

# The Silk Road Turned a Middle Corridor

## History in the Making

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In the past several years, a growing number of political addresses, scholarly articles, and policy papers have referred to the vast opportunities for the Middle Corridor to transport goods and energy between East and West via the Silk Road region, including previous IDD Analytical Policy Papers and essays appearing in issues of *Baku Dialogues*. Much of this material has correctly identified this corridor as an alternative to Russia-dominated energy sources (oil and gas), trade routes, and digital highways. Indeed, the Middle Corridor has been included for decades under different names in various international collaboration schemes, including the 1998 Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia (TRACECA), the 2013 Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the 2017 Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR).

Each of these initiatives have focused primarily either on the Caspian Sea or on the Black Sea. Yet, due to geography and the economic issues at stake (i.e., energy, trade, and logistics)—not to mention the geopolitical ones—a holistic approach incorporating both of these geographies is more appropriate. It is thus surprising that this has yet to be done (give or take one or two exceptions).

The aforementioned bodies of water are naturally independent, although they are connected artificially by the Volga-Don canals. More importantly, they are also connected geopolitically, as they both share the same neighbor the northern side of their respective shores (among many other connections). These seas hold historical origins and significant untapped potential that shed light on today's happenings while pointing to the future. They are both located within the Silk Road region, which has been defined in various

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ADA University publications as comprising that part of the world that *looks west past Anatolia to the warm seas beyond; north across the Caspian towards the Great Steppe; east to the peaks of the Altai and the arid sands of the Taklamakan; and south towards the Hindu Kush and the Indus valley; and then looping around down to the Persian Gulf and back up across the Fertile Crescent and onward to the Black Sea littoral.*

By this definition, the Silk Road region incorporates around 30 percent of the world's surface whilst straddling both parts of the commonly accepted physiographic boundaries between Europe and Asia: from north to south, this boundary starts from the Kara Sea, moves down the Ural Mountains and the Ural River to the Caspian Sea, the watershed of the Greater Caucasus, the Black Sea, the Turkish Straits, and the Aegean Sea. To paraphrase my colleague Damjan Krnjević Mišković, the Silk Road region is now an indispensable geography for the advancement of the strategic interests of all the major outside powers whilst at the same time opening the door to the region as a whole—led by its three keystone states (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan)—to take its place as a subject of international order instead of remaining an object of external power rivalry.

## *Historical Links and the Meaning of Borders*

Traditionally, and not just in today's circumstances, more than just goods and valuable commodities were transported across the extensive trade networks of the old Silk Roads. Across the many centuries of its existence, the resulting migration and population mix produced the widespread transmission of knowledge, concepts, cultures, and beliefs. This, in turn, had a significant impact on the history of the Silk Road region and the civilizations that call it home. Travelers were attracted by the intellectual and cultural interchange that took place in the caravanserais along the Silk Roads, many of which evolved into leading centers of enlightenment. Around the lengths of these routes, science, arts, literature, as well as crafts and technologies, were constantly communicated and disseminated amongst societies, each of which evolved as a result.

In other words, the world's interest in the Silk Road is neither recent nor outmoded. Today's circumstances and contemporary events have heightened its relevance to trans-continental dealings.

This leads us to examine the meaning of both physical and political borders. Both have been seen as remaining the same throughout time, as either unchangeable facts of nature or human construct. Political geographer David Newman considers them as “the lines that continue to separate us.” They may not necessarily be rigid dividers between peoples and nations, but they are incontestably sites of natural and unavoidable cultural interaction between peoples, nations, and continents. Borderlines become meeting places, permeable and opening means and routes for neighbors and distant regions to meet and transact, as well as vibrant spots where limits of national or regional action take place.

