



THE MIDDLE CORRIDOR AND UZBEKISTAN'S INTEGRATION INTO THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

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Abstract: *Transport connectivity has become one of the main conditions for economic integration, especially for landlocked and doubly landlocked economies. In this context, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, widely known as the Middle Corridor, has gained strategic importance as an alternative multimodal route connecting China, Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus, Türkiye and Europe. For Uzbekistan, the relevance of this corridor is directly linked to the country's geographic position, export diversification policy, WTO accession process, and need to reduce dependence on a narrow set of traditional transit routes. This article examines the role of the Middle Corridor in strengthening Uzbekistan's integration into the global economy by using secondary data from the World Bank, OECD, EBRD, CAREC/ADB, WTO, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route Association, and the National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan. The findings show that the corridor is expanding rapidly but remains capacity-constrained. OECD data indicate that goods traffic along the Trans-Caspian corridor reached 4.5 million tons in 2024, while the World Bank estimates that coordinated investments and efficiency measures could triple freight volumes and halve travel time by 2030. Uzbekistan's foreign trade turnover reached USD 81.2 billion in 2025,*

confirming the growing need for reliable and diversified logistics channels. The study concludes that the Middle Corridor can support Uzbekistan's global integration only if infrastructure investments are combined with soft connectivity reforms, including digital customs, harmonized procedures, competitive logistics services, and stronger regional coordination.

***Key words:** Middle Corridor, Uzbekistan, Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor, trade facilitation, logistics, global integration, transport connectivity.*

Introduction

The transformation of global trade routes after the COVID-19 pandemic and the escalation of geopolitical risks has increased the importance of resilient and diversified transport corridors. For countries without direct access to seaports, transport corridors are not only logistical instruments but also strategic mechanisms of economic integration. They determine the speed, cost and reliability of trade, shape the geography of export markets, and influence the ability of domestic firms to participate in global value chains.

The Middle Corridor, or the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), has become one of the most discussed alternatives to the traditional Northern Corridor through Russia and to long maritime routes between Asia and Europe. According to the TITR Association, the route starts from Southeast Asia and China, passes through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan and Georgia, and continues toward Türkiye and European markets. The OECD also describes the corridor as a multimodal route involving several border crossings, the Caspian

maritime leg, and onward connections through the South Caucasus and Europe.

For Uzbekistan, the corridor is particularly important because the country is doubly landlocked. This means that access to global seaports depends not only on Uzbekistan's own transport infrastructure but also on the infrastructure, border procedures and political stability of transit countries. High logistics costs, long transit time and dependence on a limited number of routes reduce export competitiveness, especially for manufactured goods, textiles, fruits and vegetables, chemicals, and other products that are sensitive to time and reliability.

Uzbekistan's recent trade dynamics demonstrate why this issue is urgent. Preliminary official data show that the country's foreign trade turnover reached USD 81.2 billion in 2025, increasing by 20.7 percent compared with 2024. Exports amounted to USD 33.8 billion, imports reached USD 47.4 billion, and the negative trade balance was USD 13.5 billion. Trade relations expanded to 210 countries, with China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Türkiye and the Republic of Korea remaining among the main partners. These figures show both the scale of Uzbekistan's integration and the need to make that integration more diversified and logistically secure.

The development of the Middle Corridor can support Uzbekistan in three ways. First, it can provide an additional westward route to European and Mediterranean markets. Second, it can reduce vulnerability to disruptions on single transit routes. Third, it can encourage domestic transport, customs and logistics reforms that are necessary for WTO accession and deeper integration into global trade rules. However, the benefits are not automatic. The corridor remains

affected by bottlenecks in ports, ferries, rail capacity, rolling stock, border procedures, tariff coordination and digital data exchange.

The aim of this article is to assess how the Middle Corridor can contribute to Uzbekistan's integration into the global economy and what policy conditions are required for this potential to be realized. The article focuses on recent open-source data and examines both hard infrastructure and soft connectivity factors.

Methods

This study applies a qualitative and analytical research approach based on secondary data from open sources. The main sources include the World Bank report Middle Trade and Transport Corridor: Policies and Investments to Triple Freight Volumes and Halve Travel Time by 2030, the OECD 2025 report on the competitiveness of the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor in Central Asia, the European Commission and EBRD study on sustainable transport connections between Europe and Central Asia, CAREC/ADB corridor performance materials, the TITR Association, WTO accession updates, and official foreign trade statistics of Uzbekistan.

