

The ‘Bridge State’ Model Revisited: Bulgaria–Central Asia Cooperation on the Middle Corridor

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Abstract

In the context of a reshaped global geopolitical landscape, this study focuses on the cooperation between Bulgaria and Central Asian countries within the framework of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (the ‘Middle Corridor’). Drawing on role theory and Ramon Lopez-Reyes’s ‘Bridge State’ theory, the study argues that this collaboration represents a strategic model through which small and medium-sized states leverage geoeconomic opportunities to enhance their strategic autonomy. With Bulgaria as a central case study, it examines how the country, through infrastructure investment and niche diplomacy, is positioning itself as a crucial gateway connecting the European Union with the Caspian region. The research finds that this cooperation model forms a ‘bridge state cluster’ comprising nations like Bulgaria and Kazakhstan, which empower each other through networked collaboration. The study shows that the bridge state concept requires theoretical updating for the 21st century: Bulgaria’s ‘bridging’ function operates through economic and institutional openness rather than military neutrality, reflecting a shift in the meaning of ‘bridge’ in an era of geoeconomic competition. The analysis concludes that this model offers a potential strategic pathway for other small states seeking to enhance their influence, while acknowledging the model’s dependence on favourable geopolitical conditions and its vulnerability to major power competition. Policy implications include recommendations for deepening EU institutional engagement with the TITR Association and establishing permanent joint working mechanisms between Bulgaria and Central Asian states.

Keywords: Middle Corridor, Bridge State Theory, Bulgaria, Central Asia, Small State Diplomacy.

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Introduction

The outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022 disrupted the existing balance of the global geopolitical landscape. Its spillover effects have extended far beyond the conflict itself, profoundly impacting logistics and trade networks across the Eurasian continent. Before the conflict, the New Eurasian Land Bridge via Russia and Belarus (the ‘Northern Corridor’) was the most critical overland transport route between China and Europe. However, as Western countries imposed comprehensive sanctions on Russia, the corridor’s transport function rapidly weakened and it came to be seen as a ‘political and financial liability’ (Dupuy, 2024). The sanctions and regional instability have affected a significant volume of Eurasian trade flows, leading to markedly longer transit times and exacerbating already high global freight costs. Data shows that since the war began, cargo volume along the Northern Corridor between China and Europe has decreased by 40% (Eldem, 2022). This dramatic shift has not only created a strategic vacuum but also spurred an urgent need to find a stable, reliable alternative route unaffected by sanctions.

In this context, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), also known as the ‘Middle Corridor,’ has gradually emerged as the primary channel to meet this strategic demand. For a long time, the route was considered a valuable auxiliary route (Poplawski, 2024) and was more often seen as a supplementary option to the traditional Northern Corridor. However, the reshaping of the geopolitical landscape has led to a revival of interest in the Middle Corridor (Greater consensus on improving the Middle Corridor, 2023), and it is now rapidly being regarded as a core artery for Eurasian trade. The exponential growth in global demand for alternatives to Russian routes has directly driven a significant increase in the Middle Corridor’s cargo volume, transforming it from a secondary, supplementary position to a globally strategic transport artery (Eldem, 2022).

The core thesis of this study is that the deepening cooperation between Bulgaria and Central Asian countries, such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, within the Middle Corridor framework transcends merely logistical and transport arrangements; it represents a strategic model through which small and medium-sized states leverage geoeconomic opportunities to enhance their strategic autonomy and international influence. Applying Ramon Lopez-Reyes’s ‘Bridge State’ theory (Lopez-Reyes, 2001) as the core analytical framework, this study argues that Bulgaria is actively shaping and playing the role of a bridge state between the EU and the Central Asian region. The cooperation among these states forms a ‘bridge state cluster’ — a networked structure in which nations with different geopolitical positions mutually empower one another through coordinated connectivity strategies.

This study addresses three research questions. First, how do Bulgaria and key Central Asian states cooperate within the Middle Corridor framework, and what are the geoeconomic foundations of this cooperation? Second, to what extent does Bulgaria’s behaviour as an EU and NATO member conform to the bridge state model, and how should the theory be adapted to account for a state that is embedded in a political-military alliance rather than formally neutral? Third, does the concept of a ‘bridge state cluster’ — in which

multiple states collectively perform bridging functions — offer a viable strategic pathway for small and medium-sized states seeking to enhance their influence in the contemporary international system?

The paper proceeds as follows. After outlining the theoretical framework and methodology, it conducts a geoeconomic assessment of the Middle Corridor, focusing on the driving forces behind its rise, the role of key transit countries, and the convergence and competition of major power strategies in the region. It then takes Bulgaria as a core case study to examine its strategic positioning as a European gateway, covering its infrastructure development, foreign economic policy, and diplomatic cooperation with Central Asian nations. Building on this empirical foundation, the study applies the Bridge State theory to interpret the cooperation model and examines the potential constraints and external competitive environment this model may face.

