

DIVERSIFICATION OF MAIN INTERNATIONAL TRANSPORT CORRIDORS TAKING INTO ACCOUNT THE INTERESTS OF UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract. *The diversification of international transport corridors is of strategic importance for landlocked countries like Uzbekistan, which face significant geographical constraints in accessing global markets. Given its central location in Eurasia, Uzbekistan is well-positioned to serve as a vital transit hub between Asia and Europe. However, its economic growth and integration into global trade largely depend on the availability, reliability, and security of multiple transport routes. This article examines the current state of international transport corridors connected to Uzbekistan and evaluates the challenges and opportunities involved in diversifying these routes. Particular attention is given to the geopolitical, economic, infrastructural, and institutional factors that shape corridor development. The study emphasizes the importance of creating alternative transport options to reduce overdependence on any single corridor, mitigate risks associated with geopolitical instability, and enhance the country's trade competitiveness. It also highlights the significance of regional cooperation, investment in infrastructure, and technological modernization as key enablers of diversification. The findings suggest that a multi-vector transport strategy aligned with Uzbekistan's national interests can significantly contribute to sustainable development, regional integration, and improved resilience against external shocks.*

Keywords: *Uzbekistan, international transport corridors, diversification strategy, landlocked countries, regional integration, logistics and infrastructure, supply chain resilience, transit connectivity, multimodal transportation, Central Asia, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Trans-Caspian corridor, North-South corridor, trade facilitation, geopolitics of transport, sustainable development, strategic corridors, cross-border trade, digital logistics systems, economic diplomacy.*

Introduction

In the context of increasing globalization and intensifying geopolitical competition, the role of international transport corridors has become a critical factor in determining the economic performance and strategic relevance of landlocked countries. Uzbekistan, located in the heart of Central Asia, is one such country whose economic growth and regional connectivity are closely tied to the efficiency and diversity of its access to international markets. The absence of direct access to seaports imposes significant constraints on Uzbekistan's trade competitiveness, as it leads to higher transportation costs, longer delivery times, and greater dependence on neighboring transit countries. These structural

challenges make the diversification of international transport corridors not only a logistical necessity but also a vital component of the country's national security, economic sustainability, and long-term development strategy.

Historically, Uzbekistan's trade routes were shaped by Soviet-era infrastructure and regional political dynamics, leading to a heavy reliance on a limited number of corridors, particularly those passing through northern neighbors such as Kazakhstan and Russia. However, recent global developments—including geopolitical tensions, regional conflicts, and the disruption of global supply chains due to pandemics and sanctions—have highlighted the risks of overdependence on singular transit routes. In this context, Uzbekistan has embarked on a policy of transport corridor diversification aimed at expanding its connectivity through multiple directions, including the East (China), South (Iran, Pakistan, India), West (Caucasus and Europe), and Southeast Asia.

The diversification strategy is also closely linked to Uzbekistan's broader foreign policy objectives, which include becoming a regional transport and logistics hub, strengthening cooperation with regional organizations such as the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC), and actively participating in large-scale international infrastructure initiatives like China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR). Additionally, Uzbekistan has demonstrated increasing interest in building multimodal transport infrastructure—integrating rail, road, and air connectivity—to improve the resilience and flexibility of its trade logistics system.

This article aims to examine the key drivers, existing constraints, and strategic options for diversifying Uzbekistan's international transport corridors. It provides a comprehensive analysis of the current transport routes, assesses their advantages and limitations, and explores the potential of new or underutilized corridors that can enhance Uzbekistan's integration into the global economy. Furthermore, the article highlights the importance of policy coordination, cross-border cooperation, investment in modern infrastructure, and the adoption of digital technologies in achieving a more diversified and efficient transport network. In doing so, it underscores how transport corridor diversification, when aligned with national interests and regional collaboration, can contribute significantly to Uzbekistan's economic resilience and sustainable development goals.

