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# TRANSPORT POTENTIAL OF THE ORGANIZATION OF TURKIC STATES: THE EMERGING ROLE OF CENTRAL ASIA–AZERBAIJAN CONNECTIVITY

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**SUMMARY**

The article analyzes the transport potential of the Organization of Turkic States through the prism of the emerging system of regional connectivity, in which the "Central Asia–Azerbaijan" axis plays a key functional role. Particular attention is given to the Middle Corridor as the spatial framework of transport integration and to the role of Azerbaijan as a Caspian–Caucasus node ensuring the linkage between the Trans-Caspian and western directions of Eurasian logistics. The study examines the infrastructure parameters of the route, the significance of the Zangezur Corridor and the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway, as well as the competition among the northern, Trans-Caspian, and southern transport routes. Special attention is given to the digitalization of transit, including the implementation of eTIR, e-CMR, and the development of digital data exchange platforms. This study demonstrates that the transport agenda of the OTS is evolving into a multi-level system of integration encompassing spatial, institutional, and digital-governance dimensions.

**Keywords:** *Organization of Turkic States, Middle Corridor, Central Asia–Azerbaijan, transport connectivity, Zangezur Corridor, Trans-Caspian route, transit digitalization, Eurasian logistics.*

The modern system of international transportation is undergoing structural transformation. Growing instability in certain regions, disruptions in maritime trade routes, sanctions, congestion of traditional corridors, and the increasing importance of secure overland routes increase the need for states to diversify transport and logistics links. Under these circumstances, the efficiency of connectivity depends not only on the availability of infrastructure, but also on the ability of states to coordinate transport policies, streamline transit procedures, harmonize tariffs, and establish institutional mechanisms that ensure sustainable connectivity.

Within this environment, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) is steadily evolving from a predominantly political and humanitarian platform toward a space of practical transport and economic coordination. The transport agenda of the OTS is increasingly becoming a tool for regional integration, economic interdependence, and the strengthening of strategic resilience among Turkic states.

The strategic foundations of the OTS transport policy are predefined in its key programmatic documents. The Turkic World Vision–2040 identifies transport and customs cooperation as one of the central directions of long-term development. It outlines the transformation of the Middle Corridor into the shortest and most secure transport route between Asia and Europe, alongside the integration of member states into regional and global supply chains, simplification of transit procedures, and harmonization of transport policies and technical standards [1].

The OTS Strategy for 2022–2026, adopted at the Samarkand Summit, serves as the first practical roadmap for implementing this long-term vision and gives the transport agenda a more applied character. Subsequently, transport connectivity within the OTS has gained not only political relevance but also a clearer institutional framework [2].

The practical orientation of this agenda is reflected in the development of specific cooperation instruments, including the implementation of the eTIR system, e-Permit, "Single Window" mechanisms, and Digital Trade Corridor. These instruments are essential for enhancing the efficiency of transit routes, as their competitiveness is determined not only by infrastructure capacity but also by border-crossing speed, procedural coordination, and predictability of logistics operations [3].

An important dimension of analysis is the emerging link between Central Asia and Azerbaijan. This configuration should not be understood merely as a geographical construct. It has wider implications, as it represents a functional axis connecting the landlocked markets of Central Asia with the Caspian

basin, the South Caucasus, Türkiye, and European destinations.

In this context, the relationship between the OTS transport agenda and the C6+ format (Central Asia + Azerbaijan) becomes particularly significant. Rather than serving as an alternative to the OTS, this format expands its transport and logistical connectivity. While the OTS provides the strategic and institutional framework, the C6+ format gives it a clear geographical expression by reinforcing the Trans-Caspian direction as a practical basis for Central Asia's access to external markets.

The inclusion of Azerbaijan in this configuration indicates not only political rapprochement but also a broader structural need to establish a stable transport axis enabling Central Asian states to access external markets through the Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus [4].

Within this framework, Uzbekistan holds a distinctive position, acting both as a driver of regional consolidation in Central Asia and as an active participant in the OTS transport agenda. The launch of the Consultative Meetings of Central Asian Heads of State has provided the political groundwork for regional coordination, while the advancement of projects such as the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway, the digitalization of transit systems, and support for the Middle Corridor has translated this political groundwork into tangible transport and logistics outcomes [5].

