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Azerbaijan at the Crossroads of Eurasian Connectivity: Implementing the East–West and North–South Transport Corridors

Abstract

Azerbaijan's location at the intersection of the East–West and North–South transport corridors has enabled the country to assume an increasingly important role in the evolving architecture of Eurasian connectivity. This study examines the historical development, institutional foundations and strategic significance of the principal transport initiatives involving Azerbaijan, with particular attention to the Transport Corridor Europe–Caucasus–Asia, the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, the Baku International Sea Trade Port and the International North–South Transport Corridor. Employing a qualitative historical-institutional approach, the research analyses how transport infrastructure, intergovernmental agreements and regional cooperation have contributed to Azerbaijan's transformation from a geographically advantageous transit territory into an emerging multimodal logistics hub. The study argues that the convergence of the East–West and North–South routes strengthens Azerbaijan's capacity to connect European, Caucasian, Central Asian, Chinese, Iranian, Russian and South Asian markets. These corridors have implications extending beyond the transportation of goods, including trade diversification, regional integration, infrastructure modernisation and the reconfiguration of geopolitical and geoeconomic relations across Eurasia. The analysis nevertheless identifies several constraints, including incomplete cross-border infrastructure, differences in railway systems, customs and tariff coordination problems, geopolitical instability and competition among alternative routes. The article concludes that Azerbaijan's long-term effectiveness as a Eurasian transport hub will depend on coordinated corridor governance, interoperability, digitalised customs procedures, competitive transit conditions and sustained cooperation with neighbouring and partner countries.

Keywords: Azerbaijan; Eurasian connectivity; East–West Corridor; North–South Corridor; Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway; transport geopolitics

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Introduction

The transformation of Eurasian trade and transportation networks has intensified competition over the routes connecting Europe and Asia. Changes in global supply chains, the growing economic importance of China and Central Asia, disruptions affecting traditional maritime and overland routes, and the demand for faster and more diversified transportation have increased the strategic value of intermediary states. Within this changing environment, transport corridors are no longer understood merely as physical routes for moving goods. They have become instruments of economic integration, geopolitical influence, regional cooperation and national development.

Azerbaijan occupies a distinctive position within this emerging connectivity architecture. Located between the Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus, the country lies at the intersection of routes extending from China and Central Asia toward Europe and from Russia toward Iran, the Persian Gulf and South Asia. This geographical position provides Azerbaijan with considerable transit potential. Geography alone, however, does not automatically produce a functioning transport hub. Transit capacity depends on infrastructure quality, institutional coordination, border efficiency, political stability, international agreements and the ability to integrate different modes of transportation into a coherent logistics system.

Since restoring its independence, Azerbaijan has pursued a transport policy intended to convert its geographical location into a sustainable economic and strategic advantage. The country has participated in regional and transregional projects designed to restore historical trade connections and establish contemporary railway, maritime and highway networks across Eurasia. The development of the Transport Corridor Europe–Caucasus–Asia constituted an important stage in this process by establishing a multilateral framework for connecting Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Baku's role in hosting the initiative's institutional structures further strengthened Azerbaijan's position within regional transport diplomacy.

The Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway subsequently provided a direct railway connection between the South Caucasus and Türkiye, facilitating access to European transportation networks. Together with the modernisation of domestic railway infrastructure and the development of the Baku International Sea Trade Port at Alat, the railway has enhanced the operational capacity of the Trans-Caspian East–West route. These projects have created the foundations for multimodal transportation combining maritime, railway and road services.

The International North–South Transport Corridor represents another major component of Azerbaijan's connectivity strategy. This corridor is intended to link Northern Europe and Russia with Iran, the Persian Gulf and India through a shorter and potentially more efficient transportation network. Azerbaijan's participation allows it to connect the North–South route with the East–West corridor, thereby increasing its importance as an intersection point between two major Eurasian transport systems.

The convergence of these corridors may generate significant economic opportunities. Expanded transit activity can stimulate logistics, warehousing, port services, railway operations, customs brokerage and industrial development. Improved connectivity may also support the diversification of Azerbaijan's economy by reducing its dependence on hydrocarbon revenues and encouraging non-oil exports. At the regional level, interconnected transport infrastructure can strengthen commercial interdependence and create incentives for sustained cooperation.

