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## The Belt and Road Initiative: Perspectives from Asia and Africa

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# Between Economic Benefits and Strategic Dividends. The "Middle Corridor" and Turkish–Azerbaijani Infrastructure Alliance

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## Abstract

Over the last decade, and chiefly as a result of the launch of China's Belt and Road Initiative, infrastructure politics emerged as a new key domain for regional politics in the Eurasian chessboard. That is, the promotion of interstate and transcontinental connectivity networks has become a privileged ground for power cooperation and competition, involving countries spanning from Eastern Asia to Central and Western Europe. Unsurprisingly, a large and growing body of scholarly attention has been focusing on infrastructure politics. Yet, it was mainly great powers' initiative drawing scholars' and analysts' attention, while the perspectives and actions of smaller powers were somehow sidelined. In an attempt to fill this gap, the present article focuses instead on infrastructure diplomacy of Turkey and Azerbaijan, a middle and small power which yielded an infrastructure alliance aimed at leveraging their rediscovered central position in the Eurasian system to come up with a joint recipe for connectivity. In particular, the article focuses upon the logic behind the joint Turkish–Azerbaijani flagship connectivity project – the so-called Middle Corridor Initiative – and upon the interaction between the latter and China's Silk Road Economic Belt.

**Keywords:** Infrastructure diplomacy, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Middle Corridor Initiative

This article deals with Turkish–Azerbaijani cooperation in the domain of infrastructure politics. It focuses on the infrastructure alliance built up by Ankara and Baku with a view to leverage their rediscovered central position in the Eurasian system and coming up with a joint recipe for connectivity – the so-called Middle Corridor Initiative (MCI), spanning from Central Asia to the border between Turkey and the EU. Furthermore, the

article unpacks the interaction between the latter and the China's Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), with which it overlaps to a great extent, so as to understand the degree of compatibility of the two initiatives and, at the same time, to offer inductive insights into the infrastructure diplomacy of middle and small powers.

The Turkish-Azerbaijani case study offers a new perspective on the centre-periphery relations in the Eurasian chessboard. It portrays the new centrality experienced by once marginal areas east of the Euro-Atlantic space as a result of the steady growth of East-Asian powers and the subsequent eastward shift of the international system's centre of gravity. Over the last decade, infrastructure politics - unfolding in the Euro-Asian space chiefly as a result of China's promotion of transcontinental connectivity networks - was the primary responsible for the re-construction of spatial hierarchies in Eurasia or, under a critical geopolitics perspective, for the modifications of those "geographical assumptions, designations and understandings that enter into the making of world politics" (Agnew 2003: 5). The SREB epitomised the new centrality of "in-between" countries, wedged between Asia and Europe and serving as a natural highway for goods travelling by land between respective markets. This is particularly true for the Black-Caspian Sea (BCS) area - i.e. the area spanning from Central Asia to the Southern Caucasus and the Anatolian plateau - which, ever since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), occupied a special role in an initiative born primarily out of the need to close the long-standing infrastructure gap plaguing China's immediate neighbourhood, thereby facilitating its transition "from land-locked to land-linked" (Pomfret 2021).

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Far from manifesting itself in mere physical terms, centrality has also taken on strategic and diplomatic connotations. The BRI, commonly portrayed as the cornerstone of China's grand strategy (Fallon 2015; Beeson 2018; Struye de Swielande and Vandamme 2020), provided BSC area with a renovated "keystone" role (Gvosdev 2020) in the Eurasian system, with significant repercussions on both regional politics and local countries' agency. As a matter of fact, China's initiative did not take place in a void along the historic Silk Route. On the contrary, it overlapped with analogous pre-existing and coeval initiatives, shaping cooperation and competition trends in an area where infrastructure politics traditionally took on an outstanding role for regional power play. Consistently, Beijing has been widely portrayed as a late-comer in the so-called "New Great Game" (Cooley 2012; Fingar 2016; Pizzolo and Carteny 2022), i.e. the competition for power and influence being played in the former Soviet South in the aftermath of USSR dissolution. The latter, in turn, expanded local actors' diplomatic leeway, which grew proportionally to the competition between traditional Western powers and their Euro-Asian challengers. Local players of the New Great Game did not behave as mere pawns in competing major powers' hands (Edwards 2003: 88-9). Rather, infrastructure politics increased the possibility to pursue multi-vectorial policies, to influence major powers' policies and, potentially, to come up with their own recipes for regional cooperation and economic development. As a result, infrastructure diplomacy has become a new

and proficient foreign policy domain whereby in-between countries could shape their agency by leveraging their *rediscovered* central position in the Eurasian system.

Greater room for manoeuvre became available to in-between countries regardless of their positioning in the international power hierarchy, as both middle and small powers showed a tendency to "punch above their weight". On the one hand, the new "freewheeling" world situation, coupled with the trend towards regionalization of the international system, ensured a greater regional role for emerging middle powers like Turkey (Mott 2022).<sup>1</sup> In the same vein, a new range of options and opportunities were available also for small powers, like Azerbaijan, which demonstrated a tendency to make up for what they lack in structural terms by virtue of "creative agency" (Cooper and Shaw 2009: 2). No longer necessarily bound by vulnerability making them mere system-takers, small powers could carve out niche strategies in the same way middle powers do, on the premise of an accurate understanding of their given circumstances and status quo (Archer et al. 2014; Wong 2018).

Finally, a normative layer adds up to the geographic and strategic ones in defining the contours of the multifaceted central position. As BRI is often understood as evidence of the emerging post-liberal order (Callahan 2016; Miller 2017; Liu et al. 2018), in-between countries found themselves torn between two different and competing developmental models - namely Beijing's state-capitalism and the Western liberal market economy. Therefore, "in-betweenness" connotes countries not only located between the Euro-Atlantic and East-Asian powers and pursuing a delicate strategic balance among them, but also actors walking a hybrid tightrope between liberal-democratic and authoritarian models (Öniş and Yalikul 2021).

In order to detect the logic behind Turkish-Azerbaijani infrastructure policy and alliance, and the latter's interaction with Chinese initiative, the article proceeds as follows. In the following section it introduces the basic working parameters of infrastructure diplomacy as well as the tenets of neoclassical realist theory, used here with the intention to bridge the system-agent divide. Successively, the second section traces the emergence of the joint Turkish-Azerbaijani infrastructure diplomacy that originated in the domain of energy politics and subsequently expanded and deepened to embrace the transportation of goods between Asia and Europe. Building on the key features of the Turkish-Azerbaijani infrastructure alliance, the third section looks at the interaction and the overall compatibility between its current flagship project - namely the MCI - and the SREB.

