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ANALYSIS

Çisem GENÇOĞLU

THE ROLE OF THE ORGANIZATION OF TURKIC STATES WITHIN THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

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THE ROLE OF THE ORGANIZATION OF TURKIC STATES (OTS) WITHIN THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI): OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES, AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

China views the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project as a critical strategy to ensure the security of its Asian borders. Therefore, the BRI project represents a strategic plan aimed at enhancing China's economic integration worldwide. The main objective of this plan is to develop two new trade routes. With the establishment of these routes, China aims to play a more effective role in international trade and increase its economic power on a global scale. However, the Initiative is not only about infrastructure projects. It also aims to enhance China's economic and political power, create an expanded and interdependent market, and provide the necessary conditions for a high-tech economy. Within this framework, the BRI initiative aims to strengthen China's influence in global trade and achieve a stronger position in the international economic arena by increasing its impact on global trade and creating new trade routes.¹

The Belt and Road Initiative, primarily summarized as reviving the ancient Silk Road through railway freight transport from China to Europe, has many different dimensions. This railway project, which affects the economic development, geopolitical position, and political situation of the Central Asian Turkic States, nearly halves the average 40-day travel time compared to maritime transport. When compared to air transport, it can reduce costs by up to 80%. This assessment indicates that both the transportation distance and cost are significantly advantageous.²

The Silk Road represents the Economic 'Belt'. This project, initially proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping during his visit to Kazakhstan in 2013, views Central Asia as the most critical region for the "Belt" component.³

This study aims to examine the roles and participation of member countries of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) in the projects carried out under the BRI. The economic, political, and social impacts on OTS member countries will be analyzed. Regional security issues and sovereignty concerns will be addressed.

The Role and Impact of the Member Countries of the OTS in BRI Projects: Economic Development and Investment Opportunities

China has taken various steps towards developing infrastructure investments with its identified 6 corridors and 65 countries. The primary objective of these steps is to develop various projects to shorten transportation times and reduce costs. One of these corridors is the China-Central/West Asia Economic Corridor (CCWAEC), which includes member

¹ "What is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)?" (Online: March 8, 2024).

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/09/what-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-bri>

² "Yüzyılın Konsepti: Bir Kuşak Bir Yol". (Online: March 8, 2024).

<https://www.21yyte.org/tr/merkezler/yuzyilin-konsepti-bir-kusak-bir-yol>

³ "What is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)?"

countries of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS).

The CCWAEC starts from China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region and covers five Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan), as well as seventeen countries in Western Asia, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. The Central Asian Turkic States hold a strategic position. Indeed, within the scope of the BRI Initiative, transportation and energy corridors will pass through these Turkic States in the region. In this regard, it is observed that the OTS and its members are significant from a geostrategic and geopolitical perspective. It is believed that the collaborations and partnerships the OTS will develop internationally will lead to significant changes.⁴

Within the project, the Kamchik Pass, which is the longest railway pass in Central Asia, has been constructed in Uzbekistan. This railway will contribute to the development of transportation infrastructure in Central Asia. Besides strengthening trade and connectivity among the regional countries, bringing together the natural resources and production potential of Central Asia with a broader market holds significant economic importance. In this context, railway transportation, being faster, more efficient, and more reliable, will support economic growth in the region. It is anticipated that the increasing international trade will enhance

cooperation and development among the countries in the region.

It is believed that the route reaching Europe through Turkey, referred to as the China-Central Asia-Iran and/or Middle Corridor within the BRI project, will strengthen regional security by connecting strategic points such as energy sources and production areas. Enhancing cooperation in transportation through the Middle Corridor, which serves as a strategic route connecting Europe, Africa, and the Black Sea region to Central Asia, has become a priority for the Organization of Turkic States. It has been expressed at the Organization of Turkic States Multimodal Transportation and Logistics Forum that Europe's perspective on Central Asia has changed following the Middle Corridor project.⁵

Organization of Turkic States Secretary General Ambassador Kubanychbek Omuraliev has stated that the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway corridor and the Zangezur Corridor will create further opportunities for the Turkic States to become a transit hub between Europe and Asia.⁶ As emphasized by Omuraliev, it is expected that the corridors developed under the BRI will create more opportunities for the Turkic States.

