

MAPPING THE CENTRAL ASIA-BLACK SEA AXIS: STRATEGIC IMPERATIVES AMIDST NEW GEOPOLITICAL AND ECONOMIC REALITIES

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1. Geopolitical Shifts: External Powers Strategies and Limitations

The EUs Ambiguous Engagement

The European Unions Global Gateway initiative, framed as a sustainable alternative to Chinas Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), seeks to counterbalance Russian and Chinese influence in Central Asia through □□□ billion in infrastructure investments. However, the EUs exclusion of Türkiye, a critical node in the Mediterranean-Black Sea corridor, from its inaugural Central Asia summit undermines its own connectivity objectives. This oversight risks replicating past EU missteps in the Eastern Mediterranean where sidelining Ankara led to fragmented energy and trade policies.

By bypassing Türkiyes historical and institutional ties with Turkic states, the EU over relies on partnerships with Central Asian governments that remain economically tethered to Russia and China. Kazakhstan, for instance, continues to balance Western engagement with its reliance on Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union frameworks, exposing Brussels to strategic volatility.[1]

US Greater Central Asia vs. Chinas Entrenchment

The United States Greater Central Asia strategy prioritizes securing rare earth minerals and diversifying trade routes like the Middle Corridor, yet it lacks Türkiyes regional trust networks and logistical expertise. While Washington seeks to reduce dependence on Chinese critical minerals- Central Asia holds 38.6% of global manganese and 30% of chromium reserves- its transactional approach contrasts starkly with Ankaras culturally rooted diplomacy via the Organization of Turkic States (OTS).

Meanwhile, Chinas shift from bilateral 5+1 to multilateral full engagement format, or simply the China-Central Asia Summit, signal institutional dominance but faces growing skepticism over debt-trap risks. China initially engaged Central Asia through the 5+1 format-five Central Asian states plus China-but this framework has now evolved into a China-Central Asia Foreign Ministers Meeting mechanism, reflecting a more institutionalized and multilateral approach following the inclusion of all six countries (China and the five Central Asian states) in regular summit-level cooperation. The upgrade was formalized at the inaugural China-Central Asia in both April and May 2025, which elevated the partnership to the heads-of-state level and established new, permanent cooperation mechanisms across sectors such as trade, security, and infrastructure. This shift signals Chinas intent to anchor Central Asia within its sphere of influence as a community of shared destiny, while also responding rapidly to external engagement, such as from the EU.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, whose Chinese debt exceeds 30% of GDP, exemplify vulnerabilities that Türkiyes equity-based partnerships avoid. Chinas rapid response to EU outreach via upgraded regional forums highlights its determination to anchor Central Asia as a community of common destiny.[2]

Russias Ebbing Influence

Russias regional hegemony faces dual challenges: NATO-aligned naval exercises and Türkiyes ascendant security partnerships. The upcoming Caspian Breeze 2025 drills-jointly conducted by Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and tacitly supported by Türkiye-directly contest Moscows Caspian Flotilla dominance. These maneuvers align with Türkiyes broader strategy to strengthen the Middle Corridor, which bypasses Russian-controlled north-south routes. [3]

Concurrently, Russias occupation of Crimea continues to alienate Black Sea littoral states, with Ukraines marine ecosystems and EU-linked energy projects (e.g., Trans-Caspian Pipeline) suffering collateral damage. Such overreach undermines Moscows credibility, creating openings for Ankara to position itself as a stabilizer through OTS-led infrastructure and energy diplomacy. [4]

2. Türkiyes Strategic Assets in the Axis

The Middle Corridor: A Turkish-Led Vision

Türkiyes Middle Corridor initiative has emerged as a transformative geopolitical project, offering the shortest overland route (6,500 km) connecting China to the EU while bypassing Russia and Iran. This corridor-comprising the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) and the Zangezur link-reduces transit times from 45 □□□ days (Northern Corridor) to 15 □□□ days with projected annual cargo capacity exceeding 5 million TEUs by 2030. Synergies with Azerbaijan (via the Zangezur Corridor) and

Kazakhstan (via the Aktau port modernization) underscore Türkiyes capacity to harmonize regional logistics, as seen in the 2022 Türkiye-Kazakhstan agreement to streamline TITR documentation and halve transit times to five days[5].