The research uses descriptive analysis to summarize the current scale and dynamics of the corridor, comparative analysis to compare the Middle Corridor with alternative routes and with Uzbekistan's trade structure, and policy analysis to identify the reforms needed to transform transport connectivity into economic integration. The core indicators used in the article are cargo volume, container traffic, projected corridor demand, border-crossing efficiency, GDP, trade turnover, export-import balance, partner-country structure, and trade facilitation reforms.

The analysis distinguishes between hard infrastructure and soft connectivity. Hard infrastructure includes railways, ports, terminals, ferries, rolling stock, logistics centers and road connections. Soft connectivity includes customs procedures, digital documentation, data exchange, tariff coordination, institutional cooperation, market liberalization and the quality of logistics services. This distinction is important because a corridor can have physical capacity but still perform poorly if procedures are slow, fragmented or unpredictable.

The study does not use primary survey data or econometric modeling. Its purpose is to provide a structured and evidence-based interpretation of the available indicators and to show their relevance for Uzbekistan's global economic integration.

Results

The results show that the Middle Corridor is moving from a secondary regional route toward a more visible Eurasian logistics corridor, but its current scale remains much smaller than the Northern Eurasian Corridor. OECD data indicate that goods traffic along the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor increased by 62 percent in 2024 and reached 4.5 million tons. Container traffic reached about 0.05 million TEU in 2024, compared with 0.02 million TEU in 2023. At the same time, the Northern Eurasian Corridor handled 177.7 million tons and 2.6 million TEU in 2023, illustrating the large capacity gap.

The World Bank's 2023 modeling confirms that the Middle Corridor can become more important by 2030 if investments and operational reforms are implemented. According to the World Bank, traffic through the Caspian Sea section of the corridor could exceed 11 million tons by 2030, including approximately 4 million tons of containerized demand.

The same report emphasizes that without the required improvements, projected demand would be 35 percent lower, which means that corridor potential depends heavily on practical implementation rather than geography alone.

**Table: Key Indicators of the Middle Corridor and
Uzbekistan's Trade Integration**

Indicator	Latest value / estimate	Interpretation
TCTC goods traffic	4.5 million tons in 2024; +62% compared with 2023	Rapid expansion, but still at an early stage of scale development
TCTC container traffic	0.05 million TEU in 2024; 0.02 million TEU in 2023	Containerization is growing, but volumes remain limited
Northern Eurasian Corridor	177.7 million tons and 2.6 million TEU in 2023	Shows the large capacity gap between the Middle and Northern corridors
World Bank 2030 scenario	Up to 11 million tons via the Caspian Sea; around 4 million tons of container demand	Potential depends on infrastructure investment and efficiency reforms
Uzbekistan foreign trade turnover	USD 81.2 billion in 2025; +20.7% compared with 2024	Growing trade creates stronger demand for reliable international routes
Uzbekistan exports and imports	Exports: USD 33.8 billion; imports: USD 47.4 billion in 2025	Trade deficit confirms the need to strengthen export competitiveness
Main trade partners	China 21.2%, Russia 16.0%, Kazakhstan 6.1%, Türkiye 3.7%, Republic of Korea 2.1% in 2025	Trade remains concentrated around major regional and Asian partners

Source: compiled by the author based on OECD (2025), World Bank (2023), and the National Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan (2026).

The table demonstrates that the Middle Corridor has a clear strategic role but not yet the full capacity to replace existing routes. Its main advantage is not absolute volume but diversification. For

Uzbekistan, this diversification is valuable because it reduces overdependence on a narrow set of corridors and creates additional access to European and Mediterranean markets. The corridor also fits Uzbekistan's broader economic reform agenda, including WTO accession, modernization of transport infrastructure, and the development of export-oriented industries.

Uzbekistan's domestic economic scale strengthens the relevance of the corridor. According to World Bank data, Uzbekistan's GDP reached USD 114.97 billion in 2024, GDP per capita reached USD 3,161.7, and annual GDP growth was 6.5 percent. A larger and faster-growing economy requires more diversified logistics channels, especially as industrial production, services exports, tourism, machinery imports, energy projects and agricultural exports expand.

The corridor's performance also depends on trade facilitation. CAREC corridor performance indicators show that border-crossing time and costs remain major determinants of logistics efficiency in the region. Although road border-crossing time decreased from 13.6 hours in 2021 to 9.9 hours in 2022, rail border-crossing time remained much higher, at 40.6 hours in 2022. This matters for Uzbekistan because its export competitiveness depends not only on the length of the route but also on the predictability of inspections, documents, customs clearance and intermodal transfers.