The Middle Corridor project, connecting China to Europe, hosts an annual trade volume of 600 billion dollars. Offering a faster and more economical route compared to the Northern Corridor, the Middle Corridor provides a 15-day

⁴ "Orta Asya'da Dengeler Değişirken Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi ve Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı". (Online: March 8, 2024). <https://briqjournal.com/orta-asyada-dengeler-degisirken-kusak-ve-yol-girisimi-ve-turk-devletleri-teskilati>

⁵ "ORTA KORİDOR İÇİN TÜRK DEVLETLERİNDEN ORTAK İRADE". (Online: March 14, 2024). <https://www.und.org.tr/medya-detay/undden-haberler/orta-koridor-icin-turk-devletlerinden-ortak-irade>

⁶ "Orta Koridor'un Potansiyeli Giderek Yükseliyor"

advantage in deliveries due to being 2,000 kilometers shorter. Additionally, concerns over the Russia-Ukraine conflict and security issues in the Suez Canal have made the Middle Corridor more attractive, further enhancing Turkey's strategic importance in global trade.

The importance of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) and the Middle Corridor is further strengthened by the activation of the digitalization process in the economy, trade, transportation, and logistics. Initiatives such as common digital customs applications, data sharing, security networks, and communication networks among OTS countries enhance the attractiveness of the Middle Corridor. Collaboration efforts in high-value-added areas such as joint industrial zones, technoparks, logistics centers, and new research centers in agricultural production to be implemented by OTS countries emerge as significant steps towards deepening existing cooperation. The potential of the vast geographical area represented by the OTS in agriculture, industry, and services sectors transforms the Middle Corridor into a reliable trade network for Europe, Africa, and Asia. This contributes to increasing the export capacity of the OTS region and creates opportunities for more solid integration into the global economic system.⁷

In Turkmenistan, as an observer member of the OTS, the International Turkmenbashi Port, the largest port on the Caspian Sea, became operational in 2018.⁸ This port serves as a significant transit point for the

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project. With the port's operation, the transportation time between the Far East and the European Continent has decreased from 45 days to 15 days.⁹

Additionally, this port offers storage services for goods without paying registration and customs duties for three years. This provides an important advantage for companies looking to increase their trade volume. This project could contribute to enhancing Turkmenistan's commercial potential by developing trade and logistics activities, and it could be considered a positive step towards promoting regional development.

Financial and Political Disadvantages in OTS Member Countries

The Belt and Road Initiative, particularly through railway and highway projects, enables Chinese firms to forge stronger ties with neighboring countries. This translates into increased competition for some companies in the European Union. Indeed, Chinese companies producing higher value-added products enhance competition in the manufacturing industry in Europe. However, criticism has arisen due to the EU's inability to take an active role in the initiative and China's desire to retain regulatory powers, leading to criticism. The EU's generally passive role has diminished its willingness to support the Initiative. It is claimed that the Belt and Road Project primarily serves geopolitical objectives, allowing China to intervene in internal affairs by influencing regional

⁷ Kerem Alkin. "Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı ve Orta Koridorun Gücü" (Online: March 14,2024). <https://istanbulticaretgazetesi.com/tr/turk-devletleri-teskilati-ve-orta-koridorun-gucu>

⁸ "Uluslararası Türkmenbaşı Liman Projesi". (Online: March 8,2024).

<https://www.gapinsaat.com/tr/altyapi/uluslararası-turkmenbasi-liman-projesi.html>

⁸ Kopuk, p.1360

⁹ Kopuk, p.1360

balances. The EU's concern is that the Initiative could affect EU-US relations, further fragment existing order, and lead to unforeseen economic, political, and military consequences. Additionally, China's growing international trade through investments is seen as a challenge to security policy.¹⁰

As an alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative, the European Union (EU) has launched a project called the "Global Gateway." The aim of the Global Gateway Project is to counter China's transportation and supply chain dominance in global trade and to establish the EU as a global transportation hub.¹¹ However, the Belt and Road Initiative's infrastructure projects already underway in Asia and Africa, along with China's continued investments, pose challenges to the success of the Global Gateway.¹²

China imports oil and natural gas from Kazakhstan, as well as natural gas from Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Countries whose external debt reaches 35-40% of GDP are considered to be at risk of losing their independence. For example, Kyrgyzstan's known debt to China is around \$1.711 billion, and it is expected to increase from 62% to 71% of GDP in the near future. Similarly, Kazakhstan's debt to China amounts to \$13.6 billion or 8.8% of its total external debt. Tajikistan's debt to

China is around \$1.8 billion. These figures indicate that the financial situations of these countries are weak, and while China's profits increase, the losses of other countries are also increasing.¹³

Criticism exists regarding the Belt and Road project in Central Asia, as it has not generated widespread satisfaction among the public. Factors such as the presence of Chinese workers and companies have led to dissatisfaction and protests, with suggestions that this situation affects the internal security policies of states. Another criticism concerns the loans provided to Central Asian states. China's demands in exchange for loans have led to issues such as debt diplomacy.¹⁴ Therefore, it has been observed that the Belt and Road Initiative project also has political and economic disadvantages.