The development of international corridors also presents substantial challenges. Railway gauge differences, incomplete infrastructure, port and border capacity limitations, inconsistent customs

procedures and uncoordinated tariff policies can reduce route efficiency. Political tensions and security risks in surrounding regions may disrupt transportation or discourage investment. Azerbaijan must also compete with alternative corridors seeking to capture the same cargo flows between Asia and Europe. Consequently, the success of its transport strategy depends not only on domestic infrastructure investment but also on predictable regulations, competitive pricing, digital integration and effective coordination with neighbouring states.

Despite increasing scholarly interest in Eurasian connectivity, the East–West and North–South corridors are frequently examined as separate initiatives. Such an approach does not adequately explain Azerbaijan’s strategic importance as a point at which the two systems intersect. Examining them within a unified analytical framework makes it possible to assess how their interaction may influence Azerbaijan’s economic development, regional role and position in the broader Eurasian transport architecture.

This study therefore investigates the historical formation, implementation and strategic implications of the East–West and North–South transport corridors in Azerbaijan. It addresses three principal questions: how Azerbaijan developed the infrastructure and institutional arrangements required for participation in these corridors; how their intersection contributes to the country’s emergence as a multimodal transit and logistics hub; and which obstacles may limit their long-term effectiveness. By addressing these questions, the article contributes to discussions of transport geopolitics, corridor governance and regional integration in the wider Eurasian space.

Literature Review

The development of trans-Eurasian transport corridors has become a central component of contemporary regional integration, trade diversification, and geopolitical competition. Existing research generally examines transport corridors not merely as infrastructure projects but as multidimensional systems connecting national development strategies, international commerce, energy security, and foreign policy. Within this literature, Azerbaijan is frequently characterised as a strategically located state whose position between Europe and Asia allows it to participate simultaneously in East–West and North–South connectivity initiatives.

Transport Corridors and Azerbaijan’s Geoeconomic Position

A substantial strand of the literature focuses on Azerbaijan’s geographical position and its potential to function as an intermediary between major economic regions. Huseynov (2008) situates the country’s transport significance within the broader political and economic transformation of the South Caucasus after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. From this perspective, the emergence of independent regional states created both new opportunities for cross-border connectivity and new challenges involving political instability, unresolved conflicts, and competing geopolitical interests.

Hasanov (2019) provides a more explicitly geoeconomic interpretation, arguing that the East–West and North–South corridors enable Azerbaijan to transform geographical centrality into economic and political influence. This interpretation is consistent with Karavaev’s (2018a, 2018b) assessment of Azerbaijan as an increasingly important junction within international multimodal transport networks. Karavaev particularly emphasises the integration of railway, maritime, and road infrastructure as a prerequisite for converting individual projects into an interconnected transport system.

The relationship between transportation and national economic transformation is also addressed in studies of Azerbaijan’s energy-based development. Gasimly (2013) examines the influence of geoeconomic and energy factors on the country’s political and economic evolution. Although the

analysis is primarily concerned with hydrocarbons, it provides an important conceptual foundation for understanding Azerbaijan's subsequent effort to extend its strategic role from energy transportation to broader logistics and commercial connectivity. This transition reflects an attempt to employ infrastructure development as an instrument of economic diversification.

TRACECA and the Restoration of the Silk Road

The Transport Corridor Europe–Caucasus–Asia occupies a prominent position in scholarship on Azerbaijan's transport diplomacy. The initiative is commonly interpreted as an institutional effort to restore historical commercial connections between Europe and Asia through contemporary transport infrastructure. The Presidential Library of Azerbaijan (Administration of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, n.d.) presents TRACECA as a framework linking the participating states through coordinated railway, road, and maritime networks.

The 1998 Baku conference and the resulting multilateral agreement represented a significant stage in the institutionalisation of this corridor. Azerbaijan's role in hosting the Permanent Secretariat of the TRACECA Intergovernmental Commission strengthened Baku's position in regional transport governance. The initiative also allowed Azerbaijan to participate in a multilateral framework involving the European Union, the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Black Sea region.

