the South Caucasus region and Russian influence on both the South Caucasus and Central Asia region. These factors might influence the project's attractiveness for China with a view to further developing and investing in the logistical infrastructure (*Avdaliani, E., 2023*). Therefore, despite the great potential for development and ongoing efforts to increase the logistical and transit capacities of the Middle Corridor, there are still some challenges that hinder the smooth and rapid development and growth of trade under this trade route.

Conclusions. The Middle Corridor project has a significant potential to have a crucial role in the overall Chinese foreign policy strategy for several reasons. First, in the view of the Belt and Road Initiative, the Middle Corridor has the potential to have an important role through the investments and improvement in the logistics and infrastructure within the participating countries, which is a significant benefit in terms of the Belt and Road Initiative and Chinese foreign policy. Furthermore, considering the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia and the sanctions against Russia, the Middle Corridor presents itself as a viable alternative route to diversify the transit routes both for China and the European countries, to facilitate bilateral trade and to diminish their dependence in terms of transit and trade on Russia. In this regard, the Middle Corridor is also crucial for China in terms of safeguarding Chinese trade with Europe and avoiding the risk of secondary sanctions by the EU through more advanced logistical cooperation with Russia. Even though the Middle Corridor doesn't have the capacity to fully substitute the volume of transit through the Northern Corridor and Russian territory, it still has a potential for further development and growth through infrastructure development and cooperation between all the parties involved. Therefore, it is safe to say that the Middle Corridor project has a significant potential of developing into one of the key supply chains, that will facilitate trade and economic cooperation between China and Europe.

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