Literature review

The issue of international transport corridor diversification, especially in the context of landlocked countries, has been the focus of extensive academic and policy research. Scholars and international organizations have examined the complex interplay between geography, infrastructure, trade policy, and regional cooperation in shaping transit

connectivity. This section reviews key literature that provides a foundation for understanding the strategic importance of transport corridor diversification for Uzbekistan.

According to the World Bank (2014) and United Nations ESCAP (2020), landlocked developing countries (LLDCs) face inherent disadvantages in international trade due to high transit costs, long distances to seaports, and complex border procedures. These challenges can be mitigated through integrated transport strategies that prioritize multimodal connectivity and corridor diversification. The Almaty Programme of Action (2003) and its successor, the Vienna Programme of Action (2014–2024), emphasize the necessity of developing efficient, reliable, and diversified transit systems to support sustainable development in LLDCs.

Several studies have specifically addressed the Central Asian context. Pomfret (2010)¹ argues that Central Asia's geographic isolation necessitates regional cooperation in order to reduce trade frictions and foster economic growth. Vinokurov and Tsukarev (2019)² highlight the importance of harmonizing transport policies across borders and investing in soft infrastructure—such as customs procedures and digital systems—alongside physical infrastructure. They also underline the importance of diversifying trade routes to reduce exposure to geopolitical shocks and bottlenecks.

Uzbek scholars have increasingly contributed to the literature on the country's transit strategy. For example, Yuldashev (2021)³ discusses the role of the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway as a transformative project that could enhance eastward connectivity, while Turaev (2020)⁴ emphasizes the strategic need for Uzbekistan to strengthen southern corridors through Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan to access South Asian and Middle Eastern markets. These contributions support the argument that corridor diversification is a multidimensional issue involving economics, diplomacy, security, and regional integration.

In the policy sphere, reports from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program provide detailed assessments of corridor performance, infrastructure gaps, and financing models. ADB's Transport Sector Assessment for Uzbekistan (2019), for instance, points to the underutilization of certain corridors and recommends stronger public-private partnerships (PPPs) for infrastructure development. Similarly, OECD (2021) stresses the need for long-

¹ Pomfret, R. (2010). *Regional Integration in Central Asia: Economic Relations in the Post-Soviet Era*. Routledge.

² Vinokurov, E., & Tsukarev, T. (2019). *Transport Corridors of Central Asia: Challenges and Opportunities*. Eurasian Development Bank.

³ Yuldashev, A. (2021). Perspectives on the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway Project: Economic and Political Dimensions. *Journal of Central Asian Studies*, 18(2), 75–88.

⁴ Turaev, N. (2020). Diversification of Transport Routes as a Strategic Priority for Uzbekistan. *Central Asian Policy Review*, 6(1), 52–64.

term planning and governance reforms to improve the performance of cross-border trade corridors.

There is also an emerging body of literature exploring the geopolitical implications of transport corridors. Scholars like Fallon (2015)⁵ and Kavalski (2018)⁶ explore how China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has reshaped connectivity patterns in Eurasia, presenting both opportunities and challenges for countries like Uzbekistan. While BRI can provide vital funding and infrastructure, it may also increase dependency on a single external actor, thus reinforcing the need for strategic diversification.

Despite growing attention to this topic, there remains a research gap in analyzing how Uzbekistan can pragmatically balance its economic interests with geopolitical considerations while pursuing corridor diversification. Much of the existing literature offers fragmented insights or focuses on specific routes. This study seeks to contribute to the academic discourse by providing an integrated analysis of Uzbekistan's transport corridor diversification strategy from the standpoint of national interest, regional collaboration, and long-term resilience.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach aimed at analyzing the strategic importance of diversifying international transport corridors for Uzbekistan. Given the geopolitical sensitivity, economic complexity, and infrastructure-specific nature of the topic, the research is grounded in a combination of document analysis, comparative case study, and expert-based review methods. The following methodological steps were undertaken:

A systematic review of existing literature, including academic journal articles, policy papers, government reports, and publications by international organizations (e.g., ADB, UNESCAP, World Bank, OECD), was conducted to understand the theoretical foundations and practical considerations surrounding transport corridor diversification. The study focused particularly on documents related to landlocked developing countries (LLDCs), regional transport integration in Central Asia, and Uzbekistan's national development strategies.