Another key aspect is the role of Azerbaijan as a pivotal Caspian–Caucasus link within the Middle Corridor. Azerbaijan occupies a central position in the transport architecture of the OTS, as it provides the essential connection through which Central Asian transit flows reach the South Caucasus, Türkiye, and European markets. The Baku International Sea Trade Port (Port of Baku), the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, and the large-scale development of logistics infrastructure collectively position Azerbaijan as a major regional hub [6].

Within the OTS framework, Azerbaijan's role extends well beyond national transit functions, positioning it as a vital link between Central Asia and the western segment of the Middle Corridor. In this context, the "Central Asia + Azerbaijan" configuration emerges as both timely and structurally grounded. It addresses a set of interrelated challenges, including the diversification of external trade routes, the need for reliable access to global markets, the growing importance of the Caspian Sea as a transport hub, and the consolidation of the Middle Corridor into a coherent and operationally integrated route rather than a set of fragmented segments.

In this context, Azerbaijan's position, as articulated at the 12th OTS Summit in Gabala, is particularly illustrative. President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the strategic importance of transport and communication links within the Organization and highlighted Azerbaijan's active participation in the East–West and North–South corridors. Of particular importance is his characterization of the Zangezur Corridor as a new transport artery and a second route within both the Middle Corridor and the North–South corridor. This framing allows the Zangezur direction to be interpreted not only as part of the western segment of Trans-Caspian connectivity, but also as an element of a broader multi-corridor architecture in Eurasia [7].

A particular place within the OTS transport architecture is held by the Zangezur Corridor, which should be viewed not as an isolated post-conflict infrastructure project, but as a factor enhancing the continuity of the Middle Corridor [8]. Its significance is not limited to restoring transport links between mainland Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic [9]. More broadly, the corridor contributes to addressing the infrastructural gap in the western segment of Trans-Caspian connectivity and reinforces the functional coherence of the route as an integrated transport system [10].

From a practical perspective, the Zangezur direction has the potential to link Horadiz, Nakhchivan, and the Turkish logistics hubs of Iğdır and Kars, with further access to the European railway network [11]. In combination with the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway, it forms a complementary linkage between the eastern and western segments of the Middle Corridor [12]. While the CKU line strengthens access to the Caspian, the Zangezur route reinforces the westward land-based continuation of the corridor [13]. Taken as a whole, these developments enhance the resilience of the broader Eurasian transport system, reduce dependence on alternative transit routes, and create conditions for the integration of transport, energy, and digital infrastructures [14].

Particular attention should be paid to the quantitative parameters and infrastructural dynamics of the Middle Corridor. According to assessments reflected in OTS materials and relevant sectoral statements, the potential capacity of the route may reach approximately 10–11 million tons of cargo per year by 2030 [12]. At the same time, the route may reduce the distance between East Asia and Europe by around 2,000–2,500 kilometres, while average de-

livery times are estimated at 12–15 days [13].

Infrastructure expansion is accompanied by the growing capacity of key nodes along the route. In particular, the capacity of the Baku International Sea Trade Port in Alat is being expanded from 15 to 25 million tons [6]. The capacities of Kazakhstan's Aktau and Kuryk ports are expected to reach up to 30 million tons, while the capacity of the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway has already been increased from 1 to 5 million tons per year [13].

The eastern segment of the route is also gaining importance. The implementation of the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway, with a length of more than 530 kilometres and an approximate capacity of up to 15 million tons annually, is expected to create a shorter and more direct connection from China to the Caspian region, thereby strengthening the transit potential of the Middle Corridor [5].

Thus, the combination of infrastructure expansion, reduced distance and delivery time, and the introduction of digital solutions creates the necessary conditions for the Middle Corridor to evolve from an alternative route into a sustainable transport and logistics platform within the Eurasian transport system.

However, the strengthening of the Middle Corridor does not take place in isolation, but rather in the context of competition among various Eurasian transport routes. The current transport architecture of Eurasia is being shaped by the simultaneous development of these routes and their functional reorientation [15]. Three principal logistical axes emerge: the northern route passing through the territory of Russia; the Trans-Caspian route (the Middle Corridor), linking Central Asia with Europe via the Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus; and the southern direction, oriented toward access to the ports of the Indian Ocean through Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan [12].

Each of these routes possesses distinct advantages and limitations. The northern route is characterized by a high level of infrastructure development and has traditionally offered the shortest delivery times. However, its use is currently associated with significant political and sanctions-related risks [12]. The southern direction offers more direct access to maritime communications, yet it remains less predictable due to infrastructural, financial, and institutional constraints [15].

