

The Role of Georgia in the Middle Corridor of the Ancient and Modern Silk Road

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ABSTRACT

The article, The Role of Georgia in the Middle Corridor of the Ancient and Modern Silk Road, provides a brief historical overview of the ancient Silk Road, accompanied by evaluations from various experts on Georgia's role along this historic caravan route. The paper assesses the New Silk Road initiative and Georgia's transit function within the Silk Road Economic Belt project. Active involvement in the New Silk Road is expected to bring significant economic benefits to Georgia, particularly through increased investments in the fields of transportation and logistics. The New Silk Road facilitates the improvement of trade relations between Asia and Europe. The Middle Corridor enhances Georgia's strategic position along the New Silk Road and presents new logistical opportunities for the country.

INTRODUCTION

For many centuries, the ancient Silk Road connected Asia and Europe, fostering economic, cultural, and political relations among countries. In Georgia, it is widely believed that the nation, due to its strategically important location, was always an integral part of the Silk Road, both in antiquity and throughout the medieval period. Caravan traffic along the route, which ceased in the 16th century, was revived in 2013 through a Chinese initiative and has since been referred to as the New Silk Road. In this sense, it can be said that the ancient Silk Road has acquired new life.

Importantly, beyond trade, Georgia now has, for the first time in centuries, an opportunity to become an energy transit corridor along the route stretching from the Caspian region and Central Asia to Europe.

The Paper Aims to explore information about both the ancient and the new Silk Road and to evaluate Georgia's transit role in each of these routes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The paper analyzes Georgian and foreign-language literature related to the research topic, including academic publications, studies, and policy documents.

METHODOLOGY

The research applies a comparative analysis method throughout the study.

RESEARCH RESULT

Since ancient times, Georgia has been regarded as a strategically important country for international trade. Both regional and global commerce have always played a significant role in the country's history. Trade routes served as a means of establishing close political, cultural, and economic relations with neighboring as well as distant countries (Avdaliani, 2019). According to historical sources, as early as the beginning of the Common Era, a trade route passed through Georgia that connected India to the Mediterranean countries (Lortkipanidze, 1957). This caravan route was later named the "Great Silk Road" in the 19th century by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen. It was a trade route stretching from the Great Wall of China to the shores of the Bosphorus, becoming one of the largest trade and economic corridors linking Europe and Asia.

The history of the ancient Silk Road begins in China, with a diplomatic mission sent by Zhang Qian to the countries of Central Asia in the 2nd century BCE. The trade-caravan route connected China to the Mediterranean and Black Sea coasts. Initially, the primary trade commodity along the Silk Road was silk, and the Chinese carefully guarded the secrets of its production and processing. The primary consumers of high-quality Chinese silk were the Roman elite. Silk exports to Rome (and later to Byzantium) occurred through intermediaries from the leading states of the Near East, Parthia (Syria), and later Sasanian Iran. However, there is reason to believe that several branches of this trade route also crossed Georgian territory.

Over time, trade goods became far diverse. Indian merchants traded in spices, precious stones, fabrics, as well as new ideas and cultural elements. It was through this route that glassware, luxury goods, certain cultivated plants, Arabian horses, and other commodities made their way to China. These historical routes also facilitated the spread of contemporary technologies, such as methods for producing silk, porcelain, paper, gunpowder, and various types of weaponry (Giguashvili, 2018a).

Map 1



Source: <https://www.georoyal.ge/?MTID=5&id=3615>

Literary sources frequently reference the idea that Georgia represented one of the branches of the Silk Road; however, expert opinions on this matter vary. Researchers emphasize that the Silk Road should not be viewed as a single, fixed route; in reality, it was a network of interconnected pathways. Georgia's involvement in this route was largely dependent on the geopolitical context of the time, as China and the countries of Central Asia were continually exploring and utilizing alternative routes (Avdaliani, 2019a).