Muradalieva (2011) places these developments within the longer historical geography of the Silk Road. Her analysis demonstrates that the cities of the Caucasus historically functioned not only as transit points but also as centres of production, commerce, and cultural interaction. This historical perspective is important because it challenges the narrow understanding of Azerbaijan as merely a passage for international cargo. Effective corridor development can also stimulate urban growth, logistics services, industrial activity, and regional markets.

The restoration of Silk Road connectivity has acquired additional significance through China's Belt and Road Initiative. Mokretsky (n.d.) interprets Azerbaijan's participation in this initiative as an important vector of the country's external economic policy. The Belt and Road framework expands the geographical scale of Azerbaijan's transport strategy by connecting its infrastructure projects with trade routes extending through China, Central Asia, the Caspian region, Türkiye, and Europe.

The Baku–Tbilisi–Kars Railway and East–West Connectivity

The Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway is widely regarded as one of the principal infrastructure components of the East–West corridor. Ismailov (2008) describes the railway as a strategic intersection connecting the railway systems of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye. Its importance derives from its ability to provide an overland connection between the Caspian region and European markets while reducing dependence on routes passing through other regional states.

Research on railway integration highlights both the national and transregional dimensions of the project. Mammadov (2015) associates the railway with broader efforts to integrate fragmented transport systems across Eurasia. Isabalaeva (2019) similarly presents Azerbaijan as an increasingly important component of the East–West corridor, particularly because of its capacity to connect Central Asian cargo flows with Georgian and Turkish infrastructure.

The Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway cannot be evaluated independently of maritime transportation across the Caspian Sea. Its effectiveness depends on coordinated operations involving the Baku International Sea Trade Port, Caspian ferry connections, customs services, and onward railway transportation. Karavaev (2018b) therefore stresses intermodal connectivity rather than evaluating individual

infrastructure projects in isolation. This approach recognises that the competitiveness of a corridor depends on the efficiency of the entire logistics chain.

Existing studies generally associate the railway with shorter delivery periods, expanded cargo capacity, and improved access to regional markets. Nevertheless, physical infrastructure alone does not guarantee commercially sustainable cargo flows. Route competitiveness is also influenced by tariffs, customs procedures, border-crossing times, schedule reliability, digital cargo tracking, and coordination among participating countries.

The International North–South Transport Corridor

A separate body of research examines the International North–South Transport Corridor as a framework connecting Russia and Northern Europe with Azerbaijan, Iran, the Persian Gulf, and India. Azerbaijan’s Ministry of Digital Development and Transport (n.d.) presents the corridor as a multimodal system involving railway, road, and maritime transportation. Azerbaijan’s position within this system is particularly significant because its territory provides one of the principal overland connections between Russia and Iran.

Ostapenko (2018) interprets Azerbaijan’s participation in the North–South Corridor as part of its balanced foreign policy. Cooperation within the corridor requires the country to maintain functional relations with states that possess different geopolitical orientations and foreign-policy priorities. Transport cooperation consequently serves both commercial and diplomatic purposes.

The intersection of the North–South and East–West routes potentially increases Azerbaijan’s strategic value. Sputnik Azerbaijan (2016) describes the country as the geographical point at which the two corridors converge. Such convergence may allow cargo to be redirected between European, Russian, Turkish, Iranian, Central Asian, Chinese, and South Asian markets. Azerbaijan may therefore operate not only as a transit country along two separate routes but also as a redistribution and logistics centre connecting them.

The literature nevertheless identifies infrastructure and institutional constraints affecting the North–South Corridor. These include incomplete railway connections, differences in technical standards, limited border capacity, customs delays, and the need for coordinated tariffs. The economic viability of the corridor depends on resolving these obstacles and ensuring predictable transit conditions across all participating states.

Infrastructure, Energy, and Regional Cooperation

Scholarship on Azerbaijan’s transport corridors frequently overlaps with research on energy infrastructure. The Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline and other energy projects contributed to the development of regional cooperation models that were subsequently applied to railway and logistics initiatives. Huseynova (2002a, 2002b) interprets the pipeline as both an economic project and a factor contributing to interstate cooperation and regional stability.