The study compares the performance, potential, and limitations of existing and emerging international transport corridors relevant to Uzbekistan, including:

- The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR)
- The China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan (CKU) corridor
- The North–South corridor via Iran

⁵ Fallon, T. (2015). The New Silk Road: Xi Jinping's Grand Strategy for Eurasia. *American Foreign Policy Interests*, 37(3), 140–147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10803920.2015.1056682>

⁶ Kavalski, E. (2018). China's Belt and Road Initiative: Implications for the Global Order and International Norms. *The International Spectator*, 53(1), 90–105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2018.1408257>

- The Northern corridor via Russia
- The proposed routes via Afghanistan and Pakistan

This comparative analysis was based on criteria such as distance, transit time, political stability, infrastructure readiness, trade volume, and geopolitical risk.

National documents such as Uzbekistan's transport strategy, foreign economic policy concepts, and public infrastructure investment programs were reviewed to evaluate how policy priorities align with the goals of corridor diversification. Particular attention was given to regional agreements under the CAREC Program and Uzbekistan's involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The study incorporated insights from economic analysts, regional trade experts, and transport specialists through secondary interviews, published commentary, and think-tank analyses. Although primary field interviews were not conducted, validated secondary expert opinions provided additional depth.

This multi-method approach allows for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Uzbekistan's options and challenges in developing a diversified, efficient, and resilient international transport corridor system. The methodology ensures that both macroeconomic trends and micro-logistical realities are considered in the analysis.

Result and discussion

The findings of this study reveal that Uzbekistan's strategic efforts toward the diversification of international transport corridors are both necessary and increasingly feasible given current geopolitical dynamics, technological advances, and regional integration opportunities. The analysis highlights several critical outcomes and associated implications for national policy and regional cooperation.

1. Overreliance on the Northern Corridor and Its Risks

Historically, Uzbekistan's transit infrastructure has heavily depended on the Northern Corridor, primarily via Kazakhstan and Russia. This route has provided relatively stable trade flows; however, recent geopolitical tensions, including sanctions and conflicts involving Russia, have significantly increased the vulnerability of this route. The risks of overdependence include tariff volatility, border bottlenecks, and political exposure. These developments reinforce the urgency for Uzbekistan to reduce reliance on a single corridor.

2. Increasing Potential of Southern and Trans-Caspian Corridors

The study finds growing potential in southern routes—especially those connecting Uzbekistan to Iran, Pakistan, and India via Afghanistan—as well as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), which bypasses Russia entirely. Though infrastructure in these corridors is still developing, recent agreements, such as the trilateral railway initiative (Uzbekistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan) and improved port access via Bandar Abbas and Gwadar, point to promising alternatives. Moreover, the TITR offers access to

European markets through the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, enhancing Uzbekistan's westward connectivity.

3. Strategic Importance of the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan (CKU) Corridor

The proposed China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan (CKU) railway is viewed as a potential game-changer in eastward trade integration. The research underscores that while political, environmental, and financing challenges remain, the project promises to significantly reduce travel time and distance to Chinese markets. For Uzbekistan, this means increased access to global supply chains, especially in the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

4. Logistical and Institutional Barriers

Despite the opportunities, several barriers persist. These include outdated rail and road infrastructure, inconsistent customs procedures, a lack of digitalization in logistics, and limited intermodal connectivity. Cross-border coordination also remains a major challenge, particularly in corridors involving politically unstable regions. The study suggests that regional collaboration through mechanisms such as the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program must be deepened to address these inefficiencies.