The article maintains that Turkish-Azerbaijani joint infrastructure diplomacy emerges as a privileged testing ground for the attempt to leverage upon their rediscovered central position in the Eurasian system with a view to strengthen independence in foreign-policy making and to maximise regional influence. Moreover, it highlights two main shortcomings in MCI-SREB cooperation. On the one hand, the latter is limited by Ankara's and Baku's aim to pursue and enhance their independence, which inhibits

entering asymmetric alignments with more powerful actors. On the other hand, while MCI stands as an independent initiative carved out among major powers' connectivity projects, it remains structurally dependent on – currently absent – enabling conditions at both sides of the wider Eurasian corridor.

### Infrastructure Diplomacy in the BCS Area Under a Neoclassical Realist Perspective

Ever since the demise of the USSR, infrastructure politics has been a privileged ground for cooperation and competition in the BCS area. Yet, scarce attention has been devoted to its "long waves", i.e. to those long-term dynamics affecting its current shape and trends as well as the way in which local actors perceive and relate to the BRI. Furthermore, although regional competition over and between infrastructures has seen a significant degree of agency by local actors, limited scholarly attention has focused on their role in regional infrastructure politics, i.e. on the various ways through which they try to influence the politics of major powers to safeguard their interests. This is partly true also for Turkish-Azerbaijani cases. While a growing body of literature deals with Ankara's (Ergenc 2015; Ikiz 2020; Hussain 2022) and Baku's (Lianlei 2016)<sup>2</sup> bilateral relations with Beijing also analysing the interactions and compatibilities between respective infrastructure projects, their *joint* and *long-term* approach to infrastructure diplomacy did not attract scholarly attention. This contribution, in turn, starts from the assumption that Ankara's and Baku's infrastructure diplomacies have traditionally represented two faces of the same coin. This has to do not only with the unavoidable dependence relations between a landlocked state, as Azerbaijan, and its main transit country, namely Turkey, but also with their attempt, pursued in different times and with different modalities, to jointly play in the regional infrastructure game to protect and advance respective national interests.

At the same time, despite the importance of infrastructure politics at both systemic and regional level, the concept of infrastructure diplomacy still lacks in-depth theorisation, as over the last decade it has been introduced and analysed in inductive terms, starting chiefly from the investigation of Beijing's initiatives. As such, even the most advanced theorisation attempts are affected by China's power resource base and by its positioning in the international power hierarchy. Therefore, such efforts do not fit with the study of those efforts by medium and small powers – analogous in their shape yet different in their scope.

Based on existing literature, infrastructure diplomacy designates the promotion of material connectivity networks for both economic and strategic goals (Zhang and Xiao 2022; Jia and Bennett 2018; Lauridsen 2020; Singh and Pradhan 2019). While the overall shape of the so-defined infrastructure diplomacy could also be applied to middle and small powers, the same does not hold true for its practice or operational features. Indeed, supporting construction and operational activities by providing technical and

financial assistance is a key feature of infrastructure diplomacy, which naturally entails "the international provisioning of capital goods by state representatives or state-owned enterprises from one country (the source) to another (the host)" (Jia and Bennett 2018: 344) and is built primarily on government-to-government contracts (Zhang and Xiao 2022).

Such theorisation excludes a wide range of state actors that, while being active participants in infrastructure politics and at times promoting the construction of their own connectivity networks, do not benefit from a sufficiently broad power resource base to allow either the financing of the infrastructure or the active involvement of state-owned companies. In other words, the current definition of infrastructure diplomacy does not apply to medium and – more so – small powers, which should not be seen as passive project-takers, both in general terms and specifically in relation to the BRI. Indeed, China's initiatives naturally entail some degree of agency for weaker potential host states as, notwithstanding the all-encompassing nature of Beijing's offer to its partners, the latter "still need to be convinced of the specific benefits of China's projects, thus creating a bargaining opportunity" (Oh 2018: 531). The latter may well be seen as falling under the domain of infrastructure diplomacy, the more so since the current multiplication of infrastructure projects from various governments and regional organisations provides medium and small powers with the possibility of pursuing multi-vector policies, further expanding their bargaining power. This is particularly significant since, while BRI stands as an "express train" that Beijing's partners allegedly cannot afford to miss (Zhixin 2016: 64), nonetheless the engagement in the initiative rarely comes free of what Jeffrey Wilson (2019: 101-2) calls an "infrastructure dilemma": while BRI offers much-needed capital goods, at the same time it comes with relevant concerns in terms of governance and security which the partner countries need to address.

While adopting the general definition of infrastructure diplomacy, this article expands the scope of the agent's diplomatic activity to include initiatives undertaken by medium and small powers pursuing their national interests in line with their own power resources. Consequently, the focus here is on all those activities aimed at either promoting new trans-national infrastructure networks or defining the modalities of participation in existing ones, through government-to-government diplomatic engagement as well as through facilitating the flow of funds and goods to and throughout the country. Given the comparatively smaller scale of the available power resource base, the infrastructure diplomacy of medium and small powers seems to be characterised by an unavoidable engagement with third country initiatives. This may come in two major but not mutually exclusive forms: on the one hand, they may look to establish infrastructure alliances (Khanna 2016) with peers or like-minded countries for the sake of promoting new low-scale transportation networks capable of integrating into larger ones; on the other hand, they may also try to engage with major powers' initiatives, maximising their



economic and strategic interest by exploiting the limited yet critical bargaining power available in an asymmetric relation.