OECD analysis of Uzbekistan shows important progress in trade procedures. Uzbekistan was identified as the top trade reformer in Europe and Central Asia for the 2022-2024 period under the OECD Trade Facilitation Indicators, with an average score of 1.071 in 2024. The Single Window system, introduced in 2020, and the Uzbekistan Trade

Info platform, created in 2022, are important steps toward reducing administrative barriers. However, private-sector feedback cited by the OECD still points to technical glitches, unreliable customs data exchange and the involvement of too many agencies at border crossings as continuing bottlenecks.

Table: Determinants of Uzbekistan's Integration through the Middle Corridor

Factor	Current evidence	Impact on integration	Policy implication
Hard infrastructure	Need for rail, port, ferry, terminal and rolling stock upgrades	Determines physical capacity and reliability	Prioritize bottlenecks on Caspian and rail connections
Soft connectivity	EU/EBRD study identifies 7 coordinated soft-connectivity actions	Reduces delays and uncertainty	Digitalize documents, harmonize customs, improve tariff coordination
Trade facilitation	Uzbekistan's OECD TFI score reached 1.071 in 2024	Improves market access and lowers transaction costs	Continue WTO-related reforms and streamline border agencies
Regional coordination	The corridor crosses several countries and involves maritime transfers	Weak coordination increases time and cost	Use joint platforms for schedules, tariffs, data and standards
Export diversification	2025 exports reached USD 33.8 billion, but imports still exceeded exports	Diversification can reduce trade deficit pressure	Support higher-value exports that benefit from faster delivery
Private logistics market	OECD notes need for competitive logistics and market principles	Improves service quality and price competition	Attract private operators and reduce barriers to logistics investment

Source: compiled by the author based on OECD, World Bank, EBRD/EU and CAREC materials.

The second table shows that Uzbekistan's integration through the Middle Corridor is multidimensional. Physical infrastructure is necessary, but it is not sufficient. A train or truck can lose the corridor's time advantage if documents are duplicated, border agencies do not exchange data, ferry schedules are unpredictable, or tariffs are not coordinated. Therefore, the corridor should be understood as an economic system rather than only a transport line.

For Uzbekistan, the strongest expected effect of the Middle Corridor is export diversification. The route can improve access to European and South Caucasus markets for goods where time and reliability matter, including fruits and vegetables, textiles, processed foods, chemical products, non-ferrous metals and higher-value manufactured goods. It can also improve import logistics for machinery, equipment and intermediate goods needed for industrial modernization.

The results also show that Uzbekistan's WTO accession process is closely related to corridor development. WTO updates in 2026 emphasize that Uzbekistan is maintaining strong momentum toward accession and continuing to align trade legislation with international standards. These reforms can improve the reliability of the country's trade environment and make transport corridors more attractive for foreign investors and logistics operators.

Discussion

The development of the Middle Corridor changes the way Uzbekistan can position itself in the global economy. Historically, the main challenge for Uzbekistan has been the combination of distance from seaports and dependence on external transit routes. The Middle Corridor does not remove this geographic constraint completely, but it gives

Uzbekistan more choices. In international trade, additional route options are economically valuable because they reduce risk, increase bargaining power, and make logistics planning more flexible.

The corridor also has a regional integration effect. It connects Central Asia with the South Caucasus, Türkiye and Europe, while also linking Central Asian countries more closely with one another. For Uzbekistan, this matters because regional trade and transit cooperation can become a foundation for global integration. A country cannot efficiently participate in global value chains if its regional borders, railways and logistics services are slow or fragmented.

At the same time, the Middle Corridor should not be overestimated. OECD and World Bank data both show that the corridor remains much smaller than the Northern Eurasian Corridor and maritime routes. Its short-term role is therefore not to replace all other routes, but to complement them and provide a reliable alternative for selected goods and trade flows. This realistic interpretation is important for policy planning because it prevents unrealistic expectations and focuses attention on targeted improvements.

One of the main problems is the Caspian Sea crossing. Maritime segments create delays because cargo must be transferred between rail, ferry and port systems. Limited ferry capacity, port congestion, weather conditions and lack of synchronized schedules can reduce the corridor's speed advantage. For this reason, investment in port capacity, ferries, terminals and digital scheduling systems should be treated as a priority.