Theoretical framework

This study draws on three interconnected strands of theoretical literature to analyse the Bulgaria–Central Asia cooperation model: role theory in foreign policy, the bridge state concept, and niche diplomacy (Cooper, 1997).

Role theory, as originally formulated by Holsti (1970) and subsequently developed by Harnisch, Frank, and Maull (2009), posits that foreign policy decision-makers adopt national role conceptions — shared understandings of their state's position in the international system — that shape diplomatic behaviour. Holsti's foundational typology identified seventeen national role conceptions, including 'mediator-intermediary' and 'bridge,' which describe states that position themselves as connectors between different geopolitical groupings. Role theory provides the broader analytical umbrella for this study: the bridge state is a specific national role conception that small and medium-sized states may adopt when they perceive that connecting different blocs serves their security and economic interests better than alignment with a single major power.

A note on terminology is warranted. This study uses 'small states' and 'small and medium-sized states' to refer to states whose capacity to independently shape the international system is limited relative to major powers, regardless of geographic size. This usage follows the convention in small state studies (Vital, 1967; Keohane, 1969), where the defining characteristic of a 'small state' is its limited ability to influence outcomes in the international system through unilateral action, rather than its territorial extent. By this criterion, Kazakhstan — despite being the world's ninth-largest country by area — functions as a small state in the context of great power competition, as its foreign policy autonomy is constrained by geographic, economic, and security dependencies on Russia and China. The 'bridge state cluster' concept developed in this study allows for states of different sizes and capabilities to collectively perform bridging functions, further mitigating the terminological concern.

Ramon Lopez-Reyes's (2001) 'Bridge State' theory operationalizes this role conception for the post-Cold War era. The theory identifies five criteria for a bridge state: (1) it is

located on a geopolitical 'fault line' between different blocs or systems; (2) it maintains democratic processes and human rights; (3) it adheres to non-offensive defence; (4) it demonstrates a commitment to peacebuilding; and (5) it can perform either a 'minimalist' function — preventing the consolidation of a new East-West divide — or a 'maximalist' function — creating a Zone of Peaceful Co-operation (ZOPC) encompassing transportation, energy, and digital infrastructure. Lopez-Reyes argued that for small states on geopolitical fault lines, this bridging posture could serve national interests better than formal military alliance membership.

The concept of niche diplomacy, as developed by Cooper (1997) and elaborated by Henriksen (2019), provides a complementary analytical lens. Niche diplomacy describes how small and middle powers concentrate their limited diplomatic and economic resources on specific issue areas or functional domains — such as connectivity, mediation, or environmental governance — rather than attempting to compete with major powers across all policy dimensions. By occupying a distinctive 'niche,' these states can acquire influence disproportionate to their size or material capabilities. Bulgaria's strategic focus on transport connectivity within the EU can be understood as a form of niche diplomacy: rather than competing with larger EU members on broad policy agendas, Bulgaria has leveraged its geographical position to position itself as indispensable to the EU's Eurasian connectivity strategy.

The study also engages with geoeconomics, understood as the use of economic instruments to achieve geopolitical objectives (Luttwak, 1990; Blackwill and Harris, 2016). The Middle Corridor is a paradigmatic geoeconomic project: simultaneously a commercial transport route and a strategic instrument through which participating states seek to reduce dependence on Russia, attract investment from competing major powers, and enhance their bargaining positions. The bridge state framework intersects with geoeconomics insofar as the 'bridge' function is exercised primarily through economic connectivity rather than military postures — a mode of influence characteristic of the contemporary geoeconomic environment.

Several analytical tensions in the bridge state concept require attention when applying it to the contemporary context. First, Lopez-Reyes formulated his theory in 2001, before Bulgaria's accession to NATO (2004) and the EU (2007), and at a time when the post-Cold War geopolitical environment appeared fundamentally different from the present one. His suggestion that Bulgaria might find a bridge state posture 'more beneficial than membership in NATO' (Lopez-Reyes, 2001: 54-55) was predicated on a security environment in which traditional military threats appeared diminished. The subsequent evolution of the security landscape — including Russia's annexation of Crimea (2014), the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022), and the rise of hybrid threats — have fundamentally altered the conditions under which the theory was formulated.

Second, Bulgaria today is not a neutral state. It is a member of both the EU and NATO, provides military aid to Ukraine, and maintains general alignment with the Western bloc in its foreign policy. This creates an apparent contradiction with the bridge state theory's

emphasis on 'non-offensive defense' and neutrality. This study argues, however, that the bridge state concept can be updated for the era of geoeconomic competition: the 'bridging' function has shifted from military neutrality to economic and institutional openness. A state can be politically and militarily integrated into one bloc while still performing a cross-regional economic bridge role. This interpretation represents a theoretical extension of Lopez-Reyes's original framework, adapted to the realities of 21st-century multilateralism and globalization.