In order to bridge the structure-agent dichotomy and to analyse the drivers behind Ankara's and Baku's aims and roles in regional infrastructure politics, this article uses a neoclassical realist approach. It assumes that understanding the logic behind the definition of Turkish and Azerbaijani infrastructure diplomacy requires taking into consideration not only the regional context, but also those unit-level elements that mediate the relationship between the latter and their foreign policy choices. Hence, the state dimension is used here as an intervening variable or "transmission belt" (Taliaferro et al. 2009: 4) between the independent and dependent variables, i.e. between the external context and their infrastructure diplomacy. Therefore, while it is assumed that the essential parameters of foreign policy remain defined by the distribution and the hierarchy of power, such an influence is understood here as "indirect and complex, because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening unit-level variables such as decision-makers' perceptions and state structure" (Rose 1998: 152). The use of the perceptual and institutional *filter* as an intervening variable appears particularly useful for the purposes of this analysis as it helps to grasp Turkish and Azerbaijani adaptation to a mercurial external context and to a shifting balance of power, going from the progressive crumbling of a unipolar world to a still undefined multipolarity. Thus, their joint infrastructure diplomacy could be interpreted as a reaction to the perceived risks and opportunities from the progressive change of scale in the international system, i.e. to the misalignment and progressive reversal of hierarchy between global and regional dynamics, to the benefit of the latter (Colombo 2011). Triggered by an increase in relative power perceptions and incentivised by respective economic needs, Turkish-Azerbaijani infrastructure diplomacy has become a tool to promote a regional ownership principle which, based on the rediscovery of centrality in the Eurasian system, aimed to foster independence in foreign policy-making and to maximise regional influence - which in the neoclassical realist view is the cornerstone of state action (Zakaria 1998; Schmidt 2005).

The adaptation process to a changing external context and the resulting investment in infrastructure diplomacy were put in motion by the systemic and regional repercussions of the 2008 economic and financial crisis. At global level, the crisis set in motion a different understanding of infrastructure development. The crisis marked the decline of a neoliberal market-based conception of infrastructure development, replaced by state-driven spatial planning aimed at "getting the territory right", i.e. at constituting functional territories that can be "plugged in" to global value chains through cross-border connections (Schindler and Kanai 2021). Such a new understanding of infrastructure-led development saw the emergence of a "global growth coalition" that included a wide range of actors, from multilateral development banks to intergovernmental institutions and state actors - including China. At local level, in turn, 2008 crisis came

as a "perceptual shock" for Ankara and Baku - i.e., as the single event that made "decision-makers aware of the cumulative effects of gradual long-term power trends" (Rose 1998: 160). By reducing the investment propensity of their traditional state and business interlocutors in the West in a regional context shaped by a perception of US strategic disengagement, the crisis fostered a proactive course of infrastructure diplomacy in line with the declared overall goal to "find regional solutions to regional problems, rather than waiting for other outside actors to impose their own"<sup>3</sup>, which was also echoed in Azerbaijan's official narrative.<sup>4</sup>

### **From Energy to Goods: The Evolution of the Turkish–Azerbaijani Infrastructure Alliance**

Geographic location is a key geopolitical factor for both Turkey and Azerbaijan, whose significance in Eurasian politics stems primarily from the hinge or buffer roles they traditionally play on different and relevant regional chessboards. This is particularly true for modern Turkey, whose strategic location traditionally allowed Ankara "to play a role in world politics far greater than its size, population, and economic strength would indicate" (Aydin 1999: 165). The same - and even more - can be said for Baku. As part of Russia's southern flank and the northern tier of the Middle East, and as the easternmost and westernmost reaches respectively of the European security space and China's Eurasian range of action, Azerbaijan stands both as a critical strategic connector and as a valuable interlocutor in power politics (Menzel 2003; Pashayev 2015).

In the early stages of the post-bipolar system, geographic location emerged as a key asset for Ankara's and Baku's foreign policies, as infrastructure politics - and particularly pipeline politics - turned out to be a privileged domain for competition and cooperation schemes in the BCS area. Indeed, closing the multifaceted regional infrastructure gap affecting the former Soviet area - as a result of the land-locked nature of the newly independent states and the Russo-centric transport network inherited from the USSR - was the main ingredient in the Western recipe to promote economic development, to foster NIS independence and mutual cooperation, and ultimately to stabilise the central Eurasian landmass, filling the security vacuum left by the Soviet dissolution (Frappi 2014). This entailed the construction of an East-West Trans-Caspian energy corridor making the alleged "Caspian bonanza" available to Western markets, while simultaneously bypassing the existing Russian routes to the north and the potential Iranian ones to the south. Such a vision, envisaged and promoted by the Clinton administration,<sup>5</sup> did assign a pivotal role to both Azerbaijan and Turkey. The former emerged simultaneously as a potentially significant energy producer and a vital transit country or, in Brzezinski's words (1997: 45), as the "cork in the bottle" for Caspian riches; the latter, in turn, stood in the US view as a bi-directional conduit allowing Caspian hydrocarbons to move westward while channelling Western values, norms



and institutions eastward - i.e. in line with the promotion of a "Turkish model" to the counties in the former Soviet South.<sup>6</sup>

Encouraged by the economic and strategic benefits of active participation in and staunch support of US regional strategy, in the mid-1990s, Turkey and Azerbaijan did lay the first stone of a lasting infrastructure alliance also involving Georgia, as the natural physical - and political<sup>7</sup> - link between the Caspian shores and the Anatolian plateau. The convergence of Ankara's, Baku's and Tbilisi's interests in the realisation of East-West energy exports resulted in a joint course of infrastructure diplomacy. This turned out to be critically important in downgrading the multifaceted above-the-ground risks for foreign investors and, ultimately, in facilitating the White House's push towards the realisation of energy transportation infrastructure along the Caucasian-Anatolian route - which eventually came in the form of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum oil and gas pipelines in 2005 and 2006.

In the subdued post-2008 scenario, the welding of the tripartite cooperation axis - along with the initial reaping of its economic and strategic dividends - worked as the chief intervening variable influencing Ankara's and Baku's perceptions of systemic trends and resulting policy choices. Accordingly, their infrastructure alliance developed and widened its scope along two interrelated paths: first, by shouldering the economic and diplomatic burden of building the infrastructure deemed strategic; second, by broadening the scope of infrastructure diplomacy to include the transport of goods and people.

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In pipeline politics, this meant joining the whole energy chain, particularly the midstream sector. As a highly capital-intensive segment, the latter was the most affected by the consequences of the 2008 crisis, as it seemed Turkey's and Azerbaijan's European partners had neither the economic incentive nor the political strength to push for the realisation of the so-called Southern Gas Corridor, i.e. Brussels' flagship initiative designed to connect the Caspian producing area with the EU markets as a means to diversify its suppliers and supply channels. Filling the void left by European investors, Turkish and Azerbaijani state oil companies took the lead in regional infrastructure politics, reaching an agreement in October 2011 for the construction of the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline, a "new, independent and standalone pipeline" designed fill the infrastructure gap between the Southern Caucasus and the EU's eastern border.<sup>8</sup>

Besides deepening pipeline politics, the Turkish-Azerbaijani infrastructure alliance expanded beyond the latter to embrace the transportation of goods and persons. Economic needs and opportunities were paramount because Baku embarked on a complex - and still ongoing - process of diversification outside the Oil & Gas sector, as set out in the "Azerbaijan 2020" strategy,<sup>9</sup> while the pace of Turkish economic growth under an export-led industrialization model required Ankara to look for new markets for its goods (Kirişçi 2009). Moreover, for both countries, improving national transport networks and their connections with trans-national transport axes was a tool to reduce

regional disparities in economic development, supporting growth in eastern Anatolia and in the areas outside Baku (Inan and Yayloyan 2018: 44; Ziyadov 2012: 46-7).

