

# The Middle Corridor As Geopolitical Axis

## Is TRIPP the Missing Piece?

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One day before the historic White House summit between President Donald Trump, President Ilham Aliyev, and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan that announced a framework agreement to establish the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP), Chairman of Azerbaijan Railways (ADY) Rovshan Rustamov [hosted a high-level trilateral meeting](#) with David Abashidze, General Director of Georgian Railway, and Talgat Aldybergenov, Chairman of the Board of Kazakhstan Temir Zholy (KTZ). This meeting was part of the evaluation process for the progress of the Middle Corridor Multimodal Ltd. joint venture, launched to advance strategic cooperation among the railway administrations of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Kazakhstan in developing the Middle Corridor transit route.

Indeed, progress related to China-Europe-China Trans-Caspian express routes over the last three years has been significant. In 2024, 287 block trains [were received from China](#), and in just the first seven months of 2025, that number reached 225 trains—nearly double the level recorded during the same period in 2024. According to ADY's estimates, by the end of 2025, over 400 block trains are expected to arrive in Azerbaijan from China. As a result of increased trade activities, infrastructure upgrades, and foreign investments, the international [rating agency Moody's](#) has upgraded ADY's long-term Corporate Family Rating (CFR) from B1 to Ba3.

The growing acknowledgment by major powers of Azerbaijan's indispensable role as an unavoidable transit country through unsanctioned territory via the Silk Road region has enabled it to build strategic partnerships with various countries, including China. Through

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its flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Beijing aims to expand its influence in Central Asia and the South Caucasus via key infrastructure projects, especially in transportation and logistics. This should not be understood as conflicting with Azerbaijan's [upcoming strategic partnership with the United States](#)—or any other country for that matter.

## *High Priority Amid Global Risks*

Generally, the Middle Corridor route is the shortest and most convenient option for cargo transportation from Central Asian countries to Europe and Africa (and vice versa). Using [the Middle Corridor](#) actively as a fast and secure route can support the sustainable development of landlocked countries. For example, a recent [analytical report prepared](#) within a project by Uzbekistan's Transport Ministry identifies the corridor as an alternative route for Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The report states that [the route can help diversify](#) import and export flows with the EU, the U.S., and Canada, while also providing access to the growing markets of the Asia-Pacific region, India, and other countries. As regional countries increase the importance of the Middle Corridor, they can reduce their own infrastructure operating costs through higher transit volumes and greater export of transport services.

Therefore, it is not surprising that landlocked Central Asian countries are eager to invest heavily in transport infrastructure to close remaining gaps and attract foreign investment from China and the West. For example, in January 2025, Uzbekistan's President [Shavkat Mirziyoyev outlined](#) a five-year plan to upgrade the country's infrastructure and streamline trade. Indeed, Uzbekistan's infrastructural investments, diplomatic realignments, and institutional relationships with regional stakeholders reinforce one another. Unsurprisingly, Uzbekistan, along with the other two keystone states of the Silk Road region (i.e., Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan), continues to pursue a [multivector strategy](#) toward all neighboring and major outside powers.

The Middle Corridor has emerged as a pivotal geopolitical artery, empowering the region's keystone states to protect their national interests while carefully balancing between global powers. In this context, [Aliyev's comments](#) at the Third Shusha Global Media Forum are particularly significant, underscoring the Middle Corridor's role not just as a trade route, but as a tool to enable strategic cohesion between various regions and actors.

## *Azerbaijan's Indispensability*

As an indispensable state of the Middle Corridor, Azerbaijan functions as a reliable logistics hub. In the context of the war in Ukraine, the strategic importance of the Middle Corridor increased significantly. The shifting geopolitical landscape paved the way for Azerbaijan to deepen its strategic ties with countries like China, culminating in a Joint Declaration on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the two states in April

2025. This partnership has visibly influenced trade and transportation data in 2024 and 2025. In 2024 alone, Azerbaijan's trade with [China rose](#) to \$3.744 billion, a 20.7 percent increase from the previous year, making China its fourth-largest trade partner.