Third, this study extends the bridge state concept from individual states to a 'bridge state cluster' — a networked configuration in which multiple states collectively perform bridging functions along a shared corridor. In this cluster, each state occupies a distinct position: Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan bridge Central Asia and the Caucasus, while Bulgaria bridges the Black Sea region with the EU. This networked structure enhances the strategic autonomy of each participating state by providing redundant connectivity options and reducing dependence on any single transit route or major power.

Methodology

This study employs the Middle Corridor as its primary case, selected for two reasons. First, it is a paradigmatic instance of geoeconomic restructuring: the disruption of the Northern Corridor following the Russia-Ukraine conflict created a strategic vacuum that small and medium-sized states have actively sought to fill, making it an ideal setting for examining how such states leverage geoeconomic opportunities. Second, the corridor involves multiple states at different levels of development and geopolitical positioning, allowing for analysis of how a bridge state cluster operates in practice.

Within this broader case, Bulgaria is selected as the focal case study because it represents a critical test for the bridge state theory. As a country that is simultaneously an EU and NATO member while actively cultivating a bridging role toward Central Asia, Bulgaria presents a scenario that the original theory did not anticipate. If the bridge state framework can be meaningfully applied to — and updated for — Bulgaria's behavior, this demonstrates the theory's continued relevance in a fundamentally altered geopolitical context. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are examined as the primary Central Asian counterparts, selected because of their geographic centrality in the Middle Corridor and the intensity of their recent diplomatic and economic engagement with Bulgaria. The analysis does not claim to represent the entirety of Central Asia but focuses on these states as the corridor's key regional nodes.

The study draws on three methods. First, it employs case study analysis to examine Bulgaria's foreign policy behaviour, infrastructure investments, and diplomatic engagement with Central Asian states, examining the linkages between geoeconomic strategy and enhanced international influence, attending to the sequence of policy decisions and their observable effects. Second, it applies comparative analysis to assess Bulgaria's positioning against competing transit nodes (particularly Romania's Port of Constanța) and to evaluate

the relative performance of different states within the bridge state cluster. Third, it incorporates quantitative data — including freight volume statistics, trade flows, and infrastructure investment figures — to empirically ground the assessment of the Middle Corridor’s development and the economic dimensions of Bulgaria–Central Asia cooperation. Data sources include institutional reports from the World Bank, OECD, Asian Development Bank, and EU institutions; policy documents and government statements from Bulgaria, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan; and academic literature on the Middle Corridor, small state diplomacy, and geoeconomics. The empirical data and policy documents cited in this study are current through July 2025. The study adopts an interpretive, theory-building approach rather than hypothesis-testing: the empirical material is used to refine and extend the bridge state concept for the contemporary era.

Geoeconomic assessment of the Middle corridor

The transformation of the Middle Corridor is one of the most significant geoeconomic phenomena in the context of recent geopolitical restructuring. Its rise in importance is not only reflected in political discourse but is also confirmed by rapidly growing freight data.

Before the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the freight volume on the Middle Corridor remained at a relatively limited level. However, since 2022, the route’s transport volume has shown a significant and rapid growth trend. Statistical data indicates that its cargo volume has increased several-fold in a short period, as shown in the table below.

Table 1. Middle Corridor Freight Volume Statistics and Forecast, 2021-2024

Year	Total Cargo Volume (million tons)	YoY Growth Rate (%)	TEU	YoY Growth Rate (%)
2021	0.84	-	25,200	-
2022	1.50	78.6%	33,600	33%
2023	2.76	84.0%	20,500	-39%
2024 (First 11 Months)	4.1	63% (vs. same period 2023)	50,500	146% (vs. full year 2023)
2025 (Forecast)	5.2	-	96,000	-
2030 (World Bank Forecast)	11	-	-	-

Note: The decline in container volume in 2023 can likely be attributed to initial capacity bottlenecks and rate fluctuations, but it recovered and significantly surpassed previous levels in 2024.

Source: developed by the authors on the basis of data from EIAS (European Institute for Asian Studies), Asian Development Bank, OECD, The Peninsula Qatar, The Astana Times, Railway Supply, MPRA, The World Bank.

The data above clearly demonstrates that the Middle Corridor has transformed from an alternative solution into an active and major trade route with sustained growth potential.

According to a World Bank forecast, by 2030, the corridor will shorten transport times and freight volume could reach 11 million tons, which is ten times or more than the 2021 level.

In essence, the Middle Corridor is a complex multimodal transport system composed of rail, road, and maritime networks. Its route originates from China and Southeast Asia, passes through Kazakhstan, crosses the Caspian Sea, and then continues through countries such as Azerbaijan and Georgia, ultimately reaching Europe via Turkey or the Black Sea. While the multimodal nature of the corridor offers flexibility and extensive connectivity, it also presents multiple challenges at the institutional, infrastructural, and operational levels. The main bottlenecks currently hindering its further development can be summarized as follows:

The main bottlenecks hindering the corridor's development include: (1) Trans-Caspian transport, where ferry operations between Kazakh and Azerbaijani ports sometimes account for up to 70% of total transit time (Ahmadzada, 2024); (2) infrastructure mismatches, with significant disparities in rail and port capacity requiring large-scale investment (Jafarova, 2023); and (3) institutional barriers, as the corridor traverses multiple sovereign nations without a unified tariff system, resulting in complex customs procedures and inconsistent standards.