At the same time, frontier lines are also places where cooperation and collaboration meet competition and confrontation in a constant power play between states and regions—small, medium, and large. As an example, the Mexico-USA border is almost 3,200 kilometers long; the area is home to 30 million persons residing in four U.S. states and six Mexican ones covering a total area of 2,524,007 km<sup>2</sup>. This area, which is just a bit smaller than Kazakhstan, has been dubbed “MexAmerica.” Running through it is busiest land border in the world, with more than 350 million documented crossings annually (almost one million crossings per day). It is one location where—amongst numerous transboundary issues—collaboration on drug-trafficking confronts unilateral law-enforcement actions to be executed in one country without the other’s consent; where trade deals are made through cooperation and competition in the midst of countervailing duties and arbitrations; and where water shortages affect the lives of tens of millions in both countries.

The Silk Road region, which encompasses almost 30 percent of the world’s land surface (as noted above), is evidencing a similar dilemma in setting the line of contact between cooperation/collaboration efforts vis-à-vis competition/confrontation in intra-region and extra-regional trends on commodities, manufactures, and connectivity—including oil, gas, trade, and digitalization—while vying with China, India, Russia and other players (like Türkiye) to reach European markets.

Throughout history, numerous efforts have been made to connect East and West; today’s development is but one more notch in its storied history. The old Silk Road was a network of transportation routes that helped different cultures trade commodities and ideas for nearly two millennia. Alexander the Great’s conquests, which significantly increased awareness and, later, knowledge between West and East, laid much of the groundwork for the development of trade and other links; as did the Han dynasty’s subsequent westward expansion and the resurgence of independent, centralized Persian states under the Parthian and Sasanian dynasties.

The Silk Roads flourished until about the fifteenth century, with the resurgence of military hostilities in Central Asia and the subsequent shift in trade routes due to the conquest by leading Western European powers of much of the Asian rimland (and much else besides). This helps to explain the growth—and today’s dominant position—of worldwide maritime trade. Therefore, while the old network of Silk Roads originating in China and India and moving to the Middle East and Europe ran north and south of (and, to a lesser degree, across) the Caspian Sea, “since 1500, maritime transport has dominated trade between Europe and East Asia” (to quote a paper published by the Asian Development Bank Institute). Consequently, the landlocked Silk Road region became an economic backwater, with much of it going on to be incorporated into the Russian Empire and then into the Soviet Union.

During the Russian period, the Trans-Siberian Railway was begun before being completed in the Soviet period. It was designed mainly for intra-state purposes—to

connect Vladivostok with Moscow—yet found additional opportunities to link China with Europe via the great Russian landmass. In the 1960s, China-Europe trade augmented by using the Trans-Siberian Railway. The political climate during the Cold War as well as logistical and technical issues prevented the line from being fully utilized, including variances in railway track gauges, as the Soviet Union used a wider gauge than most of Europe and China. By formally linking China and the USSR in the 1990s, this corridor began acquiring its contemporary appearance and extent. The rail link between China and Europe started to operate via Kazakhstan in the 2010s. Still, less than 5 percent of the approximately 10 million containers that are shipped from China to Europe each year use the Trans-Siberian Railway (the Northern Corridor), while much of the rest is transported by sea. The imposition of West-led sanctions against Russia has also had an impact, although the Russian railway system *per se* has not yet been added to the growing list of sanctioned entities.

The Caspian Sea as a trade resource remained generally neglected mostly for practical reasons—the movement of cargo from camels into ships and vice-versa for a relative short distance (378 kilometers is the distance between Aktau and Baku)—and because of its landlocked nature. This remained the prevalent reality until the end of the Cold War, when new states (re)emerged.

Initially the Caspian Sea received heightened attention because it opened novel avenues and possibilities for the West to access and develop the Caspian basin's hydrocarbon resources, beginning with oil before expanding into natural gas. Attention to commerce would come more than two decades later. One important issue was that new infrastructure had to be built. Western states and corporations promoted pipelines to transport crude oil and natural gas from the Caspian Sea basin through Türkiye to Europe. Various agreements to build these pipelines set the path for further endeavors, namely the provision of energy security (diversification of supply, mainly gas) and logistics and commercial connectivity.