The notion of Georgia's transit potential is supported by the ancient Greek geographer Strabo (64–63 BCE – 23–24 CE), who, in his description of the Kingdom of Kartli, noted that four roads converged in its capital, Mtskheta. Georgian historian Ivane Javakhishvili also wrote: "It seems that trade had taken strong root. In Colchis, there were several well-known trade hubs... The Colchians used the Rioni River for commercial navigation; clearing channels and building bridges were necessary, and so they cleaned and built them..." The Silk Road, which spanned over 12,000 kilometers, connected the territories of what are now 16 modern countries: Japan, South Korea, North Korea, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Greece, and Egypt (Charekishvili, 2017).

The Caucasian route gained particular significance in the 6th century, when conflict between Byzantium and Persia made travel through Persian-controlled territory dangerous and unprofitable for traders. As a result, Asian merchants carrying Chinese silk to the Mediterranean sought alternative routes, one of

which passed through Georgia. Historical records indicate that the first caravan passed through Georgian territory in the year 568.

The ancient Silk Road ceased to function at the end of the 16th century due to ongoing wars in Central Asia and the development of maritime trade routes by Europeans, who had begun navigating around Africa.

Centuries later, the idea of reviving the historic Silk Road resurfaced. It became increasingly apparent that Georgia, historically positioned as a bridge between Europe and Asia, could once again play a significant role in the New Silk Road. The term “New Silk Road” was first introduced to the public by Hillary Clinton in a speech delivered on July 20, 2011, at the Anna Centenary Library in Chennai, India. She stated: “Historically, the countries of South and Central Asia were connected to each other and the rest of the continent through an extensive network of trade routes known as the Silk Road. Indian merchants traded in spices, precious stones, fabrics, and also in ideas and culture, all the way from the Great Wall of China to the shores of the Bosphorus. Let us work together to build a ‘New Silk Road.’ That means building more railway lines, highways, energy infrastructure... It means modernizing cross-border facilities... It means abandoning outdated trade policies we still live with and embracing the new rules of the 21st century,” Clinton emphasized in her speech (Giguashvili, 2020).

In November 2011, Turkey hosted the “Heart of Asia Conference” in Istanbul, where, with the support of the United States and China, the New Silk Road initiative became a cornerstone of regional cooperation. China welcomed the project with enthusiasm.

On September 7, 2013, during an official visit to Kazakhstan, Chinese President Xi Jinping publicly announced China’s ambition to revive the Silk Road (Wang Jun, 2018:379). He introduced a new concept, “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR), also referred to as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), to the global community, thereby distinguishing his vision from Hillary Clinton’s “New Silk Road” initiative. The OBOR initiative consists of two main components: the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road. The overarching aim of the New Silk Road project is to deepen cooperation among countries across the Eurasian continent (Giguashvili, 2018b).

It is noteworthy that Xi Jinping later expanded the initiative by calling for the creation of a “Green, Healthy, Intelligent, and Peaceful” Silk Road. He stated: “We must work to enhance cooperation in environmental protection, put the concept of green development into practice, and strengthen environmental safeguards so that together we can build a Green Silk Road. We must intensify efforts to strengthen collaboration in medicine and healthcare, expand mutually beneficial cooperation in combating infectious diseases, prevention, medical assistance, traditional medicine, and other fields, to jointly build a Healthy Silk Road. We should deepen cooperation in talent development to create a Silk Road of Intelligence. We must focus on enhancing cooperation in the field of security, implement a shared, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security vision for Asia, promote the development of a security management model that reflects Asian characteristics, and build a Peaceful Silk Road.” (Giguashvili, 2018a)

Xi Jinping's initiatives yielded tangible results. While the initial phase of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative encompassed only the maritime and overland Silk Roads, the scope has since expanded to include the Digital Silk Road, the Health Silk Road, and the Space Information Corridor. According to China's 2016 Space Information Corridor project, developed under the Belt and Road framework, the Beidou satellite system digitally links roads, railways, ports, and industrial parks established as part of the OBOR initiative (Chachanidze, 2021:3-6).

The OBOR initiative envisioned connecting Asia, Europe, and Africa through five routes. The Silk Road Economic Belt focuses on: (1) Linking China to Europe via Central Asia and Russia; (2) Linking China to the Middle East via Central Asia; (3) Connecting China with Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Indian Ocean countries. Meanwhile, the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road aims to: (4) Link China to Europe through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean by utilizing Chinese ports; and (5) Connect China to the southern Pacific region via the South China Sea.