The successful operation of the Middle Corridor is highly dependent on the active participation and synergistic cooperation of the core countries along the route. The following section analyses the role of these core nations using three key transit countries as examples.

1. Kazakhstan: As the essential gateway connecting China to the Caspian Sea, Kazakhstan holds a foundational position in the Middle Corridor, handling 85% of the overland trade between China and Europe (DHA Press, 2025/b). Facing pressure from Russia through the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC), Kazakhstan has explicitly directed its oil companies to explore new transport routes that bypass Russia, a move that has significantly enhanced the strategic value of the Middle Corridor (Çolakoğlu, 2023). Concurrently, the country is investing heavily in the expansion of the Aktau and Kuryk ports to increase trans-Caspian transshipment capacity, further solidifying its pivotal role in regional connectivity.
2. Azerbaijan: Located at the intersection of the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus, Azerbaijan holds a key hub position in the Middle Corridor. Its Port of Alat (the new Port of Baku) is a critical node for receiving cargo from Central Asia. The operation of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway provides a vital rail link for goods traversing the Caucasus region. The peace agreement reached between Azerbaijan and Armenia in August 2025 to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and the potential opening of the Zangezur Corridor (also known as the 'Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity,' or TRIPP), is seen as a major future breakthrough for enhancing the corridor's capacity by providing a more direct route to Turkey (Rossi, 2025).
3. Georgia: As the eastern gateway to the Black Sea, Georgia's ports of Poti and Batumi, along with its east-west highway, serve as a 'lifeline' (Eldem, 2022) connecting the

Caucasus to Europe. However, Georgia's limited railway capacity and the instability of its domestic political situation are considered potential risks for the corridor (Jafarova, 2023).

The rapid development of the Middle Corridor has turned it into a focal point for the strategic planning of major powers, creating a complex landscape of both competition and cooperation.

The Middle Corridor is one of the flagship projects of the European Union's 'Global Gateway' strategy. This strategy aims to offer partner countries an infrastructure investment plan that is distinct from China's Belt and Road Initiative, based on values and principles of sustainable development (Tagliapietra, 2024). The EU has pledged to invest between €10 and €12 billion in the development of the Middle Corridor. Its objectives are not only to enhance connectivity but also to secure a stable supply of critical raw materials from Central Asia and to integrate EU standards and norms into the regional integration process (Zipatolla, 2025). Furthermore, the new Black Sea Strategy, launched by the EU in May 2025, explicitly sets the construction of a secure and interconnected corridor to Central Asia as a core objective, creating a synergistic effect with the Global Gateway strategy (Jeffler, 2025).

Before 2022, due to the higher efficiency of the Northern Corridor, China paid relatively limited attention to the Middle Corridor (Greater consensus on improving the Middle Corridor, 2023). However, with the continually rising geopolitical risks associated with the Northern Corridor, the Middle Corridor has gradually been seen as an important route for achieving supply chain diversification, helping to mitigate the potential risks posed by maritime routes dominated by the United States and its allies (Sharifli, 2025). China is actively participating in the infrastructure development of the Middle Corridor under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, for example, by providing new locomotives to Azerbaijan and promoting projects such as the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, demonstrating a high degree of pragmatism and long-term strategic consideration.

The United States views the Middle Corridor as a significant strategic opportunity to reshape the trade patterns of the Eurasian continent. Its main objectives are to weaken the regional influence of Russia and Iran and to open up new markets for American companies, particularly in fields such as engineering, logistics, and digital services. Under the 'Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and Interstate Relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia,' Washington has established a key strategic foothold in the South Caucasus through the development, management, and leasing of the 42-kilometer Zangezur Corridor. Meanwhile, Turkey considers the Middle Corridor a core initiative to strengthen its position as a Eurasian transport hub and uses it to enhance ties with the Turkic states of Central Asia, thereby further expanding its geopolitical influence.

This convergence of major power interests, on the one hand, injects significant financial and political momentum into the development of the Middle Corridor, and on the other, creates strategic space for the small and medium-sized countries along the route to balance and choose between multiple powers. Notably, the Middle Corridor is undergoing a transformation from a mere 'transit corridor' to a 'development corridor.' Early discussions

about the Middle Corridor largely focused on reducing transit times and increasing freight volume between China and Europe (Valansi, 2025). However, with in-depth research from international institutions like the World Bank and the gradual implementation of strategic plans by the leaders of countries along the route, the focus on the Middle Corridor has gradually shifted towards promoting regional trade, fostering emerging economic centres, and attracting foreign direct investment beyond the logistics sector (Daly, 2025). The EU's strategic documents also explicitly state that one of its goals is to secure the supply of critical raw materials through the corridor, not just to transport containers. This shift means that the criteria for the corridor's success are being redefined; its significance is no longer limited to the container throughput (TEU) of China-Europe trade but is increasingly linked to the GDP growth, economic diversification, and political resilience of the countries along the route. This transformation injects stronger endogenous momentum and sustainability into the Middle Corridor, while also reducing over-reliance on the complex and volatile China-Europe trade relationship.