Critically, the corridor aligns with EU and US objectives to diversify away from Russian routes, yet Ankaras central role ensures it retains leverage. Türkiyes proactive infrastructure investments, such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway and the Caspian Container Hub-contrast with Chinas debt-driven BRI projects, offering Central Asian states equitable partnerships.

Soft Power and Institutional Leverage

Türkiyes cultural-linguistic affinity with Turkic states, institutionalized through the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), provides a unique advantage over transactional US/EU approaches. The OTSs 2023 Samarkand Summit, which prioritized joint energy and defense projects, reflects Ankaras strategy to transform historical ties into multilateral frameworks. Military diplomacy complements this: Türkiyes Bayraktar TB2 drones, deployed by Azerbaijan in the 2020 Karabakh conflict, and its training programs for Kazakh naval forces exemplify defense exports as a tool of strategic alignment.

This soft power extends to digital infrastructure, with Türkiyes Türksat 5B satellite enhancing connectivity across Central Asia, a counter to Chinas Digital Silk Road. Such initiatives position Türkiye as a cultural interlocutor, mitigating skepticism toward external powers extractive agendas.

Black Sea Security and Energy Hub Potential

Türkiyes control of the Turkish Straits and its Floating Storage Regasification Unit (FSRU) projects solidify its role as a Black Sea energy arbiter. The straits facilitate 3% of global oil trade (3.7 million barrels daily), while the FSRU Ertuğrul Gazi diversifies EU gas supplies via Azerbaijani imports, reducing dependence on Russian pipelines. Ankaras balancing act-maintaining NATO commitments while collaborating with Moscow on TurkStream-underscores its pragmatic sovereignty.

Recent NATO □□□□□□□ Black Sea security drills, coupled with Türkiyes veto over non-littoral naval deployments, further empower Ankara to shape regional stability. This dual approach safeguards Türkiyes interests amid competing EU □□□□□□ tensions over Crimeas occupation.

3. The Balancing Act: Türkiyes Challenges

Navigating Russia-West Tensions

Türkiyes strategic autonomy in the Black Sea is strained by competing pressures from

NATO and Russia. While Ankara maintains NATO commitments-evidenced by its participation in Ukraine-led maritime security drills-it simultaneously sustains energy and defense ties with Moscow, including the TurkStream pipeline and the Rosatom-built Akkuyu nuclear plant. This duality reflects Türkiyes pragmatic approach to safeguarding its interests: it condemns Russias occupation of Crimea under international law yet avoids sanctions to preserve economic stability. [6]

However, overreliance on Russian energy (40% of Türkiyes natural gas imports) risks entanglement in Moscows geopolitical maneuvers, particularly as the EU seeks alternative suppliers post-Ukraine invasion. Türkiyes Middle Corridor initiative, which bypasses Russia, offers a counterbalance but requires careful navigation to avoid alienating Moscow while advancing Western-aligned connectivity goals [7].

EUs Exclusionary Approach

The EUs decision to exclude Türkiye from its inaugural Central Asia summit, despite Ankaras pivotal role in the Middle Corridor, undermines Brussels own connectivity ambitions. By sidelining Türkiye-a candidate member with linguistic and historical ties to Central Asia-the EU overlooks a partner capable of mitigating risks posed by Central Asian states economic dependencies on Russia and China.

This exclusion echoes past Mediterranean missteps, where EU policies fragmented energy cooperation. Revitalizing the stalled EU-Türkiye Customs Union negotiations could realign interests, particularly in diversifying critical mineral supply chains and integrating Türkiyes logistics infrastructure into the Global Gateway initiative. As Türkiyes Trade Minister emphasized, such cooperation is vital for advancing green and digital transformation synergies [8].