In the initial map of the New Silk Road project, Georgia was not marked. However, given the country's strategically important location and the recent significant growth in China-Georgia relations, it must be acknowledged that Georgia could emerge as one of the key participants in China's New Silk Road plans.

According to some experts, China considers Georgia to be one of the pivotal countries in the Silk Road Economic Belt project. Government circles suggest that Georgia is expected to become a hub for Chinese goods, a role supported not only by the country's geographic position and its historical involvement in the ancient Silk Road, but also by the expanding trade and economic relations between Georgia, China, and the European Union (Giguashvili, 2020).

At present, Georgia is directly involved in the China-Central Asia-West Asia corridor, commonly referred to as the Middle Corridor. Georgia offers both land and maritime transit routes to China within this framework. It is important to note that shipping goods from China to Europe has traditionally relied on

maritime transport, which typically takes 45 to 60 days. The Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, often referred to as the “Iron Silk Road,” provides the opportunity to reduce cargo shipping time from China to Europe by approximately fivefold (Giguashvili, 2022).

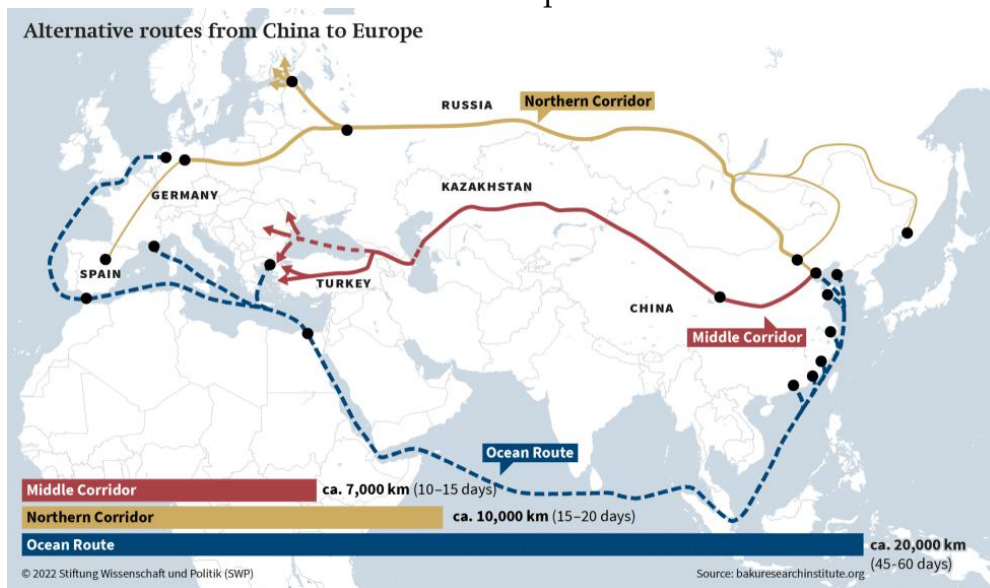
Map 3



Source: <https://www.international-alert.org/publications/rehabilitation-railways-south-caucasus-vol-1/>

In parallel with the development of railway infrastructure, China, Turkey, and most countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus have long sought to strengthen an alternative route known as the Middle Corridor. For the countries of Central Asia and the South Caucasus, this route enhances their transit functions. A significant opportunity to strengthen the Middle Corridor emerged in 2022, following the imposition of Western sanctions on the Russian Federation due to its invasion of Ukraine. Today, as the Northern Corridor (which runs through Russia) and the Southern Corridor (which runs through Iran) are effectively blocked, the Middle Corridor has gained developmental prospects. The Middle Corridor, more precisely referred to as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), bypasses both the Northern and Southern Corridors, as well as the traditional maritime route through the Indian Ocean.