Simultaneously, the Middle Corridor is experiencing a dynamic of 'co-opetition' between the EU's 'Global Gateway' strategy and the 'Belt and Road Initiative.' Although the Global Gateway is often portrayed as a direct competitor to the BRI, offering a 'values-based' alternative (García-Herrero, 2024), in the actual operation of the Middle Corridor, the two exhibit a degree of coexistence and even complementarity. For instance, China provides locomotives to Azerbaijan to enhance railway capacity, while the EU focuses on investing in broader connectivity and 'soft infrastructure' (such as regulatory harmonization and digitalization) (Avdaliani, 2025). For transit countries like Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, this situation presents a strategic opportunity to actively seek investment from both sides, refusing to make an either/or choice between major powers. Consequently, the geoeconomic competition in the region can no longer be simplified into a 'David versus Goliath' confrontational narrative but must be considered from the perspective of a more complex and pragmatic multilateral reality. The small and medium-sized countries along the Middle Corridor are not passive recipients shaped by external forces but are active agents proactively seeking to maximize their own interests amidst the interplay of multiple powers.

Bulgaria: the EU's bridge to the Caspian Sea

On the westward-extending map of the Middle Corridor, Bulgaria's geostrategic value is magnified as it serves as a key gateway connecting the Black Sea and Caspian Sea regions with Europe. By leveraging a clear strategic vision, sustained infrastructure investment, and proactive diplomacy, Bulgaria is effectively converting its geographic advantages into tangible geoeconomic benefits, thereby securing a more prominent position in the regional connectivity landscape.

Due to its unique geographical and political identity, Bulgaria holds an irreplaceable position in the Middle Corridor. Its location on the western coast of the Black Sea allows

it to connect directly with Georgia via maritime routes and also to Turkey through land-sea transport links, making it a natural European terminus for the Middle Corridor (DHA Press, 2025/b). Furthermore, as a member of the EU and NATO, Bulgaria not only provides a stable, regulated, and secure entry point to the European market for goods from the East (Kazinform, 2025) but also plays an important role in the spillover of institutions and regulations. This dual advantage makes Bulgaria a natural logistics ‘bridge’ in a geographical sense, as well as a ‘bridge’ in an institutional and regulatory sense, capable of radiating EU standards and norms to the wider Black Sea and Caspian regions.

Bulgaria is transforming this strategic vision into reality through large-scale investments in its ports and inland transport networks.

Bulgaria’s two major Black Sea ports, Burgas and Varna, are its core assets for participation in the Middle Corridor.

The Port of Burgas, the closest EU deep-water port to the Bosphorus Strait (Ganeva, 2024), has undergone extensive modernization, most notably the new deep-water Berth 28 (completed January 2025), which accommodates container ships up to 4,500 TEU. Its operator, BMF, became an associate member of the TITR Association in July 2023 and signed a cooperation memorandum with Kazakhstan’s KTZ Express in October 2024.

The Port of Varna, supported by a €50 million EIB loan, is advancing construction of a new grain terminal and plans to increase berth depth to 13.5 meters (Nuno, 2024). As a key node on Pan-European Corridor VIII, it provides crucial connection to the European mainland (Port of Varna, 2025). Container throughput figures for both ports are not publicly reported by Bulgarian port authorities, which limits direct quantitative comparison with Constanța; this data gap should be noted when interpreting the competitive dynamics discussed below.

Bulgaria’s strategic value is further amplified by its integration with the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T). The Middle Corridor is a natural extension of Pan-European Corridor VIII, connecting the Black Sea with the Adriatic Sea via Bulgaria, North Macedonia, and Albania (Kazinform, 2025). In March 2025, the Bulgarian government announced a \$1.8 billion railway investment plan to modernize the line (DHA Press, 2025/a).

Bulgaria’s hardware investments are supported by a proactive foreign policy, particularly through cooperation with key Central Asian nations.

In June 2025, Bulgarian President Rumen Radev’s visit to Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, marked a milestone in the development of bilateral relations. During the visit, the two sides signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the joint development of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, officially incorporating the ports of Burgas and Varna into the Middle Corridor’s official framework (BNR, 2025). To advance concrete cooperation, the Kazakh side proposed establishing a dedicated joint working group on transport and logistics under the bilateral intergovernmental commission (Nurmaganbetova, 2025). Behind this diplomatic breakthrough lies the tangible foundation of rapid growth in bilateral trade. Data shows that in 2024, Kazakhstan’s exports to Bulgaria (mainly crude

oil) increased more than 11-fold year-on-year, reaching \$303.6 million (DHA Press, 2025/b), providing solid economic support for the deepening of bilateral relations.