The increasing economic influence of China, along with the free movement of goods, capital, and labor, has led to criticisms that it has the potential to disrupt the demographic balance of the Turkic Republics.¹⁵

¹⁰ "Yüzyılın Konsepti: Bir Kuşak Bir Yol". (Online: March 8,2024).

<https://www.21vyte.org/tr/merkezler/yuzyilin-konsepti-bir-kusak-bir-yol>

¹¹ "Çin'in "Kuşak-Yol"una karşı AB'nin 300 milyar euroluk "Küresel Geçit"i topluyor". (Online: March 8,2024).

<https://www.dunya.com/dunya/cinin-kusak-yoluna-karsi-abnin-300-milyar-euroluk-kuresel-geciti-toplaniyor-haberi-708364>

¹² "Kuşak-Yol Projesi'ne Karşı "Küresel Geçit": Bir Alternatif Olur Mu?". (Online: March 8,2024).

<https://www.ankasam.org/kusak-yol-projesine-karsi-kuresel-gecit-bir-alternatif-olur-mu/>

¹³ "Çin Kuşak Yol Projesi ve Orta Asya'daki Güvenlik Tehditleri" (Online: March 13,2024).

<https://www.tuicakademi.org/cin-kusak-yol-projesi-ve-orta-asyadaki-guvenlik-tehditleri/>

¹⁴ "Çin Kuşak Yol Projesi ve Orta Asya'daki Güvenlik Tehditleri"

¹⁵ Ersan Bocutoğlu. "Çin'in "Bir Kuşak-Bir Yol" Projesinin Ekonomik ve Jeopolitik Sonuçları Üzerine Düşünceler". INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON EURASIAN ECONOMIES, 201,7 p.268

Balancing Policy: The Role of the Organization of Turkic States in the Success of the Middle Corridor

The Organization of Turkic States comprises members including Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkey, with Turkmenistan, Hungary, and the recently admitted Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus participating as observer states. It is considered a highly significant structure in political, economic, and military dimensions. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project, stretching from China to the heart of Europe, includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan along the land route in Asia. Therefore, the full roster of the Organization of Turkic States is right at the center of the project in terms of land routes.¹⁶ On November 11, 2022, the 9th Summit of the Organization of Turkic States was held in Samarkand, declared as the Capital of Turkish World Civilization, under the theme "A New Era for Turkish Civilization: Towards Common Development and Prosperity."¹⁷

President Tokayev of Kazakhstan emphasized in his speech on economic cooperation that their country provides direct connections between the west and east, north and south. He particularly highlighted that projects like the Middle Corridor, which passes through three brotherly countries, solidify these connections.¹⁸ Tokayev emphasized the

need to expand cooperation in transportation and transit areas and stressed the importance of joint efforts in logistics. With these statements, he highlighted the significance of the Belt and Road Initiative project for regional development and economic growth.

According to Diriöz, in order for the successful realization of the Middle Corridor, a significant component of China's Belt and Road Initiative, balance must be maintained with major actors such as Russia, Iran, and China. Additionally, solidarity among these actors is necessary to prevent them from perceiving the Middle Corridor as a threat. Otherwise, there is a risk that other regional actors may view its formation as a threat and exhibit tendencies to delay projects. Collaboration and solidarity should not entail hostility towards other actors and should be conducted in a balanced manner. In this context, relations with the European Union (EU), which has strict political stances towards Russia and Iran, should be rationally managed in a balanced manner.¹⁹ TDT, by balancing with these major actors, can ensure the sustainability and success of the Middle Corridor. The organization plays an important role in the development of member states, ensuring regional prosperity, and increasing the influence of TDT member states in the international arena.

¹⁶ "Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı'nın "Bir Kuşak Bir Yol" Projesi açısından önemi." (Online: March 16,2024). <https://www.gzt.com/z-raporu/turk-devletleri-teskilatinin-bir-kusak-bir-yol-projesi-acisindan-onemi-3723713>

¹⁷ "Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı Dokuzuncu Zirvesi Semerkant'ta gerçekleştirildi." (Online: March 16,2024). https://turkicstates.org/tr/haberler/turk-devletleri-teskilati-dokuzuncu-zirvesi-semerkantta-gerceklestirildi_2678

¹⁸ "Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı'nın "Bir Kuşak Bir Yol" Projesi açısından önemi."