Map 4



Source: <https://bakuresearchinstitute.org/en/middle-corridor-from-western-initiated-traceca-to-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative/>

According to the international logistics company Maersk, transportation from China to the European Union via the Middle Corridor takes approximately 40 days. The company Rail Bridge Cargo also estimates the transit time to be 36 to 40 days. The route is as follows: after crossing the China–Kazakhstan border, containers are transported by rail to the Kazakh port city of Aktau on the Caspian Sea. From Aktau, the cargo is transferred onto a barge headed for Baku. From Baku, it continues by rail toward the Port of Poti. After transshipment in Poti, the cargo proceeds by sea to the Romanian port of Constanța, from which it is distributed to various European capitals via different routes. A portion of the cargo from Baku is transported directly by rail through Tbilisi to the Turkish city of Kars.

Since 2022, major European transport companies, including the Danish Maersk, Austrian Rail Cargo Group, Finnish Nurminen Logistics, German CEVA Logistics, and Dutch Rail Bridge Cargo, have begun using the Middle Corridor. As a result, in 2022, the volume of goods transported via this route increased sixfold compared to the previous year, reaching 3.2 million tons. Thus, the Eurasian “middle path” has transformed into a “highway.” According to various forecasts, and in line with the ambitions of the participating countries, the corridor’s capacity is expected to reach 10 million tons by 2025 (Pertaia, 2023).

According to the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia, rail container transportation in Georgia increased by 30.5% this year. The growing significance of the Middle Corridor is further confirmed by the substantial rise in Chinese cargo passing through Georgia’s transport corridor in the first half of 2025. From January to June of this year, the number of containers transported between China and Georgia (in both directions) via the Middle Corridor reached 9,849 TEU, 173.0% more than the 3,608 TEU transported during the same period in the previous year. In the first six months of 2025, the ports of Poti and Batumi handled 7 million tons of cargo, representing a 5.9% increase

compared to the same period in the previous year. It is important to note that the increase in cargo volume is observed across virtually all modes of transport - land, sea, and air.

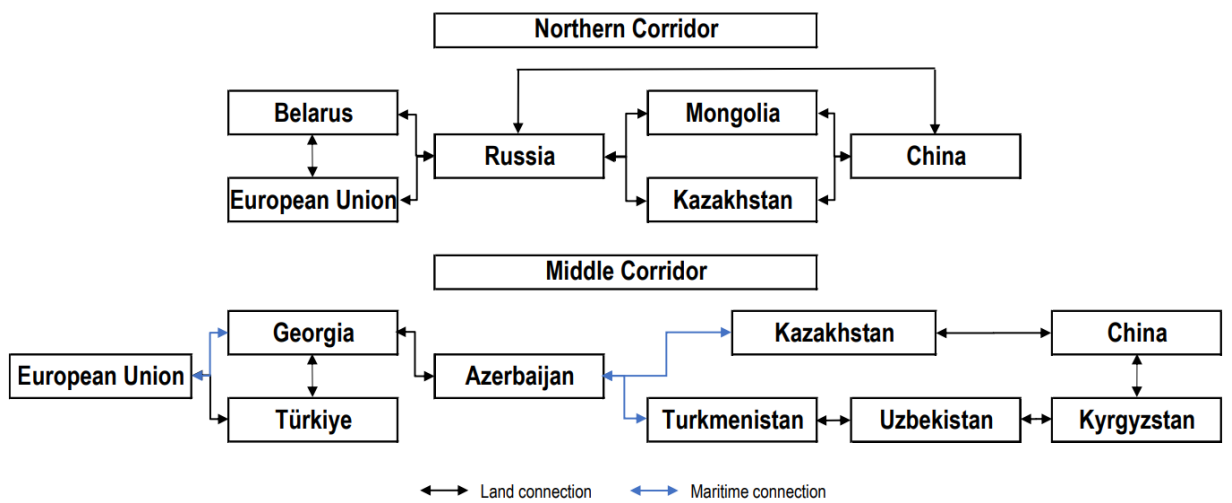
In particular, during the first half of 2025, the total volume of cargo processed at Georgia’s maritime ports, namely Poti and Batumi, amounted to 7 million tons, a 5.9% increase year-on-year. As for container shipments specifically, the number of containers handled in Georgian ports from January to June 2025 increased by 19.5%, marking a record-high figure.