In this context, the Middle Corridor occupies an intermediate position, combining relative stability, institutional coordination within the OTS and C6+ formats, and potential for further optimization [1; 2]. Its key advantage lies not solely in absolute performance indicators, but in its adaptability to a changing external environment through route diversification, digitalization of procedures, and coordination of transport policies among participating states [3].

The systemic development of this corridor, including its interconnection with the Zangezur and Trans-Afghan segments, contributes to the formation of a more flexible transport model in which Central Asian states are able to redistribute cargo flows depending on external conditions. This reflects a transition from competition among individual routes toward the emergence of a multi-vector logistics system, within which the Middle Corridor serves as one of the key stabilizing elements of the Eurasian transport architecture.

Another important aspect relates to the functional roles of OTS member states within this system. Kazakhstan represents the largest territorial segment of the Middle Corridor and serves as a major transit backbone connecting China, Central Asia, and the Caspian Sea [15]. Its significance derives from its geographical scale, developed railway infrastructure, access to the Caspian through the ports of Aktau and Kuryk, and its participation in the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route [13].

Within this system, Kazakhstan operates as the eastern and north-eastern transit space, ensuring the integration of the Turkic region into broader Eurasian supply chains [13]. The practical significance of Kazakhstan's role is reflected in the expansion of its port infrastructure, with capacities expected to reach up to 30 million tons, significantly enhancing the throughput of the Caspian segment of the Middle Corridor [15].

Kazakhstan also plays a central role in facilitating transit between China and the Caspian region, as the primary flows of the eastern segment pass through its territory. This makes Kazakhstan's participation in the Trans-Caspian route structurally indispensable [13]. Moreover, the integration of Kazakhstan's infrastructure with regional projects, particularly the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway, strengthens the connectivity of the eastern segment and increases the flexibility of the entire logistics system [5].

Another country playing a distinctive role in the development of multi-vector transport connectivity is Uzbekistan. As a landlocked country, it has a structural interest in developing stable, diversified, and competitive transport routes. Consequently, Uzbekistan actively supports the development of the

Middle Corridor, the optimization of transit tariffs, the digitalization of customs procedures, and the modernization of transport infrastructure. At the Gabala Summit, the President of Uzbekistan emphasized the importance of competitive transit tariffs, modern infrastructure, and digital customs systems for the effective functioning of the corridor [4].

Uzbekistan also links the OTS transport agenda with broader regional initiatives, including the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway, the Trans-Afghan corridor, and the development of multimodal connectivity [5]. This allows Uzbekistan to be viewed not only as a participant in regional transport processes, but also as one of the key initiators of new transport initiatives within the broader Eurasian connectivity framework [13].

An additional dimension of regional connectivity is represented by the Trans-Afghan corridor, aimed at linking Central Asia with the ports of the Indian Ocean through Afghanistan. Projects such as the Mazar-i-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar railway are viewed as part of broader efforts to strengthen transport connectivity between Central and South Asia. Their implementation could significantly expand the geographical scope of the region's external economic relations and contribute to the diversification of transport flows [16].

At the same time, unlike the Trans-Caspian direction, the Trans-Afghan corridor faces several objective constraints, including infrastructural, financial, and institutional challenges, as well as the need to ensure the long-term stability of the transport environment. This gives the corridor strategic importance while simultaneously limiting its predictability. For this reason, Central Asian states tend to view this route not as an alternative to the Middle Corridor, but rather as a complementary direction within a broader multi-vector model of connectivity [16].

In combination with the development of the Middle Corridor and the Zangezur direction, the Trans-Afghan route contributes to a broader configuration of Eurasian connectivity, enabling the states of the region to redistribute transport flows and reduce dependence on any single route.

Kyrgyzstan plays a significant role in shaping the eastern dimension of the OTS transport system. Its importance increases particularly in connection with the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway project, which fosters connectivity between China, Central Asia, and further along the Middle Corridor.

Within the OTS framework, Kyrgyzstan can be viewed as a mountainous transit hub that expands route variability and reinforces the connectivity of the eastern part of the Turkic region. The implementation of the railway project is expected to transform Kyrgyzstan's position within Eurasian logistics, shifting it from a peripheral mountainous area into an important linking element between the Chinese direction and the Central Asian–Caspian transport system. With an estimated capacity of up to 15 million tons annually, this project significantly strengthens Kyrgyzstan's role as an eastern entry point into the Middle Corridor [5].