Table 2. Overview of Cooperation between Bulgaria and Central Asian Countries (Partial)

Agreement/Memorandum	Countries	Signing Date	Key Provisions	Strategic Objectives
Memorandum of Understanding on TITR Development	Bulgaria, Kazakhstan	June 2025	Incorporate Port of Burgas and Port of Varna into TITR; establish joint working group.	Formally integrate Bulgaria as the European gateway of the Middle Corridor.
Agreement on Increasing Transport Permits	Bulgaria, Uzbekistan	September 2024	Fifteen-fold increase in mutually issued transport permits by 2025.	Facilitate road freight transit through Bulgaria into the EU.
Logistics Cooperation Roadmap	Bulgaria, Uzbekistan	July 2025	Joint projects spanning logistics, energy, agriculture, and other sectors.	Establish a comprehensive bilateral economic cooperation framework.

Source: Kazinform (2025), UzDaily (2025)

Cooperation between Bulgaria and Uzbekistan has also shown a trend of accelerating and deepening in recent years. In December 2022, the first container train from Uzbekistan arrived at the Port of Burgas via the CASCA+ route, a significant practical breakthrough for connectivity between the two countries under the 'Middle Corridor' framework (Umarova, 2025). In September 2024, the two nations reached an agreement to increase the number of mutually issued road transport permits by 15-fold in 2025, which will greatly facilitate the entry of Uzbek goods into the EU market via Bulgaria. Furthermore, a comprehensive cooperation 'roadmap' covering logistics, energy, and agriculture is also being developed (UzDaily, 2025).

Bulgaria's strategic orientation reflects a practice of what Cooper (1997) terms 'niche diplomacy'. As a relatively small and economically weaker member of the EU, Bulgaria has not attempted to compete directly with major powers like Germany and France on a wide range of issues. Instead, it has leveraged its unique geographical position to concentrate its diplomatic and policy resources on the specific field of 'connectivity' (BNR, 2025). By focusing on a key strategic challenge for the EU's Eurasian transport network—namely, establishing a reliable transport route that bypasses Russia—Bulgaria is gradually positioning itself as an indispensable part of the EU's approach to Black Sea-Caspian affairs (Zipatolla, 2025). This strategy not only enhances Bulgaria's political weight within the EU but also allows it to accumulate valuable diplomatic capital and institutional influence.

An examination of the economic relationship between Bulgaria and Central Asian countries reveals an asymmetrical yet strategically complementary symbiotic model. Trade data shows that Kazakhstan's exports to Bulgaria far exceed Bulgarian exports to Kazakhstan. This indicates that Bulgaria's value to Kazakhstan lies not in the size of its

consumer market, but in its role as a secure, compliant transit gateway to the EU market. Conversely, Kazakhstan's value to Bulgaria is demonstrated by its close ties with East Asian countries, which provide a continuous and substantial flow of goods, thereby offering a commercial rationale for Bulgaria's large-scale investments in its port and rail infrastructure. Consequently, this relationship is not built on a perfectly balanced bilateral trade, but on the complementary exchange of strategic assets: Central Asian countries provide the 'flow' (goods, resources), while Bulgaria provides the 'entry point' (an institutional channel into the EU market). This partnership, based on shared strategic needs, is more stable than a simple trade relationship subject to commodity market fluctuations because it creates a long-term structural interdependence, thus mutually reinforcing the durability of their bilateral cooperation on both economic and political levels.

The empirical record thus points toward a pattern that invites theoretical interpretation. What Bulgaria and its Central Asian partners are constructing can be read through the lens of the Bridge State framework developed above.

Bulgaria's geographical and political position places it on a critical geopolitical fault line between the Euro-Atlantic community and the post-Soviet Eurasian space where Russia, China, and Turkey converge. The Middle Corridor is an economic artery along this fault line. As an EU member, Bulgaria fulfils the core bridge state criteria. Its democratic processes are institutionalized through the Copenhagen Criteria, providing a governance framework that enhances credibility as a partner for Central Asian states. Its security posture is non-offensive by design: NATO membership provides collective defence without requiring independent power projection, a posture that reduces tensions in the surrounding region. Its commitment to peacebuilding manifests not through military disengagement but through economic connectivity — building interdependencies that create shared stakes in stability.

Bulgaria's practices embody both functional models of the Bridge State theory. The minimalist function — preventing a new East-West divide — is fully realized: by providing a stable corridor free from Russian control, Bulgaria offers Central Asian countries a 'third option' besides Russia and China, preventing a new Iron Curtain across Eurasia (Eldem, 2022). The cooperation also shows potential toward the maximalist function — creating a Zone of Peaceful Co-operation. Agreements have expanded beyond transport to energy and digital sectors (Kazinform, 2025), and Bulgaria's president has positioned the Middle Corridor as a 'transport, energy, and digital corridor,' aligning with ZOPC theory's broader human security concept.