5. Economic and Developmental Gains from Diversification

Diversifying transport corridors aligns with Uzbekistan's broader development goals, such as increasing export competitiveness, attracting foreign direct investment (FDI), and strengthening economic sovereignty. Improved connectivity has already contributed to growth in transit trade volumes and logistical sector investments. Additionally, corridor diversification supports regional development by stimulating infrastructure growth in rural and border areas.

6. Policy and Strategic Recommendations

- **Invest in Multimodal Infrastructure:** Uzbekistan must prioritize integrated rail-road-port logistics hubs to maximize corridor efficiency.
- **Strengthen Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs):** To accelerate infrastructure development and innovation in logistics services.
- **Harmonize Customs and Transit Rules:** Especially with key partners in the South and West corridors to reduce time and cost.
- **Leverage Regional and Global Platforms:** CAREC, BRI, and WTO frameworks can be used for negotiation, funding, and standardization.
- **Develop Digital Trade Platforms:** E-customs, e-documentation, and cargo tracking systems should be expanded.

In summary, the study concludes that Uzbekistan's national interest strongly favors a balanced, multi-vector approach to transport corridor development. Strategic diversification not only enhances trade resilience but also serves as a pillar of the country's

broader economic modernization agenda. The successful implementation of this strategy, however, requires sustained political will, regional coordination, and investment in both hard and soft infrastructure.

Corridor	Direction	Key Countries	Advantages	Challenges
Northern Corridor	North	Kazakhstan, Russia	Established infrastructure; large trade volume	Geopolitical risk; overreliance; exposure to sanctions
Trans-Caspian (TITR)	West	Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey	Bypasses Russia; access to Europe; strategic for diversification	High transport cost; multiple modal changes (rail–sea–rail)
CKU Corridor	East	China, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan	Shorter distance to China; part of BRI; high trade potential	Project delays; political and financing challenges in Kyrgyzstan
South Corridor (via Iran)	South-West	Turkmenistan, Iran	Access to Persian Gulf; active rail connections	Sanctions on Iran; customs inefficiencies
South Corridor (via Afghanistan and Pakistan)	South	Afghanistan, Pakistan	Access to ports of Gwadar and Karachi; link to South Asia	Security issues in Afghanistan; infrastructure gaps
Multimodal Corridors	Mixed (Rail-Road-Sea)	Various	Flexibility; integration with global supply chains	Requires advanced logistics hubs; high coordination costs

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Main International Transport Corridors Relevant to Uzbekistan⁷

This table presents a comparative analysis of key international transport corridors that are vital or potentially strategic for Uzbekistan. It summarizes each corridor's geographical direction, the primary countries involved, and outlines both the main advantages and prevailing challenges associated with each route.

The Northern Corridor, though historically dominant, now poses geopolitical risks. The Trans-Caspian Route (TITR) offers an alternative western passage bypassing Russia and connecting Uzbekistan to Europe but involves complex multimodal logistics. The China–

⁷ Author created

Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan (CKU) corridor holds significant promise for connecting Uzbekistan to East Asian markets, although it faces delays in implementation. Southern routes via Iran and Afghanistan–Pakistan provide access to seaports and South Asia, but face issues ranging from sanctions to security risks.

This comparative approach highlights the necessity of a multi-vector transport policy, enabling Uzbekistan to reduce dependence on a single corridor and increase its connectivity resilience and trade efficiency.