¹⁹ Ali Oğuz Diriöz. "Yeni Olgular ve Güvenlik Yönetişimi Bakımından Kuşak ve Yol Rekabet Güvenliği: Yeni İpek Yolu için Çin'in Kuşak ve Yol projesine alternatif/tamamlayıcı rotanın önemi". (Online: March 16,2024) https://tasam.org/Files/Icerik/File/Ali_O%C4%9Fuz_Dirioz_TASAM_TEBLIG_TAM_METIN_pdf_cd4a289d-6c28-41fc-b09f-d675952fb830.pdf

The results declaration of the 10th Summit of the Organization of Turkic States, held on November 3, 2023, emphasized the importance of developing opportunities in the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars and China-Kyrgyzstan-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Afghanistan-Pakistan (Peshawar) railways in the Middle Corridor. The summit's declaration underscored the necessity of establishing seamless transportation mechanisms at customs and border points to effectively utilize these railway lines.²⁰ The establishment of these mechanisms will accelerate trade and logistics, thereby enhancing the competitiveness of the Middle Corridor.

On November 6, 2023, the TDT delegation participated in the event titled "Realizing the Potential of the Middle Corridor: Initial Findings and Recommendations," held in Istanbul. Dr. Mirvokhid Azimov, Deputy Secretary-General of TDT, emphasized the vital role played by the Middle Corridor as a transportation network connecting Europe and Asia, underscoring its immense potential for economic growth and regional cooperation. In this context, he expressed his belief that the implementation of the Action Plan (Roadmap) for the Implementation of the 2023-2027 TDT Transportation Connectivity Program, adopted at the Astana Summit, would significantly increase the transit potential of the Corridor and make Caspian crossings smoother. Furthermore, he noted that the findings and recommendations of the

OECD closely aligned with the goals of TDT and would serve as a valuable guide for the ongoing development of the Middle Corridor, advancing economic growth and strengthening regional connections.²¹

Conclusion

The role of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) member countries in large-scale projects such as the China-Central/West Asia Economic Corridor (CCWAEC) is of great importance in terms of regional development and cooperation. These corridors are crucial due to the strategic position of the Turkic States. Extensive transportation and energy corridors like CCWAEC, combined with the Middle Corridor project, have the potential to strengthen regional security. Collaborations and partnerships that OTS will develop in this context can shape changes in the region and have significant impacts. Especially, OTS's balanced policies and cooperation among member countries play a critical role in the successful implementation of the BKBY Project and ensuring the sustainability of the Middle Corridor.

However, along with the opportunities brought by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), there are also challenges. While the BRI facilitates strong connections between China and neighboring countries, it increases competition in Europe. However, the European Union faces various criticisms for its inability to take an active

²⁰ "Astana'da Yapılan Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı 10. Zirvesinin Sonuçları Nelerdir?" (Online: March 17,2024).<https://strasam.org/ua-iliskiler/uluslararası-orgutler/astanada-yapılan-türk-devletleri-teskilati-10-zirvesinin-sonuclari-nelerdir-2553>

²¹ "TDT Heyeti "Orta Koridorun Potansiyelinin Gerçekleştirilmesi" başlıklı OECD etkinliğine katıldı" (Online: March 17,2024).<https://www.turkicstates.org/tr/haberler/tdt-heyeti-orta-koridorun-potansiyelinin-gerceklestirilmesi-baslikli-oecd-etkinligine-katildi-3117>

role and China's desire to maintain rule-making powers. In this context, initiatives such as the Global Gateway Project launched by the EU aim to curb China's global trade power but are challenged by the impact of the Belt and Road Initiative. The project has caused general dissatisfaction among the public in Central Asia, and China's lending policies have raised criticism.

OTS's balanced policies and cooperation among member countries play a critical role in the successful implementation of the BKBY Project and ensuring the sustainability of the Middle Corridor. However, economic, political, and social challenges in the region must be considered, and solution-oriented approaches adopted. OTS should promote cooperation and development among member countries to increase regional prosperity and better represent themselves internationally.

OTS's determination to develop opportunities in the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars and China-Kyrgyzstan-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Afghanistan-Pakistan (Peshawar) railways in the Middle Corridor is considered a significant step towards regional integration and economic cooperation. OTS's support for such infrastructure projects will facilitate cross-border trade and promote regional economic growth.

Furthermore, the participation of the OTS delegation in the event titled "Realizing the Potential of the Middle Corridor: Initial Findings and Recommendations" underscores the importance of regional cooperation and infrastructure projects. As emphasized by OTS Deputy Secretary-General Azimov, the Middle Corridor's critical role in regional development and

cooperation as a vital transportation network connecting Europe and Asia has been communicated to the global public.

With the implementation of the Action Plan for the Implementation of the OTS Transport Connection Program (Roadmap) adopted at the Astana Summit for 2023-2027, the belief in the increase of the transit potential of the Middle Corridor supports the economic and commercial integration of the region. These efforts are expected to revitalize trade and the economy in the region, contributing to more effective representation of the Turkic States internationally and increasing prosperity.

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