In order to take advantage of the growing trade between Europe and East-Asian countries as well as the unfolding above-mentioned global coalition for infrastructure development, the Azerbaijani authorities – the engine behind the expansion of the infrastructure alliance – put forward a "Grand Hub Vision" focusing on "developing the country as a major trade, transportation and logistics centre in the region" (Ziyadov 2012: xii). Building on the opportunity to re-invest part of the increasing energy rents at home and abroad, Baku started upgrading its domestic infrastructure and, most importantly, re-launched an old railway project to connect Azerbaijan and Turkey via Georgia along the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) route. Originally conceived as a way to re-establish direct connections after the 1993 seizure of the Turkish-Armenian border and, consequently, as an instrument to reduce transit dependency on Russia, the BTK took on the broader, more ambitious role of forming the neural centre of a multi-directional transportation axis with an outstanding strategic and diplomatic rationale.

Multi-directionality was simultaneously the basic principle and the key aim driving this new stage in Turkish-Azerbaijani infrastructure diplomacy, as made explicit by the tripartite Trabzon Declaration that, in 2012, sealed – and broadened beyond energy politics – the entente among Ankara, Baku and Tbilisi.<sup>10</sup> Both the TANAP and the BTK were conceived as potential central segments of multi-directional transportation schemes, capable of engaging multiple stakeholders on both ends. In the same way as the Caucasus-Anatolian energy transportation axis was designed to attract new stakeholders at both the ends of the energy chain – i.e. either producing or consuming countries willing to diversify respective exporting or importing channels – BTK was conceived as a potential transit point not only in an East-West trans-Caspian perspective, but also in a North-South one, linking Persian Gulf ports with Georgian Black Sea shores.<sup>11</sup> Priority was naturally given to the East-West axis, along which, after the dissolution of the USSR, the EU promoted a connectivity strategy analogous in its vision and geographic scope to the one promoted by the US in the energy sector. Accordingly, in 1993 Brussels launched the Transport Corridor Europe, Caucasus and Asia (TRACECA), enhanced in 1998 with the signing of a Basic Multilateral Agreement on International Transport for Development of the Europe-Caucasus-Asia Corridor<sup>12</sup> and with the establishment of a permanent secretariat in Baku. As a confirmation of the priority assigned to the development of the East-West connectivity vision, Ankara launched a trans-Anatolian high speed railway project to connect the BTK with the Turkish-EU border – namely the Kars-Edirne railway.

The Grand Hub Vision also took on diplomatic connotations, broadening the scope of "in-betweenness" well beyond purely geographic terms. Accordingly, Turkish and Azerbaijani infrastructure diplomacy also aimed to play a facilitator role for infrastructure development in a multi-regional perspective.<sup>13</sup> Thus, infrastructure

diplomacy also became a vector to take on a "diplomatic hub" role so as to promote the principle of regional ownership and become an engine for regional transformation to enhance stability through cooperation and mutual dependence. In turn, pursuing multi-directional infrastructure diplomacy and advancing a diplomatic hub role served the aim of increasing Ankara's and Baku's bargaining power and reducing the asymmetry vis-à-vis more powerful interlocutors promoting connectivity schemes. Consequently, Turkish-Azerbaijani infrastructure diplomacy ultimately aimed to ensure the highest degree of independence compatible with their respective positions in international and regional power hierarchies. In the domain of infrastructure politics, such an aim translated into broader trends that are evident in the respective foreign policies. In the case of Turkey, its self-perception as a "central country" (*merkez ülke*) in the post-bipolar era (Davutoğlu 2001) and the abandonment of a "Western-centric approach to international order" (Dal 2014: 111) have been compounded by the attempt and goal to carve out an independent foreign policy in both regional and international politics - which, in turn, can be seen as the hallmark of its rising middle-power status (Dal 2014; Kutlay and Öniş 2021). As for Azerbaijan, *status* and *power* came to be understood primarily as the "maximization of decision-making autonomy vis-à-vis the structure of the international system" (Strakes 2016: 294). Accordingly, Baku pro-actively engaged more powerful actors trying to avoid entering asymmetric relations with them, thereby pursuing "strategic manoeuvring" with "the enhancement of sovereignty and autonomy over its domestic and foreign policy as the main goal" (Mehdiyeva 2011: 26).

### Advancing the "Hub of Hubs" Vision: The Middle Corridor Initiative and the BRI

The key drivers and aims of Turkish-Azerbaijani infrastructure alliance were already set at the time when the BRI was launched. The latter can thus be seen as an independent variable which impinged on Ankara's and Baku's determination to strengthen their infrastructure alliance and diplomacy. The more so since Chinese initiative came at a time when external circumstances - i.e. Crimea crisis, the ups and downs in Iran-US relations, and the unfolding global coalition for infrastructure development - seemingly opened new room for manoeuvre in infrastructure politics, and when both countries were experiencing economic downturns.<sup>14</sup>

The BRI initiative, and particularly the China-Central Asia-West Asia land corridor, was perceived and presented by Turkey and Azerbaijan as complementary to the project to open a trans-Caspian multimodal transport network between the Asian and European markets, stretching from the Kazakh-Chinese border to the Turkish-EU one - which came to be labelled in Turkey as the "Middle Corridor Initiative". Indeed, the SREB seemed to bring the MCI several advantages. First and foremost, being primarily focused on the Chinese neighbourhood, it could help bridge the infrastructure gap in Central Asia, particularly between China's north-western border and the Kazakh coast on the Caspian. Moreover, in a time of economic hardship it could serve as a

multiplier of investments and as a source of international trade diversification – both seen as economic imperatives in Baku's attempt to develop its non-oil sector (Valiyev 2015; Ismailzade and Babyev 2020) – and as an opportunity for Ankara to open up new markets for Turkish goods while simultaneously narrowing the growing trade imbalance with China and Asian partners (Hussain 2022: 215-6; Atli 2022).<sup>15</sup> In turn, the MCI could potentially offer the BRI relevant competitive advantages in terms of transport times compared to sea-based routes, and in terms of above-the-ground risks compared to both the northern and southern routes crossing respectively Russia and Iran, thus ensuring valuable diversification for the East-West land corridors.