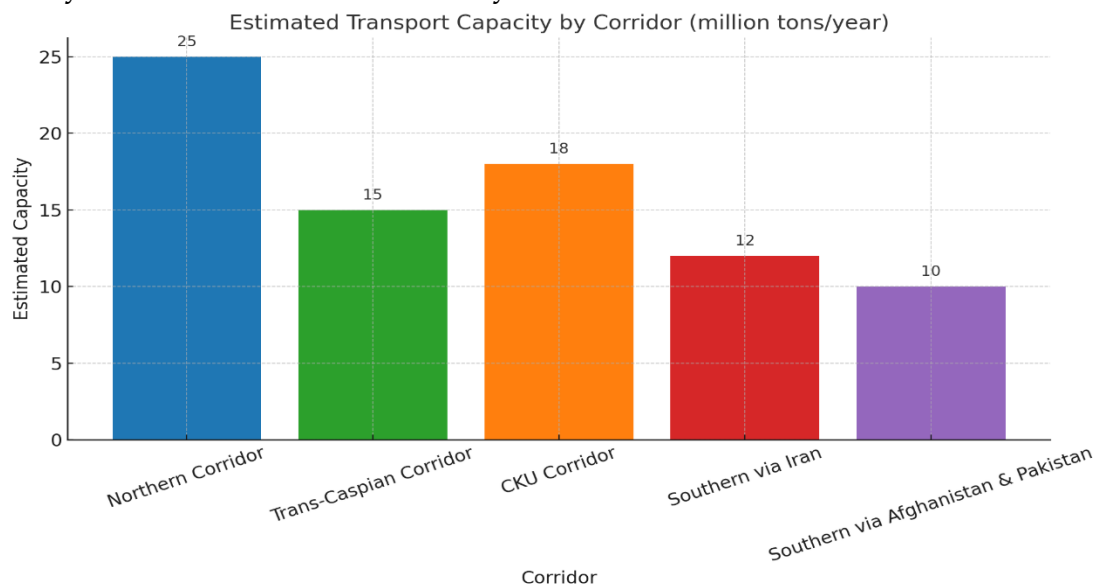


Figure 1. Estimated Transport Capacity of Key International Corridors for Uzbekistan (in million tons per year)⁸

This bar chart illustrates the estimated annual transport capacity of five major international transport corridors relevant to Uzbekistan. The Northern Corridor currently has the highest capacity (25 million tons/year), reflecting its established infrastructure and trade volume. However, due to geopolitical risks, Uzbekistan is increasingly focusing on alternative routes.

The Trans-Caspian Corridor and China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan (CKU) Corridor show significant potential, with capacities of 15 and 18 million tons/year respectively, offering strategic diversification. The Southern Corridors, both via Iran and Afghanistan–Pakistan, are viable routes to access South Asian and Middle Eastern markets, though they currently operate at lower capacities due to security and sanctions challenges.

⁸ Author created

This comparison underscores the importance of investing in underutilized or developing corridors to ensure trade resilience, reduce dependency, and strengthen Uzbekistan's connectivity to global markets.

Conclusion

The diversification of international transport corridors is a strategic imperative for Uzbekistan as it seeks to enhance its economic security, trade competitiveness, and regional integration. As a landlocked country, Uzbekistan's access to global markets is highly dependent on efficient, secure, and diversified transit routes. The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that overreliance on the Northern Corridor poses significant geopolitical and logistical risks, particularly in light of regional tensions and shifting trade alliances.

Emerging alternatives—such as the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, and the southern corridors via Iran and Pakistan—offer viable and increasingly attractive options for expanding Uzbekistan's connectivity. However, unlocking the full potential of these corridors requires substantial investment in infrastructure, harmonization of customs procedures, enhanced regional cooperation, and the adoption of digital trade technologies.

The government of Uzbekistan has taken important steps in recent years to promote corridor diversification through bilateral agreements, participation in regional programs like CAREC, and the modernization of its domestic transport infrastructure. Yet continued political commitment, effective public-private partnerships, and strategic coordination with neighboring countries will be essential for long-term success.

In conclusion, a balanced and pragmatic diversification strategy will allow Uzbekistan to reduce transit dependency risks, enhance its geopolitical flexibility, and position itself as a vital transport and trade hub in the heart of Eurasia.

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