The case's uniqueness lies in its bridge state cluster structure. Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan bridge Central Asia with the Caucasus, while Bulgaria connects these bridge states to the EU. This networked structure enhances each nation's strategic autonomy: for Central Asian countries, the corridor provides a path to escape over-reliance on Russia (Valansi, 2025); for Bulgaria, its key node status grants EU strategic value surpassing its economic or military size. In this sense, the cluster performs a compensatory function: the aggregate stability of the networked corridor exceeds what any single member could achieve alone,

providing a buffer against geopolitical spillover risks that no individual state could absorb independently.

The case also offers a theoretical extension. Lopez-Reyes's 2001 theory centres on neutralism, yet Bulgaria today is embedded in the Western system — a NATO member providing military aid to Ukraine. Its bridge function manifests through economic and institutional openness rather than military neutrality. This amends the theory: a country can be integrated into one political-military bloc while still playing a crucial economic bridge role. The cooperation also functions as 'strategic insurance' for Central Asian states against the weaponization of geography by major powers (Çolakoğlu, 2023), evolving the Middle Corridor from a commercial project into a tool for sovereignty and security.

Challenges, competition and future development

Despite the significant progress in cooperation between Bulgaria and Central Asian countries within the Middle Corridor framework, its future development still faces complex uncertainties. Whether this model can maintain long-term sustainability depends critically on how the relevant parties address multiple challenges, such as mounting geopolitical risks, structural constraints, and the increasingly fierce competition among regional and external major powers.

Russia's long-term strategic intentions represent a major uncertainty for the Middle Corridor. On the one hand, Russia's military presence in Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and its new naval base in Abkhazia place the corridor's key infrastructure within its potential strike range, posing a direct military threat. If Russia achieves a decisive victory in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, it might devote more resources to disrupting or controlling this corridor that bypasses its territory. On the other hand, some argue that with the Northern Corridor obstructed, Russia itself needs new trade routes. Therefore, out of pragmatic considerations, Moscow might view the Middle Corridor as a supplementary north-south channel for maintaining economic and trade ties with Turkey, the Middle East, and South Asia, which could somewhat weaken its motivation to oppose it completely (Çolakoğlu, 2023). This duality of threat and potential pragmatism makes Russia a critical and unpredictable variable in the future development of the Middle Corridor.

Regional instability is another major challenge along the Middle Corridor, especially in the South Caucasus, a traditional geopolitical hotspot where overall stability remains fragile. Although the peace process between Azerbaijan and Armenia has made positive progress, laying the groundwork for the opening of the Zangezur Corridor, long-term peace in the region is far from guaranteed. Furthermore, domestic political turmoil in Georgia could also affect its reliability as a transit country, thereby posing a potential threat to the long-term predictability of the Middle Corridor (PRINCEPS, 2025).

Financing and infrastructure gaps are also a major obstacle. The long-term competitiveness of the Middle Corridor depends on securing continuous, large-scale investment to overcome its inherent structural flaws, such as the high time and cost burdens

of multimodal transport and the inconsistent standards of infrastructure along the route (PRINCEPS, 2025). While the €10 billion investment pledged by the EU is substantial, it may still be insufficient for the modernization of the entire corridor. The corridor is currently in a critical ‘window of opportunity’ and must rapidly enhance its efficiency and capacity before competitive pressure from the Northern Corridor potentially resumes.

At the European end of the Middle Corridor, Bulgaria’s ports face intense competition from the Port of Constanța in Romania. The outcome of this competition will directly impact the logistics landscape of the Black Sea region, particularly at its European end.

Table 3. Comparison of Port Sizes and TITR Relations for Burgas, Varna, and Constanța

Port	Country	TEU (2022)	Maximum Vessel Draft (m)	Key Modernization Projects	Relation With TITR
Burgas	Bulgaria	-	15.5 (Berth 28)	New deep-water Berth 28 (completion 2025), accommodating 4,500 TEU vessels.	Associate member of TITR; signed MoU with KTZ Express.
Varna	Bulgaria	-	13.5 (New Grain Terminal)	EIB-financed construction of new grain terminal; connects to Pan-European Corridor VIII.	Extension of Pan-European Corridor VIII, indirectly connecting to TITR.
Constanța	Romania	Approx. 1,000,000 (pre-transshipment of Ukrainian cargo)	>18	Ongoing expansion with enhanced integrated handling capacity and improved hinterland connectivity.	Traditional gateway to Central and Eastern Europe, serving as one of TITR’s established European nodes.

Source: Official website of 3 ports, TITR Association

As shown in the table above, the Port of Constanța has historical advantages in terms of scale, water depth, and hinterland connections, and has long been the primary maritime gateway for Central and Eastern Europe (Georgiev, 2025). However, since 2022, a large volume of Ukrainian grain exports has been forced to divert to the Port of Constanța, leading to severe congestion and a decline in operational efficiency (Nuno, 2024). This situation has, in turn, created a strategic opportunity for Bulgaria’s ports. Through a series of targeted investments, such as constructing Berth 28 capable of handling large container ships, and by actively establishing direct cooperation mechanisms at the institutional level with major cargo-source countries like Kazakhstan, the Port of Burgas is striving to position itself as a more efficient and reliable alternative. The core of this competition lies in whether Bulgaria can leverage its flexibility and policy focus to divert and secure key cargo sources in the long term from its larger and more established competitor.