In a broader perspective, making Beijing a partner in Turkish-Azerbaijani infrastructure diplomacy was also in line with the current status of bilateral relations with Beijing – as both the actors had already engaged China so as to improve economic cooperation and turnover (Ergenc 2015; Ismailzade 2007) – as well as with the key drivers of Turkish and Azerbaijani foreign policies. In particular, cooperation with China was fully in line with Ankara's and Baku's drive towards the economization of foreign policy (Kirişçi 2009)<sup>16</sup> and the diversification of foreign relations, in line with the former's "own pivot to Asia" or "soft-Eurasianism" (Akcadag Alagoz 2021; Ergenc 2015) and with the latter's course of a "balanced" foreign policy (Shaffer 2010).

The perceived complementarity in infrastructure diplomacy and the consequent possibility to pursue mutually beneficial synergies almost naturally resulted in Ankara and Baku joining the BRI. In November 2015, Turkey and China signed a "Memorandum of Understanding on Aligning the Belt and Road Initiative and the Middle Corridor Initiative" and a "railroad cooperation agreement", while Turkey became one of the founding members of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Almost at the same time, in December 2015, the Azerbaijani President signed a Memorandum of Understanding on joint support for the Silk Road Economic Belt during a visit to Beijing,<sup>17</sup> after having joined the AIIB initiative in June.

The complementarity of the Middle Corridor and the BRI can also be understood in strategic terms, as the Chinese initiative not only did not seem to interfere with two key aims of Turkish-Azerbaijani infrastructure diplomacy – i.e. promoting their role as a physical and diplomatic hub – but, in turn, seemed capable of boosting them. First and foremost, the BRI has the potential to enhance the principle of multi-directionality at the heart of Turkish-Azerbaijani infrastructure diplomacy. Indeed, while the geographic overlap between the Middle Corridor and the SREB could naturally result in an improvement of the trans-Caspian route, the latter in turn enabled important economic and strategic spin-offs at both ends of the transport corridor: on the eastern front, the so-called "Lapis Lazuli" project, a multimodal route launched in 2017 to link Turkey with Afghanistan through the Southern Caucasus, the Caspian Sea, and Turkmenistan;<sup>18</sup> on the western front, the Black Sea routes linking Georgian facilities either to the Ukrainian port of Odessa and further north to the Baltic countries through the "Viking

route" or to the Romanian port of Constanta, known as the "Black Sea-Caspian Sea Transit-Transportation Corridor"<sup>19</sup> - both falling within the scope of the TRACECA project. Moreover, besides enhancing the East-West dimension of the infrastructure alliance, the BRI naturally boosted the North-South one, as a result of the possibility - deemed strategic by Beijing (Chaziza 2020: 142; Lianlei 2016) - to connect Iran's railway network with the BTK. Finally, the growing competition unfolding within the broader BRI scheme between the ports on the eastern shore of the Caspian - i.e. the Kazakh port of Aktau and the Turkmen port of Turkmenbashi - indirectly resulted in enhancing Baku's role as a transport hub on the western shores of the basin (Lianlei 2016: 30).

Second, enhancing multi-directionality would naturally result in strengthening Ankara's and Baku's "diplomatic hub" role, even beyond the highly visible government-to-government meetings organised and held to advance the above-mentioned connectivity projects. In particular, the TRACECA Secretariat in Baku emerged as the natural technical and diplomatic hub connecting the activities of the organisation with those of partner initiatives - including the SREB - in accordance with the aims of the Strategy "for development of the international transport corridor Europe-the Caucasus-Asia for 2016-2026" and with the perceived opportunity to take advantage of the continuing economic growth of the PRC and EU policies making the Caucasian-Anatolian transportation axis more competitive, compared to maritime routes.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the increasing role of connectivity in the EU's external projection over the last decade, culminating in the approval of the "Global Gateway" strategy,<sup>21</sup> also indirectly helped strengthen the multi-layered "in-between" role of Turkey and Azerbaijan, chiefly through two initiatives. On the one hand, the 2015 launch of the EU-China Connectivity Platform (EUCCP) - as a result of the overlapping interests and schemes for infrastructure development - almost naturally made the Anatolian-Caucasus transport axis a critical junction for transcontinental joint connectivity projects. It is no coincidence that the latter received the lion's share of the projects potentially coming under the EUCCP's initiative, in line with its attempt to explore synergies between the EU's Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) and the BRI.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, the role of the Anatolian-Caucasus axis as a critical juncture was also strengthened by the 2019 EU Strategy for Central Asia, which aimed to promote sustainable connectivity by jointly working on the transport sector,<sup>23</sup> among other aspects. Accordingly, at the end of 2021, the European Commission launched a "Study on Sustainable Transport Connections with Central Asia" to assess existing and potential new transport corridors covering both Turkey and the Southern Caucasus countries.<sup>24</sup>

The promotion of a diplomatic hub role in infrastructure politics also emerges from Turkey's initiatives to foster dialogue on connectivity within the multilateral frameworks for cooperation that it is part of - in line with one of the three main pillars on combined transport indicated in the National Transport Strategic Plan for

2014-2018.<sup>25</sup> This infrastructure diplomacy vector resulted in the creation, in 2012, of the Transport Working Group of the Ankara-based Standing Committee for Economic and Commercial Cooperation of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (COMCEC), which Azerbaijan also joined in 2018. The same logic was also behind the high priority simultaneously given to the transport sector in the various frameworks for cooperation among Turkic-speaking countries - particularly the Organization of Turkic States, whose Secretariat is located in Istanbul, and the Baku-based Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic States.<sup>26</sup> In the same vein, and in line with the attempt to capitalise on the unfolding global coalition for infrastructure development, Ankara's and Baku's attempt to give diplomatic connotations to the in-between condition also resulted in active participation in the multilateral framework for cooperation in the transport sector in the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program (CAREC), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), and the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSEC).