Türkiye represents the western gateway of the OTS transport architecture. Its importance stems not only from its geographical position between Asia and Europe, but also from its developed transport infrastructure, including ports, railways, and road networks, as well as its direct connection to European markets.

Within the OTS system, Türkiye functions as the final integration node of the Middle Corridor, through which the transport network of the Turkic states gains access to the Mediterranean region, the Balkans, and the European Union. Particular importance is attached to the development of the Turkish segment, including railway connections such as Kars–Iğdır–Aralık–Dilucu and their linkage to Nakhchivan. The attraction of €2.4 billion for the Kars–Iğdır–Nakhchivan railway project reflects Türkiye's strategic commitment to strengthening the western segment of the Middle Corridor [17]. In combination with the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway and the prospective Zangezur connection, this further enhances Türkiye's role as the principal transport gateway of the OTS toward Europe and the Mediterranean.

Within this context, a qualitative rethinking of the Middle Corridor itself is taking place. Particular attention should be paid to digitalization as a new dimension of transport integration within the Organization of Turkic States [1; 2]. The Middle Corridor should not be perceived merely as a linear transport route. Its contemporary significance lies in its gradual transformation into a multi-layered system that interconnects railway, road, maritime, port, customs, digital, and institutional components into a unified operational framework [3].

The key issue concerns not only the expansion of physical infrastructure, but also the qualitative transformation of transport governance mechanisms. Empirical evidence suggests that even routes with comparable physical characteristics may differ significantly in competitiveness depending on

the level of digital coordination, the speed of transit procedures, and the degree of interoperability among national systems [13].

OTS is forming an approach, in which the development of transport corridors is accompanied by the creation of a digital environment for their functioning [3]. This includes the implementation of e-Permit systems, the deployment of eTIR instruments, the expansion of Single Window mechanisms, and the development of digital platforms for data exchange. These tools not only accelerate border-crossing procedures, but also reduce transaction costs by standardizing processes and increasing transparency in transit operations [13].

The practical implementation of this digital agenda was further advanced in the materials of OTS sectoral meetings. While the initial stage focused mainly on the introduction of individual electronic tools, subsequent decisions shift the emphasis toward a more integrated model of transit management. In particular, the Protocol/Communiqué of the OTS Transport Ministers' Meeting in Almaty addresses the wider use of electronic consignment notes (e-CMR) in cooperation with the International Road Transport Union (IRU), the development of a digital transport system along the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, and the establishment of a Transport Data Hub for data consolidation, route optimization, and greater predictability of transport operations. Regular monitoring of the 2023–2027 Roadmap on Transport Connectivity also becomes an important operational element. In this sense, digitalization within the OTS is gradually moving from a set of separate instruments toward a more coordinated model of transport-flow governance [18].

An important feature of this transformation is the shift from isolated digital solutions toward the formation of an interconnected transnational data infrastructure. In this regard, the development of the Caspian direction is reinforced by projects aimed at establishing data transmission channels, including submarine fiber-optic cables. This allows the region to be viewed as a transport and information hub [3; 14].

The interaction between physical and digital infrastructure is particularly evident in the evolving architecture of the Middle Corridor. Within this framework, elements such as the Zangezur Corridor acquire significance not only as overland transport links, but also as nodes where logistics flows are synchronized with digital systems of monitoring, coordination, and management. This allows a transition toward a more complex model of connectivity in which transport and information networks function as an integrated system [3; 14].

For these reasons, the effectiveness of the Middle Corridor depends not only on infrastructure development, but also on the coordination of tariffs, the speed of border procedures, the digitalization of documentation, the compatibility of technical standards, and the political alignment of participating states.

Thus, the transport potential of the OTS should be understood not as a collection of separate national infrastructure projects, but as an emerging system of Turkic connectivity. Its core is represented by the Middle Corridor, while its most dynamic functional dimension is the "Central Asia–Azerbaijan" linkage, which connects the inland space of Central Asia with the Trans-Caspian and western directions of Eurasian logistics.