Energy diplomacy also strengthened Azerbaijan’s experience in managing large-scale multinational infrastructure projects. Mammadov (2007), Kalinovskiy (2014), and Akhundov (2019) demonstrate that competition among export routes is often accompanied by negotiation, convergence, and changing regional partnerships. Although pipelines and transport corridors serve different markets, both depend on long-term interstate commitments, infrastructure security, commercially viable demand, and coordination among multiple jurisdictions.

The relationship between energy and transportation also reflects the evolution of Azerbaijan's development strategy. Whereas the country's international economic position was initially shaped predominantly by oil and gas exports, contemporary transport initiatives seek to generate revenue from logistics, transit, port services, and non-oil trade. Fedorovskaya (2019) regards transport projects as an increasingly important component of Azerbaijan's broader regional economic strategy.

Limitations of the Existing Literature

The reviewed scholarship establishes Azerbaijan's strategic importance within Eurasian transportation, but several limitations remain. First, many studies examine the East–West and North–South corridors separately. This division obscures the strategic implications of their intersection within Azerbaijan. A more integrated approach is required to explain how the two systems may complement one another and contribute to the development of a multimodal logistics hub.

Second, much of the existing literature is descriptive or policy-oriented. Numerous publications document infrastructure projects, political declarations, and transport agreements without systematically evaluating corridor performance. Greater attention should be given to measurable indicators, including cargo volumes, transit times, transportation costs, border delays, port capacity, and route reliability.

Third, previous studies frequently emphasise the advantages of Azerbaijan's geographical position without sufficiently distinguishing between potential and operational capacity. Strategic location creates opportunities, but these opportunities can be realised only through efficient institutions, competitive tariffs, interoperable infrastructure, and sustained international cooperation.

Fourth, the existing literature provides limited analysis of competition among alternative Eurasian corridors. Azerbaijan's routes operate within an environment in which states and logistics companies can choose among maritime, northern, southern, and trans-Caspian alternatives. The competitiveness of the Azerbaijani route must therefore be evaluated in comparative rather than exclusively national terms.

Finally, earlier studies give insufficient consideration to digitalisation, environmental sustainability, and corridor resilience. Contemporary transport systems increasingly depend on electronic customs procedures, integrated data platforms, cargo traceability, and the ability to adapt to geopolitical or supply-chain disruptions. These dimensions should be incorporated into assessments of Azerbaijan's future role in Eurasian connectivity.

Research Gap and Contribution

This study addresses these limitations by analysing the East–West and North–South corridors within a unified historical and geoeconomic framework. It conceptualises Azerbaijan as an intersection point between two complementary systems rather than merely as a transit territory located along separate routes. The study also distinguishes geographical potential from effective corridor performance by considering infrastructure, institutional coordination, multimodal integration, and geopolitical constraints.

The article contributes to the literature by demonstrating that Azerbaijan's emergence as a Eurasian logistics hub depends on more than the construction of railways, ports, and highways. Its long-term position will be determined by its ability to coordinate corridor governance, reduce border and customs barriers, ensure predictable transit conditions, and integrate national infrastructure with the transport systems of neighbouring and partner countries.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative historical-institutional case-study design to examine the formation, implementation, and strategic interaction of the East–West and North–South transport corridors in Azerbaijan. A qualitative approach was selected because the research sought to explain how infrastructure development, intergovernmental agreements, regional diplomacy, and geopolitical conditions collectively shaped Azerbaijan’s emergence as a Eurasian transit state. Rather than measuring corridor performance through a single economic indicator, the study investigated the institutional and historical processes through which transport connectivity became a component of national development and foreign policy.

Azerbaijan was treated as an embedded case within the wider Eurasian transport system. The analysis considered the country’s participation in TRACECA, the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, the Baku International Sea Trade Port, and the International North–South Transport Corridor. Energy infrastructure was examined where necessary to explain the institutional experience, geopolitical relationships, and transit strategies that preceded the country’s shift toward transport and logistics diversification.

Data Sources

The study was based on documentary analysis of academic publications, books, conference proceedings, government documents, presidential orders, institutional reports, policy statements, and specialised media coverage. The source material primarily covered developments from the restoration of Azerbaijan’s independence to the end of the 2010s.