Azerbaijan has invested significant effort in building and upgrading strategically important infrastructure along the Middle Corridor and establishing new routes to boost trade between Europe and Central Asia. After the Second Karabakh War, [Baku promoted the opening](#) of a new land route to Türkiye through its exclave Nakhchivan, which it called the Zangezur Corridor. This eventually led to the announcement of TRIPP, which is expected to increase the Middle Corridor's cargo volume capacity significantly.

On the Azerbaijani side, TRIPP [would be integrated](#) into the Horadiz-Agband transport highway and railway network. On the Turkish side, it would link into the Nakhchivan-Igdir-Kars railway and highway, providing a direct land route to Anatolia and beyond. Azerbaijan has already made considerable progress in developing its portion of the infrastructure, including the construction of modern highways and railway lines. However, due to [interference from various external actors](#), the opening of this corridor has been delayed, though Baku remains committed to its initial plans to establish land access to Nakhchivan and Türkiye. On the Armenian side, the terms of TRIPP indicate that Yerevan will enable the construction and lease the operation of its part of the route to a U.S.-based consortium.

### *TRIPP: The Missing Piece*

From a strategic perspective, [the TRIPP agreement aligns](#) with Azerbaijan's broader objective of enhancing its role as a critical transit hub linking the South Caucasus to European markets. The project, if implemented as envisioned, could optimize regional connectivity patterns, potentially reducing reliance on traditional transport routes that cross the territories of sanctioned states.

Nevertheless, the [initiative carries geopolitical](#) sensitivities. The absence of Russia and Iran—two historically influential outside stakeholders in developments in the South Caucasus—from the negotiation processes may cause friction, as both states could perceive the corridor as reducing their established leverage in regional trade and transit frameworks. The project's success [will therefore depend not only](#) on bilateral commitment but also on the ability to navigate complex regional power dynamics and manage the reactions of excluded stakeholders.

Unlike Russia, Iran remains one of the most vocal opponents of the Zangezur Corridor, driven by concerns that the project could marginalize Tehran's role as a regional transit hub and weaken its strategic influence in the South Caucasus. However, it seems that both Baku and especially Yerevan, which has longstanding close relations with Tehran, are taking steps to address legitimate Iranian concerns. As Aliyev [recently pointed out](#),

“The implementation of the Zangezur corridor will, in essence, open another route of the North-South corridor—not only the one everyone talks about, from Russia through Azerbaijan to Iran via Rasht, but also through East Zangezur and other parts of the Zangezur region to Iran, further extending to Türkiye.”

## *Clearing Skies?*

Recent developments in the South Caucasus, such as the agreements and understandings reached in the White House, as well as the evolving strategic partnership between Azerbaijan and China, demonstrate that Baku’s proactive infrastructure investments, combined with strengthened partnerships with Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, are significantly boosting the capacity and relevance of the Middle Corridor. Record increases in block train traffic from China, Moody’s upgrading of ADY’s corporate rating, and the integration of projects like TRIPP highlight the tangible economic and logistical gains of this strategy. These outcomes not only bolster Azerbaijan’s standing as a reliable transit hub but also increase its leverage in shaping regional transport networks in ways that align with its long-term national interests.

However, the realization of these initiatives—especially TRIPP and the long-discussed Nakhchivan-Türkiye connection—will depend on navigating geopolitical sensitivities. The absence and, in some cases, skepticism of key regional actors introduces both risks and potential points of contention. Maintaining momentum will require striking a balance between foreign investment, infrastructure delivery, and careful diplomacy to avoid external disruptions. If Azerbaijan can maintain this equilibrium, the Middle Corridor could evolve into a cornerstone of connectivity in the Silk Road region, with Azerbaijan’s indispensable role gaining even greater strategic importance in both geopolitical and geoeconomic contexts.