The system-forming role of the OTS transport agenda is reflected in the emergence of three interrelated layers of regional connectivity. The first is spatial, connecting Central Asia, the Caspian region and the western segment of the Middle Corridor. The second is institutional, reflected in the coordination of transport policies, tariffs, procedures and intergovernmental mechanisms among member states. The third is digital-governance oriented and associated with the introduction of electronic permits, eTIR, e-CMR, digital data exchange platforms and the prospective Transport Data Hub. The interaction of these layers allows transport to be understood not as a separate sector of cooperation, but as the operational foundation of practical integration within the OTS.

Within this framework, the Zangezur Corridor, the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway, the development of Caspian ports, the digitalization of transit procedures, and Azerbaijan's participation in the "Central Asia + Azerbaijan" format should not be perceived as fragmented initiatives, but rather as elements of a single transport architecture. The sustainability of this architecture will depend on the ability of member states not only to develop infrastructure, but also to synchronize tariffs, digital procedures, customs mechanisms and long-term transport strategies.

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## ТРАНСПОРТНЫЙ ПОТЕНЦИАЛ ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ ТЮРКСКИХ ГОСУДАРСТВ: ФОРМИРУЮЩАЯСЯ РОЛЬ СВЯЗАННОСТИ «ЦЕНТРАЛЬНАЯ АЗИЯ – АЗЕРБАЙДЖАН»

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**РЕЗЮМЕ**

В статье анализируется транспортный потенциал Организации тюркских государств через призму формирующейся системы региональной связанности, в которой ось «Центральная Азия – Азербайджан» играет ключевую функциональную роль. Особое внимание уделяется Среднему коридору как пространственному каркасу транспортной интеграции, а также роли Азербайджана как каспийско-кавказского узла, обеспечивающего сопряжение транскаспийского и западного направлений евразийской логистики. В работе рассматриваются инфраструктурные параметры маршрута, значение Зангезурского коридора и железной дороги Китай – Кыргызстан – Узбекистан, а также конкуренция между

северным, транскаспийским и южным транспортными направлениями. Особое внимание уделяется цифровизации транзита, включая внедрение систем eTIR, e-CMR и развитие цифровых платформ обмена данными. Показано, что транспортная повестка ОТГ трансформируется в многоуровневую систему интеграции, охватывающую пространственное, институциональное и цифрово-управленческое измерения.

**Ключевые слова:** *Организация тюркских государств, Средний коридор, Центральная Азия – Азербайджан, транспортная связность, Зангезурский коридор, транскаспийский маршрут, цифровизация транзита, евразийская логистика.*

## TÜRK DÖVLƏTLƏRİ TƏŞKİLATININ NƏQLİYYAT POTENSİALI: "MƏRKƏZİ ASİYA – AZƏRBAYCAN" ƏLAQƏLİLİYİNİN FORMALAŞAN ROLU

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**XÜLASƏ**

Məqalədə Türk Dövlətləri Təşkilatının nəqliyyat potensialı formalaşmaqda olan regional əlaqəlilik sistemi prizmasından təhlil edilir və burada "Mərkəzi Asiya - Azərbaycan" oxunun əsas funksional rol oynadığı göstərilir. Orta Dəhlizə nəqliyyat inteqrasiyasının məkan çərçivəsi kimi, eləcə də Azərbaycanın Trans-Xəzər və qərb istiqamətləri arasında əlaqəni təmin edən Xəzər-Qafqaz qovşağı kimi roluna xüsusi diqqət yetirilir. Tədqiqatda marşrutun infrastruktur parametrləri, Zəngəzur dəhlizinin və Çin-Qırğızıstan-Özbəkistan dəmir yolunun əhəmiyyəti, həmçinin şimal, Trans-Xəzər və cənub nəqliyyat istiqamətləri arasındakı rəqabət təhlil edilir. Tranzitin rəqəmsallaşdırılması, o cümlədən eTIR, e-CMR sistemlərinin tətbiqi və rəqəmsal məlumat mübadiləsi platformalarının inkişafı məsələlərinə xüsusi diqqət yetirilir. Göstərilir ki, TDT-nin nəqliyyat gündəliyi məkan, institusional və rəqəmsal-idarəetmə ölçülərini əhatə edən çoxsəviyyəli inteqrasiya sisteminə çevrilir.

**Açar sözlər:** *Türk Dövlətləri Təşkilatı, Orta Dəhliz, Mərkəzi Asiya – Azərbaycan, nəqliyyat əlaqəliliyi, Zəngəzur dəhlizi, Trans-Xəzər marşrutu, tranzitin rəqəmsallaşdırılması, Avrasiya logistikası.*

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