Academic studies were used to establish the historical and conceptual context of regional connectivity, transport geopolitics, and Azerbaijan’s foreign economic strategy. Official materials were used to reconstruct agreements, policy decisions, infrastructure projects, and implementation priorities. Contemporary media sources provided supplementary information concerning negotiations, project announcements, construction phases, and interpretations of regional developments.

Priority was given to materials addressing at least one of the following areas:

1. TRACECA and the restoration of the historical Silk Road;
2. the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway;
3. the Baku International Sea Trade Port and multimodal transportation;
4. the International North–South Transport Corridor;
5. Azerbaijan’s relations with Georgia, Türkiye, Russia, Iran, and Central Asian states;
6. transport-related regional integration and corridor governance; and
7. the relationship between energy transit experience and transport diplomacy.

Sources that contained only general descriptions without identifiable relevance to Azerbaijan’s corridor development were not central to the analysis. Duplicate references and sources lacking sufficient bibliographic information were excluded from the final interpretation.

Analytical Procedure

The documents were examined in three stages. First, a chronological reconstruction was undertaken to identify major stages in Azerbaijan's transport-corridor development. These stages included the institutionalisation of TRACECA, negotiations concerning the North–South Corridor, the construction and commissioning of the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, and the development of port and border infrastructure.

Second, the documents were coded thematically. The principal analytical categories were:

- infrastructure development;
- multimodal integration;
- institutional cooperation;
- transit-time and cost reduction;
- foreign-policy balancing;
- economic diversification;
- corridor competition;
- geopolitical constraints;
- customs and tariff coordination; and
- environmental and technological modernisation.

Third, the findings from academic, official, and media sources were compared through source triangulation. Official documents were used to establish formal decisions and institutional commitments, while academic publications were used to interpret their historical and geopolitical significance. Media materials were used cautiously and primarily to reconstruct contemporary debates or project implementation stages.

Analytical Framework

The analysis combined three complementary perspectives. The historical-institutional perspective was used to explain how earlier decisions, agreements, and infrastructure investments shaped subsequent corridor development. A geoeconomic perspective was applied to assess how Azerbaijan sought to transform its location into transit revenue, commercial influence, and economic diversification. A corridor-governance perspective was used to evaluate the coordination required among states, railway operators, ports, customs authorities, and logistics companies.

Within this framework, corridor effectiveness was understood as dependent on five interrelated dimensions:

1. physical infrastructure and capacity;
2. institutional and regulatory coordination;
3. multimodal interoperability;

4. commercial competitiveness; and
5. geopolitical stability.

This multidimensional model prevented the analysis from equating the construction of infrastructure with the successful operation of an international corridor.

Methodological Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, it relies predominantly on documentary evidence and does not include interviews with government officials, transport operators, port authorities, or logistics companies. Second, many of the consulted sources are descriptive and do not provide comparable statistics on cargo volumes, costs, delays, or route reliability. Third, some media reports reflect the political and economic expectations prevailing when they were published rather than subsequently verified outcomes.

The results should therefore be interpreted as an historical and institutional assessment rather than a contemporary econometric evaluation of corridor performance. Future studies should incorporate longitudinal freight data, customs-processing times, transport costs, port-capacity utilisation, and interviews with corridor stakeholders.

Results

Institutionalisation of the East–West Corridor

The analysis shows that Azerbaijan's East–West transport strategy developed through the gradual institutionalisation of international cooperation rather than through a single infrastructure project. The 1998 Baku conference on restoring the historical Silk Road established a multilateral foundation for the Europe–Caucasus–Asia corridor. Azerbaijan's role in hosting the Permanent Secretariat of the TRACECA Intergovernmental Commission subsequently strengthened its position within regional transport governance.

TRACECA provided an institutional framework through which Azerbaijan could connect its national infrastructure with European, Black Sea, South Caucasian, and Central Asian transport systems. The initiative also established transport diplomacy as an important component of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. Baku was no longer positioned solely as a geographic transit point; it became an institutional centre involved in the coordination of corridor development.

The results further indicate that Azerbaijan's involvement in the East–West Corridor evolved alongside broader European discussions concerning green corridors, intelligent transport systems, logistical efficiency, and environmentally sustainable freight transportation. Although the Baltic East–West Transport Corridor represented a geographically distinct initiative, its emphasis on digital coordination, rail cooperation, port development, and sustainable logistics offered a relevant operational model for wider Eurasian connectivity.