The degree of diplomatic activism following the launch of the SREB indirectly testifies to the incentive provided by the latter to the Turkish-Azerbaijani infrastructure alliance and diplomacy. Such an incentive role can also be seen in the change of gear in the creation of the infrastructure required to achieve the "Grand Hub" vision and, in particular, the MCI-SREB synergy. After repeated delays, and thanks to the loans provided to Georgia by the State Oil Fund of Azerbaijan (Klimas and Humbatov 2016: 36), the BTK railway was finally inaugurated in October 2017; seven months later, in May 2018, the opening ceremony of the Baku International Sea Trade Port (first of three phases) - the designated linchpin in the multimodal route between Central Asia and the Caucasus - was held. On the Anatolian side of the transportation axis, besides the above-mentioned Kars-Edirne railway line, Turkey produced the infrastructure needed to expand connectivity with the European road and railway network - particularly the Marmaray tunnel and the Yavuz Selim Bridge across the Bosphorus strait. At the same time, in February 2014, the Turkish state railway company joined its Azerbaijani, Georgian and Kazakh counterparts in establishing the Coordination Committee for the Development of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), as a follow up to the agreement they signed in November 2013 in order to coordinate national policies as part of creating the multimodal trans-Caspian route. The TITR finally became a fully-fledged international association in February 2017, progressively enlarging its membership to include the Ukrainian state railway company and admitting stakeholders from Poland, Hungary, Romania, and China as associate members and partners. The acceleration in the creation of infrastructure along the MCI made it possible to run the first trips of the demonstration trains - the so-called Nomad Express - on the China-Azerbaijan (Shihezi-Kishli) and the China-Turkey (Lianyungang-Istanbul) routes in July and November 2015, respectively.



Notwithstanding the above-mentioned achievements, to date Turkish-Azerbaijani cooperation with China has not lived up to expectations. The implementation of the bilateral memoranda and agreements was rather slow and limited, exposing an evident shortcoming in the alleged natural *synergy* between the MCI and the BRI. Indeed, while the cooperation between the initiatives is highly compatible with Ankara's and Baku's resolve to be a logistics and diplomatic hub in the BCS region - i.e. with two out of three pillars of their infrastructure diplomacy - it was not free of an infrastructure dilemma. The significant power asymmetry was a potential source of vulnerability in the attempt to pursue an independent infrastructure policy, as both Turkey and Azerbaijan perceived the risks associated with the comprehensive cooperation package that China used to offer to its partners. The infrastructure dilemma apparently caused quite limited involvement of Chinese capital and its workforce in the development of national infrastructures which, in Turkey and Azerbaijan, are designed to advance the MCI vision. The slow pace of cooperation is detectable first and foremost in quantitative terms. According to the American Enterprise Institute's China Global Investment Tracker, the combined value of Chinese investment and construction under the BRI in Turkey and Azerbaijan is respectively USD 5,780 and 1,440 million - only a small fraction of the West Asia total of USD 155,460 million.<sup>27</sup> China's limited investment in both economies is confirmed - and made comparatively clearer - by the country's negligible shares in total current FDI stock in Turkey and Azerbaijan, 0.45 per cent and 0.1 per cent, respectively.<sup>28</sup> This trend is particularly visible in Azerbaijan, where the Chinese presence is also quite limited in the energy sector, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. Above all, this is the result of Baku's "very conservative policy"<sup>29</sup> on foreign borrowing, i.e. the decision to limit the country's exposure to foreign debt as a means to promote sustainable economic development and to walk an independent path in foreign policy. This is particularly true in the case of China: although the Azerbaijani establishment tends to perceive Beijing as geographically distant enough not to meddle in regional or national politics (Valiyev 2016: 34),<sup>30</sup> the potential for Chinese investments to come with "strings attached" is nonetheless a "source of concern" (Kuchins et al. 2016: 23). As a consequence, infrastructure projects along the Middle Corridor route have been financed directly by the government through the State Oil Fund or by international financial institutions.<sup>31</sup> The limited amount of investment is all the more astonishing in the case of Turkey, when one considers, on the one hand, the volume of Chinese investment from 2005 to 2013, which was double (USD 10,000 million) the post-2014 phase and, on the other hand, the central position enjoyed by the country not only in the SREB but also in the BRI maritime dimension.<sup>32</sup> The bid for the construction of the Kars-Edirne high speed railway - a key element in the MCI, as the "missing link" connecting its Caspian-Caucasian segment to the European railway system and markets - can be taken as the single example that embodies and highlights the limits of synergy. Indeed, the possibility for cooperation in the realisation of the project - discussed since the launch

of the MCI-BRI cooperation<sup>33</sup> - has so far fallen victim to "technical issues", resulting from Ankara's unwillingness to accept a cooperation scheme revolving around the offer of financing and the contextual request for the involvement of national companies in the construction of the railway (Atli 2018: 124; Ikiz 2020: 479).<sup>34</sup> Besides showing the limits of the MCI-SREB synergy, the lack of agreement on the modernization of the Kars-Edirne line highlights the still limited development of the Turkish railway network, which represents one of the main weaknesses of the Middle Corridor (Kenderdine and Bucsky 2021:10-12) and explains why the potential capacity to diversify the routes between China and Europe has not been achieved. To date a complex mix of economic considerations and of persistent physical and non-physical barriers still prevent the corridor from playing the desired role of a credible alternative to both sea and land routes between Asian and European markets. While the former are still the cheapest - and hence preferred - way for goods to travel between the indicated markets, the barriers along the MCI route as well as the persistent inadequacy of the logistics transshipment infrastructure keep the throughput capacity of the corridor limited and the travel time longer compared to the northern land route.<sup>35</sup> Hence, as market logic does not allow the consistent development of the corridor, the latter remains highly dependent on the degree of China's engagement and impetus (Kenderdine and Bucsky 2021) which, in turn, is manifestly limited.

## Conclusions

In recent decades, Turkey and Azerbaijan have sealed a steady infrastructure alliance, which is the result of their shared perception that they occupy and can benefit from their central positions in the Eurasian system and from the priority given to infrastructure development. Built on a Western-centric rationale in the 1990s, the alliance took a proactive and autonomous posture by the end of the 2000s, when systemic trends apparently opened up the possibility of pursuing an independent course of infrastructure diplomacy as a means of maximising regional influence. By doing so, Ankara and Baku effectively advanced the regional ownership principle, allowing them to pursue a diplomatic hub role that runs in parallel with the logistics role. Accordingly, they attempted to build a core of infrastructure alliances with variable geometry, whose contours depend on the relevant transportation axis within a multi-directional and inclusive understanding of infrastructure politics.