The volume of cargo transported by air has also grown significantly. In January–June 2025, Georgia’s international airports handled 16.5 thousand tons of cargo, representing a 57.6% increase compared to 10.5 thousand tons in the same period of 2024 (Tkeshelashvili, 2025).

Shortly, the full-scale operation and increased capacity of the Middle Corridor will be driven by the continued expansion of trade and economic relations between Asia and Europe, as well as among the corridor countries. According to World Bank forecasts, trade between Chinese and European markets is expected to triple by 2030, while intra-regional trade among corridor countries will grow by 37%, and trade between these countries and the European Union will increase by 28%. It is also likely that in the coming years, there will be a growing shift of cargo flows from the Northern Route (via Russia and Belarus) toward the Middle Corridor. Furthermore, the corridor is of critical importance not only for Asia-Europe connectivity but also for the transport chains of the transit countries, significantly enhancing its long-term development potential.

DISCUSSION

Figure 1
Northern and Middle Corridor schematic routes



Source: OECD analysis (2023)

Georgia, as a key transport and transit hub of the Middle Corridor, is inherently interested in the full-scale operation, increased capacity, and enhanced efficiency of the corridor. The country stands to gain significantly from transit fees and the creation of added value on goods that may pass through its territory. To achieve this, it is essential to improve and further develop transport and logistics infrastructure, widely integrate modern digital technologies and international management practices into the corridor's operations, and strengthen cooperation and efforts among transit chain countries, so that the Middle Corridor can evolve into a highly competitive route and a unified logistics network.

Due to its geopolitical advantage as the shortest land-sea connection between Asia and Europe, Georgia may soon not only emerge as a regional hub of the Caucasus but also become a competitive alternative transit corridor linking the two continents (Javakhishvili, 2024).

Various studies confirm that:

- Air transport is the fastest, taking 1 week to 10 days, but it is also the most expensive.
- Rail transport (Northern Corridor) is relatively costly, but delivers goods in an acceptable timeframe, about 2 to 3 weeks.
- The maritime route is the cheapest, but also the slowest, requiring 45 to 60 days. That is the most commonly used route for freight between China and the EU. It passes through 23 countries, including member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN): Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam (Song and Fabinyi, 2022).

The oceanic route begins from ports in the Yellow and East China Seas, passes through the Strait of Malacca, enters the Indian Ocean, then proceeds into the Red Sea, goes through the Suez Canal, enters the Mediterranean Sea, and from there reaches the southern and western coasts of Europe.

The New Silk Road remains a topic of continuous discussion. In Georgia, specifically in Tbilisi, four international Silk Road forums have been held in 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2023, bringing together thousands of representatives from dozens of countries to explore new opportunities related to this significant initiative.

Georgia is strategically located along a critical segment of the Belt and Road route, lying on the shortest transit path between China and Europe. This position makes Georgia a key gateway for freight movement to and from landlocked regions of Central Asia and the Caucasus. The Anaklia Port is expected to serve markets in the Caucasus (Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia), Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan), and northern Iran (Andghuladze, 2022).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Active participation in the New Silk Road will bring significant economic benefits to Georgia. Primarily, this may be reflected in increased investment in the transport and logistics sectors, as well as in agriculture, manufacturing, tourism and hospitality, energy, and the financial sectors.

Georgia must fully realize its transit potential as a connector between Europe and Asia. It is significant to enhance transport infrastructure, support the export of Georgian products to Central Asian countries, and attract both tourists and investors. The country is striving to deepen its friendly relations with China (visa-free travel for Chinese citizens was introduced in 2023) and further develop trade and economic relations.

Thus, the New Silk Road facilitates the strengthening of trade relations between Asia and Europe. Georgia's geographic location, the strengthening of its foreign-economic ties with China, and the implementation of key infrastructure projects, including the ports of Poti and Anaklia, the development of new railway lines, and more, position the country as a vital part of the New Silk Road. Free trade agreements signed with Turkey, China, and the European Union further enhance its strategic importance. The Russia-Ukraine war and sanctions imposed on Russia are diminishing Russia's role in the New Silk Road, thereby creating new opportunities for Georgia.

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