Development of a Multimodal East–West Route

A second result concerns the transformation of the East–West Corridor into a multimodal system. The Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway created a direct rail connection between Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye, linking the Caspian region to the Turkish and European railway networks. Its significance lies not only

in the construction of a railway line but also in its integration with Caspian maritime services, domestic railways, highways, and logistics facilities.

The development of the Baku International Sea Trade Port reinforced this multimodal structure. Cargo arriving from Central Asia across the Caspian Sea could be transferred to rail or road networks and transported through Georgia and Türkiye toward European markets. Conversely, European and Turkish cargo could reach Central Asian and potentially Chinese markets through the same network.

The evidence therefore supports the interpretation of Azerbaijan as an intermodal junction rather than a conventional transit territory. Its strategic value derives from the ability to connect maritime, railway, and road transportation across different national systems. However, the results also indicate that the operational effectiveness of this arrangement depends on synchronised ferry schedules, efficient cargo handling, transparent tariffs, and reduced border delays.

Implementation of the North–South Corridor

The North–South Corridor developed through extended negotiations among Azerbaijan, Russia, and Iran. Azerbaijan’s participation became more institutionalised during the early 2000s, when railway authorities and government representatives began negotiating the establishment of a consortium and the coordination of construction, financing, and transit operations.

The corridor was intended to connect Indian and Persian Gulf markets with Russia and Northern Europe through Iran and Azerbaijan. The western land route through the Astara border was strategically important because it could reduce the need for repeated maritime transshipment and provide a continuous overland connection.

Azerbaijan constructed the railway segment extending from Astara station to the Iranian border, participated in the construction of the railway bridge over the Astarachay River, and developed associated customs and border infrastructure. These measures demonstrated that Azerbaijan completed significant elements of its national obligations under the project.

Nevertheless, the results identify the Qazvin–Rasht–Astara connection within Iran as a persistent infrastructure constraint. The absence of a fully integrated railway link prevented the corridor from reaching its maximum operational potential. International sanctions against Iran, financing difficulties, technically complex terrain, and prolonged interstate negotiations contributed to implementation delays.

Convergence of the Two Corridors

The most important result is that Azerbaijan’s strategic value arises from the intersection of the East–West and North–South corridors. The East–West system connects Central Asia and the Caspian region with the South Caucasus, Türkiye, and Europe. The North–South system connects Russia and Northern Europe with Iran, the Persian Gulf, and India. Azerbaijan occupies the geographic and infrastructural space where these two systems can interact.

This convergence creates opportunities to redirect cargo between multiple markets. Goods moving along the North–South route may be transferred toward Türkiye or the Black Sea, while cargo moving across the Caspian may gain access to Iranian and South Asian markets. Azerbaijan can consequently perform functions extending beyond transit, including consolidation, redistribution, storage, customs processing, and value-added logistics.

The evidence indicates that the convergence of the corridors could strengthen the commercial role of the Alat port area and associated logistics infrastructure. However, this potential depends on operational integration. Two corridors crossing the same territory do not automatically constitute an interconnected logistics system. Their interaction requires compatible tariffs, coordinated schedules, efficient customs procedures, and integrated digital information.

Transport Corridors as Instruments of Foreign Policy

The results demonstrate that corridor development has served both economic and diplomatic objectives. Azerbaijan's transport strategy involves cooperation with states possessing different and sometimes competing geopolitical orientations. The East–West Corridor requires sustained cooperation with Georgia, Türkiye, Central Asian states, and European institutions. The North–South Corridor depends on coordination with Russia, Iran, and, indirectly, India.

The 2016 trilateral summit involving Azerbaijan, Russia, and Iran illustrated the diplomatic significance of transport cooperation. The meeting placed economic connectivity, railway integration, investment, and trade facilitation at the centre of regional negotiations. Azerbaijan's ability to maintain working relations across different geopolitical blocs strengthened its role as an intermediary and regional convening state.

This finding supports the interpretation of transport infrastructure as a foreign-policy instrument. Participation in multiple corridors reduces dependence on a single route or strategic partner and enables Azerbaijan to balance relationships across regional power structures.