As far as the BRI is concerned, the case of Turkish-Azerbaijani infrastructure diplomacy is particularly significant insofar as its configuration, scope and purposes predate the launch of Beijing's initiative, which overlapped with and promised significant advantages to their own flagship project, the MCI. In engaging with China, Ankara and Baku attempted to safeguard the logic and tools that have presided over their infrastructure diplomacy, namely strengthening their in-between condition so as to become a multi-directional reference point for unfolding Eurasian infrastructure

projects, as a way to increase their respective bargaining power and independence. However, cooperation with China, while in line with the overall goal of promoting a logistics and diplomatic hub role, seemed to clash with the pursuit of strategic autonomy and with their goal of avoiding entering asymmetric relationships with more powerful actors. This resulted in selective engagement with the BRI that revolved around an attempt to benefit from the Chinese initiative in economic and diplomatic terms, without losing out in strategic terms. This ultimately limited the forecasted synergies between the MCI and SREB and showed how the complementarity between the two initiatives finds its limits in the power relations between their promoters. From a broader perspective, the article has shown that, despite not benefiting from a power resource base wide enough to allow the creation of an ambitious connectivity network through direct or indirect funding of infrastructure or the involvement of state-owned enterprises, middle and small powers are nonetheless fully-fledged actors in infrastructure diplomacy, albeit with some limitations, which the MCI perfectly embodies. The initiative's strategic rationale seems to overtake the economic and developmental ones. The proven inability to translate political and diplomatic engagement with MCI partners into concrete normative and regulatory convergence stands as the key hurdle to advancing the corridor's vision, the more so since the countries involved do not possess either a sufficiently large market-base or volume of mutual trade to attract foreign investment. Moreover, the same in-between condition which provided the key stimulus for the development of Turkish-Azerbaijani infrastructure diplomacy also represents one of its main constraints, as it remains torn between a state-developmental model in the East and the market-based logics to its west. Thus, the MCI can be seen as a state-driven initiative that, guided by a strategic rationale limiting potential exposure to asymmetrical relations and lacking a sufficient resource base to allow the creation of infrastructure with poor economic rationale, remains ultimately dependent on market conditions. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the adoption of sanctions that directly and indirectly affect the viability of the Russian railway network, the tide seems to be turning in favour of the MCI again. Yet, it remains to be seen if and how the market will adjust to the new conditions.

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## Notes

1 - See also: Moeini A., Mott C., Paikin Z., and Polansky D., *Middle Powers in the Multipolar World*, "Institute for Peace & Diplomacy", White Paper, 2022, <https://peacediplomacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Middle-Powers-in-the-Multipolar-World-2.pdf> (last accessed on 30 April 2022).

2- See also: Valiyev A., *Can Azerbaijan Revive the Silk Road?*, "PONARS Eurasia", Policy Memo no. 382, 2015, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/can-azerbaijan-revive-the-silk-road/>; Ismailzade F. and Babyev B., *Azerbaijan's Contribution to the Chinese Belt & Road Initiative*, "GCRF Compass Policy Brief", University of Kent 2020, <https://www.kent.ac.uk/politics/rs-gcrf-compass/COMPASS-ADA-Paper-on-BRI-Fariz-final.pdf> (last accessed on 15 May 2022).

3 - Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Interview by Mr. Ahmet Davutoğlu published in AUC Cairo Review (Egypt) on 12 March 2012*, [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/interview-by-mr\\_-ahmet-davuto%C4%9Flu-published-in-auc-cairo-review-\\_egypt\\_-on-12-march-2012.en.mfa](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/interview-by-mr_-ahmet-davuto%C4%9Flu-published-in-auc-cairo-review-_egypt_-on-12-march-2012.en.mfa) (last accessed on 30 May 2022).

4 - In a speech given to the National Assembly, Azerbaijani President İlham Aliyev highlighted that "Azerbaijan has already proved itself as a modern, secular and strong state in the region. [...] We treat very attentively the issues of regional co-operation and this will remain as a priority issue for us in the years to come because we live in this region, and of course, broadening of our influence opportunities into the processes going on in the region are in full compliance with our national interests". Aliyev İ., *Azərbaycan Respublikası Milli Məclisinin ilk iclasında İlham aliyevin nitqi*, "President of the Republic of Azerbaijan", 2010, <https://president.az/az/articles/view/1183> (last accessed on 30 May 2022).

5 - Jofi J., *Pipeline Diplomacy: The Clinton Administration's Fight for Baku-Ceyhan*, "Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs", WWS Case Study no.1/99, 1999, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA360382.pdf> (last accessed on 30 May 2022).

6 - *White House Background Briefing. Subject: The Upcoming Visit of Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel of Turkey, Attributable to a Senior Administration Official*, "Federal News Service", 10 February 1992.

7 - Besides offering an indispensable physical link between Azerbaijan and Turkey, Georgia did share to a large degree the latter's views and, particularly, the idea that, besides economic gains, the inclusion in the foreseen transport networks would ensure strategic relevance and facilitate the cooperation with and the integration into the Euro-Atlantic inter-governmental frameworks for cooperation (Blandy 1998).

8 - UNOLA - United Nations Office of Legal Affairs, *Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Turkey and the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan Concerning the Transit Passage of Natural Gas*, Treaty Series 2958, New York, United Nations, p. 203.

9 - *Azerbaijan 2020: Look into the Future Concept of Development*, "Asian Development Bank", 2014, <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/linked-documents/cps-aze-2014-2018-sd-06.pdf> (last accessed 27 August 2022).

10 - Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Trabzon Declaration of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Georgia and the Republic of Turkey*, 8 June 2012, [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/trabzon--declaration-of-the-ministers-of-foreign-affairs-of-the-republic-of-azerbaijan\\_-georgia-and-the-republic-of-turkey\\_-08-june-2012\\_-trabzon.en.mfa](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/trabzon--declaration-of-the-ministers-of-foreign-affairs-of-the-republic-of-azerbaijan_-georgia-and-the-republic-of-turkey_-08-june-2012_-trabzon.en.mfa) (last accessed on 15 August 2022).

11 - The inclusive vision of the infrastructure politics underlying the principle of multi-directionality had only one significant exception, namely Armenia. The failure in reaching a peace agreement on the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh resulted in Baku's resolve to isolate the country from the regional infrastructure development, as a mean to aggravate the burden of both Armenia land-locked condition and the seizure of the border with Turkey and, therefore, to force Yerevan to drop maximalist negotiating positions.