Another challenge is institutional fragmentation. The Middle Corridor crosses several jurisdictions, and each country has its own customs procedures, border agencies, tariff systems and technical

standards. If these systems are not harmonized, the corridor becomes less competitive. Therefore, Uzbekistan needs to participate actively in regional agreements that simplify procedures and increase transparency. This includes electronic documentation, mutual recognition of data, common transit procedures, and predictable tariff policies.

Digitalization is central to this process. Electronic customs declarations, eTIR, e-CMR, digital railway documents, cargo tracking platforms and data exchange between agencies can reduce transaction costs and improve reliability. Uzbekistan has already made progress through the Single Window system and trade information platforms, but these systems must be connected more effectively with regional partners. Digitalization should not only exist inside the country; it must work across borders.

The corridor also creates opportunities for private-sector development. Logistics centers, dry ports, warehousing, freight forwarding, cold-chain logistics and multimodal terminals can attract investment and create jobs. For Uzbekistan, this is especially relevant because the country is trying to move from raw-material exports toward more diversified and higher-value production. Better logistics can help firms export not only commodities but also processed and manufactured goods.

From a macroeconomic perspective, the Middle Corridor can support growth by reducing trade costs and increasing market access. However, the impact will depend on how domestic firms use the route. If Uzbekistan only becomes a transit territory, the benefits will be limited. If the country combines transit development with industrial zones,

export promotion, logistics services and value-added production, the corridor can become a tool of structural transformation.

Policy Recommendations

First, Uzbekistan should prioritize corridor-linked infrastructure that directly reduces bottlenecks. This includes rail connections to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, multimodal logistics terminals, container facilities, cold-chain infrastructure, and better road links to border crossing points. Infrastructure planning should be based on measurable indicators such as average transit time, border waiting time, cargo handling time and cost per container.

Second, Uzbekistan should deepen customs digitalization and cross-border data exchange. The existing Single Window system should be integrated with regional platforms wherever possible. The goal should be to reduce duplication between paper and electronic procedures and to allow cargo information to move before the physical cargo reaches the border.

Third, the country should strengthen coordination with Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Türkiye and Turkmenistan on tariffs, schedules, port operations and technical standards. The corridor will be competitive only if it operates as a coordinated logistics chain rather than a sequence of disconnected national segments.

Fourth, Uzbekistan should link corridor development with export policy. Support should be directed to sectors that can benefit most from faster and more reliable delivery, including textiles, processed food, fruit and vegetables, chemicals, electrical goods, machinery components and non-ferrous metals. Exporters need information about route costs, documentation requirements and delivery schedules.

Fifth, private-sector participation in logistics should be expanded. Competition among freight forwarders, warehouse operators and multimodal logistics companies can improve service quality and lower costs. Public-private partnerships can be useful, but they should be transparent and based on clear performance obligations.

Finally, Uzbekistan should treat WTO accession and corridor development as complementary reforms. WTO-aligned customs, sanitary, phytosanitary and trade defense rules can make Uzbekistan's trade regime more predictable. Predictability is essential for international shippers, exporters and investors choosing whether to use Uzbekistan-linked routes.

Conclusion

The Middle Corridor represents a strategic opportunity for Uzbekistan's integration into the global economy. It provides an alternative westward route, increases trade-route diversification, and supports the country's broader reform agenda. Recent data show that the corridor is growing quickly: goods traffic reached 4.5 million tons in 2024, and the World Bank estimates that coordinated investments and efficiency reforms could raise traffic through the Caspian section to 11 million tons by 2030.

For Uzbekistan, the corridor's importance is reinforced by the rapid growth of foreign trade. In 2025, foreign trade turnover reached USD 81.2 billion, with exports of USD 33.8 billion and imports of USD 47.4 billion. These figures show that Uzbekistan is increasingly connected to the world economy, but they also highlight the need to reduce logistics costs, improve export competitiveness and diversify routes.

The key conclusion is that the Middle Corridor should be understood not only as infrastructure but as a complete trade facilitation system. Railways, ports and terminals matter, but customs digitalization, institutional coordination, tariff transparency and private logistics services are equally important. Without soft connectivity, physical investments will not deliver full economic benefits.

Uzbekistan can benefit from the Middle Corridor by combining transport investments with WTO-related reforms, export diversification, regional cooperation and digital trade facilitation. If these measures are implemented consistently, the corridor can help Uzbekistan move from geographic limitation toward deeper and more resilient participation in global trade and value chains.

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