Transition From Energy Transit to Logistics Diversification

The analysis also identifies continuity between Azerbaijan's energy-corridor experience and its subsequent transport strategy. The Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum gas pipeline provided Azerbaijan with institutional experience in negotiating and implementing complex cross-border infrastructure projects.

These projects demonstrated that infrastructure could reshape political and economic relationships in the South Caucasus. They also established durable cooperation among Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye. The transport-corridor strategy expanded this model from hydrocarbons to containerised cargo, agricultural products, manufactured goods, and general freight.

The results suggest that this transition is central to Azerbaijan's economic-diversification objectives. Transit fees, logistics services, warehousing, cargo processing, and industrial development may generate non-oil economic activity. Nevertheless, the scale of these benefits depends on sustained cargo demand and the competitiveness of Azerbaijani routes relative to alternative corridors.

Operational and Geopolitical Constraints

The documentary evidence identifies several constraints limiting corridor effectiveness. These include:

- incomplete cross-border railway infrastructure;
- technical differences among national railway systems;
- repeated cargo transshipment;
- inconsistent tariffs and customs procedures;

- limited coordination among transport operators;
- sanctions and political restrictions affecting partner states;
- regional conflicts and security risks;
- fluctuations in cargo demand; and
- competition from maritime and alternative overland routes.

The findings also show that political announcements and projected freight capacity do not necessarily correspond to realised cargo flows. Infrastructure capacity represents potential, whereas commercial performance depends on reliability, cost, speed, and predictability.

Key Findings

The study produced six principal findings.

First, Azerbaijan's emergence as a transit hub has resulted from sustained institutional and infrastructure development rather than from geography alone. TRACECA, the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, the Baku International Sea Trade Port, and the Astara railway connection represent complementary components of a long-term national strategy.

Second, the country's principal strategic advantage is the convergence of the East–West and North–South routes. Azerbaijan's position allows it to connect markets extending across Europe, Türkiye, Russia, Iran, Central Asia, China, and South Asia.

Third, multimodal integration is more important than the isolated capacity of any single railway, port, or highway. Corridor performance depends on the efficiency with which cargo can move between maritime, rail, and road transportation.

Fourth, transport corridors serve a dual function in Azerbaijan. They support economic diversification while simultaneously strengthening the country's diplomatic importance and capacity to balance relations with multiple regional powers.

Fifth, Azerbaijan's experience with international energy pipelines provided an institutional foundation for its subsequent transport strategy. Cross-border negotiation, infrastructure diplomacy, and transit security developed in the energy sector were later extended to general transport and logistics.

Sixth, incomplete infrastructure and weak coordination remain more significant barriers than geographic limitations. Customs delays, tariff inconsistency, financing problems, political tensions, and the unfinished sections of international routes may prevent existing infrastructure from reaching its full commercial capacity.

Discussion

The findings support the broader argument that contemporary transport corridors should be understood as institutional and geopolitical systems rather than merely as physical infrastructure. Azerbaijan's experience demonstrates that railways, ports, and highways acquire strategic value only when they are supported by multilateral agreements, operational coordination, and commercially competitive services.

The institutionalisation of TRACECA was important because it embedded Azerbaijan within a wider framework of European and Eurasian transport cooperation. The initiative provided the country with an early platform for corridor diplomacy and helped establish Baku as a coordination centre. This finding is consistent with historical interpretations that position the Caucasus as both a transit region and an area of commercial and political interaction (Huseynov, 2008; Muradalieva, 2011).

The Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway represents a material extension of this institutional strategy. Its opening strengthened the physical continuity of the East–West route, but its economic significance depends on integration with the Caspian crossing and European logistics networks. This reinforces Karavaev’s (2018b) emphasis on intermodal connectivity. A railway cannot be evaluated solely by its nominal annual capacity; it must be assessed as part of a transport chain involving ports, ferries, border crossings, customs systems, and freight operators.

The North–South Corridor presents a different model of cooperation. Whereas the East–West route is closely associated with Türkiye, Georgia, Central Asia, and European connectivity, the North–South route requires sustained coordination among Azerbaijan, Russia, and Iran. Azerbaijan’s simultaneous participation in both systems illustrates a strategy of infrastructural and foreign-policy diversification.