12 - Parties of the 1998 Basic Multilateral Agreement were all the former-Soviet countries in Eastern Europe (except the Baltic countries and Belarus), in the Southern Caucasus, and in Central Asia (except Turkmenistan) plus three Black Sea countries, namely Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey.

13 - Such a drive was particularly successful in the domain of energy politics, as Turkey and Azerbaijan became a key interlocutor in Brussels' attempt to pursue a suppliers' diversification strategy by engaging Central Asian producers - and especially Turkmenistan, the regional powerhouse in the gas sector.

14 - As for Turkey and Azerbaijan, see respectively: Acemoglu D., *Why Turkish Growth Ended*, "World Eco-

conomic Forum, Agenda", 2015, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/11/why-turkish-growth-ended/> (last accessed on 10 May 2022); Jafarli N., *Azerbaijan: Approaching Crisis Point*, "European Council on Foreign Relations, Commentary", 2016, [https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_azerbaijan\\_approaching\\_crisis\\_point5096/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_azerbaijan_approaching_crisis_point5096/) (last accessed on 10 May 2022).

15 - It is worth noting that, ever since the beginning of the 2010s, the improvement in trade with China was seen by Turkish business world - and particularly by the conservative and Islamic-oriented Independent Industrialists and Businessmen Association (MÜSİAD), ideologically close to the ruling party - as part of a wider engagement with Eurasian partners, also useful "not to be too much dependent on the European Union market". See: *China, Turkey Deepen Ties During Rare Visit*, "VOA News", 10 October 2010, <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-turkey-deepen-ties-during-rare-visit-104723729/166476.html> (last accessed on 30 May 2022).

16 - As for Azerbaijan, see Lussac 2010.

17 - *Azərbaycan-Çin sənədlərinin imzalanması mərasimi olub*, "President of the Republic of Azerbaijan", 2010, <https://president.az/az/articles/view/1183> (last accessed on 30 May 2022), 10 December 2015, <https://president.az/az/articles/view/17137> (last accessed on 20 August 2022).

18 - Shahbazov F., *Lapis Lazuli: A New Transit Corridor to Link Asia and Europe Via the South Caucasus*, "Eurasia Daily Monitor", 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/lapis-lazuli-new-transit-corridor-link-asia-europe-via-south-caucasus/> (last accessed on 30 May 2022).

19 - See, respectively: Ministry of Transport and Communications, Republic of Lithuania, *Lithuania invites Azerbaijan to Exploit the Opportunities for Transit of Goods to West*, 15 October 2014, <https://sumin.lrv.lt/en/news/lithuania-invites-azerbaijan-to-exploit-the-opportunities-for-transit-of-goods-to-west>; Mehdiyev M., *Azerbaijan Gets Attention As New Eurasian Transit and Transport Route Starts Developing*, "Caspian News", 31 July 2018, <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/azerbaijan-gets-attention-as-new-eurasian-transit-and-transport-route-starts-developing-2018-7-30-10/> (last accessed on 30 May 2022).

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21 - European Commission, *The Global Gateway*, "Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank", 1 December 2021, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52021JC0030> (last accessed on 10 May 2022).

22 - Three out of five planned transport infrastructure projects presented in 2019 by both sides for possible cooperation in the Eastern European neighbourhood fall within the Anatolian-Caucasus axis for transportation: the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route in Azerbaijan, the Anaklia Deep Sea Port in Georgia, and the Tbilisi and Kutaisi Logistics Centers in Georgia. The inclusion of these projects is all the more significant in the light of the 2018 TEN-T extension to the EU Eastern Partnership countries, in the framework of the "20 Deliverables for 2020 Plan for the Development of the Eastern Partnership".

23 - European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership* (Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, Brussels), "European Union External Action Service", 15 May 2019, p. 11, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint\\_communication\\_-\\_the\\_eu\\_and\\_central\\_asia\\_-\\_new\\_opportunities\\_for\\_a\\_stronger\\_partnership.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf) (last accessed on 30 May 2022).

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26 - Since 2012 and up to date, four meetings of the Ministers of Transport, two meetings of the Coordination Council on Transport at deputy minister-level, and eight meetings of the Working Group on Transport have been organised within the Organization of Turkic States. Moreover, cooperation on transport has been one of the core topics dealt with by the Commission on Economic, Trade and Financial Affairs of the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic States.

27 - By comparison, the combined value of China's investment and construction under the BRI in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, two of the Central Asian partners in the SREB, is respectively USD 13,200 and USD 7,670 millions. See, American Enterprise Institute's China Global Investment Tracker, <https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/> (last accessed on 30 May 2022).

28 - Azərbaycan Respublikasının Mərkəzi Bankı, *Foreign Direct Investments Statistics for 2021*, "External sector statistics", <https://www.cbar.az/page-43/external-sector-statistics> (last accessed on 15 July 2022). Türkiye Cumhuriyet Merkez Bankası, *Foreign Direct Investments in Turkey by Countries - Stock*, "Electronic Data Delivery System", <https://evds2.tcmb.gov.tr> (last accessed on 15 July 2022).

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30 - See also: Schmidt K., *Azerbaijan's Port on China's Road*, "Center for Strategic and International Studies, Reconnecting Asia", 2019, <https://reconasia.csis.org/azerbaijans-port-on-chinas-road/> (last accessed on 20 August 2022).

31 - World Bank, *Belt and Road Initiative: Azerbaijan Country Case Study*, "World Bank Open Knowledge Repository", 2020, p. 4, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/b0c69259-3fe8-56eb-bbd5-162cc7950b94/content> (last accessed on 20 August 2022).

32 - While falling beyond the scope of this article, the Kumport port case stands as a further confirmation of the wider lack of strategic convergence on connectivity between Ankara and Beijing. Bought by a Chinese consortium in September 2015, the port has mainly functioned as a gateway for Chinese goods into Turkish market, rather than serving as an alternative to the Greek port system in the China-Europe transport system, as envisaged by Ankara.

33 - See, e.g., Atli A., *Turkey to Get Railroads from China, not Missiles*, "Asia Times", 19 November 2015, <https://asiatimes.com/2015/11/turkey-to-get-railroads-from-china-not-missiles/> (last accessed on 30 May 2022).

34 - Çolakoğlu S., *The Sino-Turkish Relationship*, in *China in the Broader Black Sea Region*, GLOBSEC Report, march 2021, pp.18-21 at 20, <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/China-in-the-Broader-black-sea-region-ver7-nonprint.pdf> (last accessed on 15 May 2022).

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