The 'window of opportunity' for the Middle Corridor is real, but it is also limited. Whether it can transform from a current stopgap measure into a long-term, sustainable strategic corridor depends on whether substantial progress can be made swiftly in the coming years. The key to success lies on two levels. The first is hard infrastructure: the modernization of ports and railways must be accelerated, particularly by completing the 'missing link' of Pan-European Corridor VIII between Bulgaria and North Macedonia. Simultaneously, countries along the route need to vigorously promote the digitalization of customs and border management to shorten transit times and reduce transaction costs through technology. The second is soft infrastructure: the institutional cooperation framework must be consolidated and strengthened. Using the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) Association and the newly formed Bulgaria-Kazakhstan joint working group as platforms, efforts should be made to promote unified freight rate policies, simplified regulations, and standardized operational procedures to provide customers with a seamless, 'single-operator'-like service experience (Eldem, 2022).

The analysis above suggests several avenues for policy consideration. At the EU level, deepening institutional ties with the TITR Association could enhance the coherence of the 'Global Gateway' strategy in Eurasia. Fund allocation might prioritize cross-border projects that address critical bottlenecks, such as the Bulgaria-North Macedonia railway connection. A dedicated risk guarantee fund could help attract private capital to corridor infrastructure investments. For Bulgaria and the Central Asian states, transforming the existing joint working group into a permanent mechanism with operational capabilities would help ensure that agreements translate from paper commitments into concrete projects. The formation of a joint venture operating company, with participation from major logistics enterprises along the route, is one possible institutional arrangement that could enhance the corridor's operational efficiency and market competitiveness.

Conclusion

The analysis in this study indicates that in the context of the significant shifts in the global geopolitical landscape after 2022, the cooperation between Bulgaria and Central Asian countries on the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route has transcended the purely economic or logistical level. It has gradually evolved into an exemplary 21st-century model of strategic practice for small states. This model clearly demonstrates that amid rising geopolitical risks driven by major power competition, small states are not merely passive actors. Instead, by proactively building and participating in cross-regional cooperation networks, they can effectively enhance their strategic autonomy, economic resilience, and international influence.

The core findings of this study can be summarized as follows:

1. Strategic Seizure of Geoeconomic Opportunities: Bulgaria and the Central Asian countries astutely grasped the strategic opportunity arising from the restructuring of the Eurasian logistics landscape triggered by the Russia-Ukraine conflict. By

promoting the modernization and institutionalization of the Middle Corridor, they have transformed a previously marginal transport route into an economic corridor of global strategic significance, successfully converting a geopolitical crisis into geoeconomic benefits.

2. Formation of a Bridge State Cluster: This cooperation is not an isolated act by a single nation but rather involves a 'bridge state cluster' composed of small and medium-sized countries, including Bulgaria, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan. Through networked and institutionalized cooperation, they have jointly constructed a relatively stable trans-Eurasian channel, mutually empowering one another and thereby exhibiting greater capacity to resist and mediate external pressures and major power rivalries.
3. The Effectiveness of 'Niche Diplomacy': The case of Bulgaria proves that by focusing on a specific domain (such as connectivity) and leveraging their unique geographical and institutional advantages, small states can play an indispensable 'niche' role within multilateral frameworks like the EU, thereby gaining influence disproportionate to their size.

This case study provides empirical support and a theoretical extension for Ramon Lopez-Reyes's 'Bridge State' theory. The research suggests that against the backdrop of intensifying contemporary geopolitical competition, the core meaning of the 'bridge' function has shifted from military neutrality in the traditional sense to an openness and economic cooperation driven by geoeconomic strategy. This implies that it is possible for a country to be deeply integrated into a political-military alliance while still performing a cross-regional bridge function at the economic and institutional levels. This development represents an evolution of the 'Bridge State' theory in the intertwined environment of 21st-century multilateralism and globalization, suggesting that small states may possess more flexible and diverse strategic options in the complex international system than traditionally theorized — though the durability of these options remains contingent on geopolitical conditions.

The cooperative relationship established between Bulgaria and Central Asian countries around the Middle Corridor illustrates a strategic option available to small and medium-sized states in the contemporary international system. By actively participating in cross-regional economic corridor projects, these states can strengthen their economic security and sovereign independence while playing a notable role in the broader geopolitical landscape. This cooperation model, based on national economic development and transcending traditional military security, suggests one pathway — among several possible alternatives — through which small states in similar geopolitical environments might seek to enhance their influence. Whether this model proves durable will depend on the continued convergence of economic interests, the stability of the geopolitical environment, and the capacity of participating states to manage the inherent tensions between their alliance commitments and their bridging functions.

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