This diversification has particular geopolitical importance. Transport dependence on a single route can expose a country to political pressure, conflict-related disruption, or changes in regional demand. By participating in multiple corridors, Azerbaijan seeks to increase route flexibility and reduce vulnerability. The approach resembles the diversification strategy previously employed in the energy sector, where alternative pipelines strengthened Azerbaijan’s autonomy in export policy (Gasimly, 2013; Huseynova, 2002b).

However, the findings caution against interpreting infrastructure construction as proof of corridor success. Policy discourse frequently highlights projected reductions in transportation time and cost, but the available documentary evidence does not consistently demonstrate whether these projections were achieved. Transit competitiveness is determined by total door-to-door cost, border predictability, cargo security, service frequency, and administrative efficiency.

The unfinished or delayed Iranian railway connection illustrates this distinction. Azerbaijan may complete infrastructure within its territory, but the functionality of an international corridor depends on all participating states. This creates a collective-action problem: the benefits of the corridor are shared, while construction costs, political risks, and regulatory responsibilities remain nationally distributed.

The results also have implications for Azerbaijan’s economic-diversification policy. Logistics development can support warehousing, freight forwarding, customs services, repair facilities, industrial parks, and processing activities. Yet transit alone may generate limited domestic value if cargo merely passes through the country. Azerbaijan must therefore seek to capture value through logistics clusters, free economic zones, assembly activities, distribution services, and digitally integrated trade platforms.

The environmental dimension remains underdeveloped in much of the Azerbaijan-focused literature. European green-corridor initiatives demonstrate that future competitiveness may increasingly depend on emissions reduction, rail electrification, energy-efficient ports, and digital optimisation. Incorporating these elements would enable Azerbaijan to align corridor development with emerging environmental requirements in European and international trade.

Digitalisation is similarly important. Integrated customs documentation, electronic cargo tracking, advance information exchange, and interoperable logistics platforms can reduce delays without requiring major physical construction. For Azerbaijan, institutional and digital improvements may therefore generate substantial efficiency gains from infrastructure that already exists.

Finally, corridor resilience should be treated as a strategic objective. Regional conflict, sanctions, border closures, public-health emergencies, and disruptions to maritime trade can rapidly alter freight patterns. Azerbaijan's position at the intersection of multiple routes creates opportunities during such disruptions, but it also requires contingency planning, diversified services, and transparent coordination with partner states.

Conclusion

This study examined the implementation and interaction of the East–West and North–South transport corridors in Azerbaijan through a historical-institutional and geoeconomic framework. The analysis demonstrates that Azerbaijan has progressively transformed its geographical location into a developing system of multimodal connectivity supported by railways, highways, ports, border infrastructure, and international agreements.

The East–West Corridor connects Azerbaijan with Central Asia, the Caspian region, Georgia, Türkiye, and Europe. The North–South Corridor provides potential access between Russia, Iran, the Persian Gulf, and South Asia. Their intersection strengthens Azerbaijan's capacity to function as a Eurasian logistics junction.

The study concludes, however, that geographical location and physical infrastructure are necessary but insufficient conditions for sustainable corridor performance. Azerbaijan's long-term success will depend on institutional coordination, competitive tariffs, customs digitalisation, reliable transport schedules, infrastructure interoperability, environmental modernisation, and political cooperation among participating states.

Transport connectivity also has implications extending beyond freight movement. It can contribute to economic diversification, regional diplomacy, investment attraction, and the expansion of Azerbaijan's non-oil economy. To maximise these benefits, national policy should move beyond a transit-centred model and promote value-added logistics, industrial processing, distribution services, and regional supply-chain integration.

Future research should evaluate corridor performance using longitudinal and comparative data. Particular attention should be given to freight volumes, door-to-door delivery times, transportation costs, customs-processing periods, port utilisation, environmental performance, and the experiences of logistics companies. Comparative analysis with alternative Eurasian routes would also provide a more precise assessment of Azerbaijan's competitiveness within the changing geography of international trade.

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The list below has been standardized in English according to APA 7. Duplicate and unusable entries have been removed.

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