Assuming one were to travel by sea, the distance between Beijing and Istanbul is around 18,660 kilometers. Alternatively, using the Silk Road region's land route, the trek is half the distance (9,208 kilometers) via the Beijing-Almaty-Aktau-Baku-Istanbul route and would need to cross four international borders. The Beijing-Istanbul sea route today generally takes some 60 days of voyage—a minimum of 42 days—plus nearly 60-90 days of wait until enough cargo is accumulated for the ship to be loaded and set sail. In the days of the old Silk Roads, travelling at the herculean speed of 30-40 kilometers per day in an excruciating camel trip, it would have taken some eight to ten months—or eleven to fourteen months for a Beijing-Istanbul-Madrid trip. In clear contrast, today—via railway—it takes only 12 days vs. the 45-60 days it takes by sea. Hence, today, with tariffs lower than air freight and faster than maritime options, the land voyage thru the Middle Corridor offers significant opportunities.

## Contemporary Geopolitical Links in the Silk Road Region

Decades before the onset of the present stage in the conflict over Ukraine in February 2022, the geopolitical environment in the Silk Road region had already begun to transform as a result of two major trends. *First*, the development and building of large—and very costly—regional infrastructure projects that required long-term planning, modification, and construction. These included oil and gas pipelines, refineries, and railways.

The first pipelines went to the Black Sea and Anatolia (oil: Baku-Novorossiysk or BNP in 1997, Baku-Supsa or BSP in 1999, Caspian Pipeline Consortium or CPC in 2001; gas: Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum or BTE in 2006). Later, starting from a stronger position, the pipeline network went on to the Mediterranean Sea (the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan or BTC oil pipeline in 2006). Finally, with a direct view to the European market, the pipeline reached the Europe continent itself (the final leg of the Southern Gas Corridor or SGC became operational in late 2020). Parallel to this, the Star Refinery was completed in Türkiye in 2018. In a similar fashion, a railroad was built to link the Caspian Sea on to the Black Sea and Anatolia (the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad or BTK in 2017). All these projects ended Russia's monopoly over the production and transport of Caspian Sea hydrocarbons, as well as other forms of commerce.

The realization of these and other connectivity projects was understood by all the countries participating in their construction as being in their respective national interests, which explains why important and multiple political, technical, regulatory, environmental, and financial hurdles were able to be overcome, notwithstanding various geopolitical challenges and transformations. Some still remain, as evidenced by the fact that gas from Turkmenistan is still not flowing across the Caspian in large quantities, despite the fact that the first talks for building a Trans-Caspian Pipeline took place in 1996.

The *second* reason why they ended up being built is that major external powers like China, the European Union, and the United States exhibited a greater interest in the Silk Road region in the wake of collapse of the Soviet Union. So did regional heavyweight Russia, of course, which sought to reassert its heretofore dominant position, with varying success (e.g., its intervention in the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, its invasion of Ukraine in several stages, its role in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict in the wake of the Second Karabakh War).

These and other circumstances escalated competition for trade, energy, digitalization, and other resources, types of connectivity, and regional influence. After the demise of the Soviet Union, new alliances and partnerships were established, which spurred political and economic competition. This is evinced by the Collective Security Treaty Organization or CSTO (1992), the European Union (1993), GUAM (1997), the Eurasian Economic Union (2014), and the signing of the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea (2018). A more recent example is the transformation in 2021 of the Turkic Council

into the Organization of Turkic States, which has had an increasingly visible imprint on developments in the Silk Road region. As a result, the Silk Road region's strategic factors have amplified in importance while determining how policies and initiatives reshape it. An important element always to keep in mind is that betwixt the Middle Corridor, the Caspian and Black seas are closely linked via the Caucasus.

The Silk Road region has emerged as a key region for economic integration and communication across continents at the center of Europe and Asia. The growth of infrastructure projects—particularly in the areas of oil and gas pipelines, land and railway trade routes, and cross-Caspian trade—has been sparked by the region's significant energy resources, strategic location, and expanding trade potential.