Chinas Economic Inroads

Türkiye faces dual pressures from Chinas expanding Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments and Western security concerns over 5G infrastructure. While Ankara collaborates with Huawei on digital transformation projects-evidenced by high-level visits to Beijing R&D centers-it cautiously avoids overreliance, mindful of cybersecurity risks highlighted by NATO allies.[9]

Türkiyes equity-based partnerships in Central Asia, such as joint ventures in renewable energy, contrast with Chinas debt-driven projects, which have burdened Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. By leveraging its OTS framework, Türkiye positions itself as a culturally attuned alternative to BRI, though balancing economic pragmatism with strategic autonomy remains a persistent challenge.

4. Recommendations for Türkiye

Strengthen Institutional Frameworks

In order for Türkiye to consolidate its leadership in Eurasia, it needs to transform the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) into a culturally homogeneous, integrated economic bloc that also takes security conditions into consideration. This requires adopting unified trade policies, such as harmonizing customs tariffs among member states, and jointly working on defense related issues. The OTSs nascent Turkic Investment Fund (TIF), now valued at $600 million after Hungarys accession, could evolve into a development bank to finance regional infrastructure, countering Chinas BRI debt traps. Expanding membership to include observer states like Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan would amplify the blocs geopolitical weight, leveraging their combined $1.2 trillion GDP and 170 million population. As the director emphasized, such institutionalization would position Türkiye as a rule-shaper rather than a rule-taker in Eurasian governance.

Prioritize Middle Corridor Acceleration

Türkiye must expedite the Middle Corridor by securing US/EU financing for bottleneck projects, notably the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway and Georgias Anaklia Deep Sea Port. Partnering with the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) could mobilize the $32 billion required to achieve 5 million a twenty-foot equivalent unit (TEU) annual capacity by 2030. Joint ventures with Kazakhstan in Trans-Caspian logistics (e.g., digitizing Aktau port operations) would enhance efficiency, while Türkiyes Türksat 5B satellite could provide real-time cargo tracking. As Atlantic Council analysts note, Western support for the corridor would counterbalance Russias Northern Route and Chinas BRI, ensuring Türkiye retains strategic autonomy.

Reclaim Mediator Role in Black Sea Stability

Türkiye should leverage its proven mediation capabilities to broker Crimea-focused Russia-Ukraine talks, building on its 2022 grain deal success. Hosting a multilateral summit under OTS auspices would position Ankara as an honest broker, addressing Black Sea security, energy transit, and environmental rehabilitation. Concurrently, expanding the FSRU Ertuğrul Gazis capacity to 28 billion cubic meters annually would solidify Türkiyes role as an energy hub, reducing EU reliance on Russian gas by 15%.

5. Conclusion: Türkiye as the Axiss Indispensable Power

Türkiyes unique capacity to bridge institutional, cultural, and geographic divides positions it as the linchpin of the Central Asia □□□□□ Sea axis. Its leadership in the Middle Corridor initiative, institutionalized through the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), and its dual role as a Black Sea energy arbiter and NATO ally underscore a strategic versatility

unmatched by external powers. Türkiyes cultural interlocutor role mitigates the transactional approaches of the EU and US, while its equity-based partnerships counterbalance Chinas debt-driven entrenchment.

External powers risk destabilizing the axis by sidelining Ankara, as evidenced by the EUs Mediterranean setbacks, where exclusionary policies fragmented energy security and trade integration. The Caspian Breeze 2025 drills and Türkiyes veto over non-littoral naval deployments exemplify its capacity to shape regional stability-a capability Brussels and Washington cannot replicate without Ankaras cooperation.

The axiss future hinges on Türkiyes ability to translate historical ties into 21st-century strategic partnerships. By institutionalizing the OTS accelerating the Middle Corridor with Western financing, and mediating Black Sea disputes, Türkiye can anchor Eurasian connectivity on equitable terms. As the Atlantic Council notes, Ankaras pragmatic sovereignty offers a blueprint for balancing great-power competition with regional agency.

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