

Security on Land and at Sea: Ten Rules for Operating Transport Corridors

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Trade corridors, as the main routes for transporting goods and services between countries, regions, and even continents, play a crucial role in international economic interaction. The recent geopolitical developments and crises have shattered some global and regional trade routes, thereby highlighting the urgent need to replace the “war of corridors” with “corridors of diplomacy” and make transport corridors a means of enhancing regional security and stability based on connectivity.

The Middle East, one of the most sensitive and strategic parts of the world, is among the regions that have faced a series of severe crises in recent years. In fact, facilitating the transit of goods, investing in transport infrastructure, creating a network of multimodal trade corridors, and improving trade relations between countries in this region

will not only bring benefits to their economies but will also reduce contention.

To maintain connectivity and ensure sustainable security in the Middle East, **ten rules for connectivity** should be introduced and observed by all nations operating transport corridors.

Centrality of geopolitics. The use of transport corridors should be based on due account of the geography, economic needs, and geo-economic aspirations of related nations. For instance, Iran, with its unique geopolitical and pivotal geostrategic position in the Middle East and rich experience in trade, has a great potential for facilitating transportation links between different sub-regions. Located at the intersection of North-South and East-West trade corridors, it can connect the Middle East, Central Asia, Transcaucasia, and South Asia, and serve as a bridge between East-West and North-South. Iran shares land and sea borders with 15 countries, including Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Iraq, Turkey, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, as well as six Arab countries in the southern part of the Persian Gulf.

Counterproductive effect of weaponization. The instrumentalization of the transport corridors for marginalizing some countries or putting pressure on them is counterproductive. Any attempts to polarize the region or eliminate the regional consensus on the corridors would heavily reduce their effectiveness in the medium term and hamper security and stability in the long run. For instance, the IMEC transit route (the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor running from India to Europe through the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel, and Greece) should not exclude countries such as Iran and Turkey. These countries should be given access to this corridor and an opportunity to benefit from the advantages of interdependence, which will strengthen regional stability.

Inclusivity. The corridors should be inclusive in a way that all interested nations could play their part in maintaining connectivity. An exclusive-inclusive approach is ineffectual. For instance, exclusion of Iran and Russia from regional equations of the Middle Corridor would

deprive them of foreign exchange earnings from transit and make them look for bypass routes. In this context, the Zangezur Corridor as part of the Middle Corridor would hinder free flow of goods between Iran and Armenia. Creation of new passages by excluding historical corridors would reduce the neighbors' geopolitical advantages, negatively affect their position in the global value chains, and prompt their hostile reaction to the impaired exchange of goods.

Avoiding politicization. The politicization of connectivity would lead to a zero-sum game. From this perspective, attempts of some countries to change internationally recognized borders are pointless. A depoliticized approach would lead to collaboration instead of animosity and confrontation and activate economic cooperation with no or little political involvement of states.

Inter-regionalism. Connectivity requires interconnectedness of different regions. An extended neighborhood policy would enhance inter-regional links and help create a strong economic and trade network. In 2002, India, Russia, and Iran initiated the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) as a multimode transport project to enhance trade cooperation between different regions. The INSTC is 7,200 km long and links the Indian Ocean to Russia and Europe through the Persian Gulf, Caspian Sea, and Central Asia. It could potentially be extended to the Baltic, Nordic, and Arctic regions. In 2016, Iran proposed a complementary regional initiative to develop the Persian Gulf–Black Sea International Transport and Transit Corridor (ITC), which will also include Armenia, the Republic of Azerbaijan, Georgia (the ports of Poti and Batumi on the Black Sea), Bulgaria, and Greece. This multimode corridor will begin in Iran at Bandar Abbas (Chahbahar & Mukran) and stretch to Armenia or Azerbaijan, connecting four key basins: the Persian Gulf, the Oman Sea, the Caspian Sea, and the Black Sea.

Cost and benefit analysis. Boosting region-wide trade and transportation through the reinforcement of transport corridors requires the shortening of transit routes and a reduction of transport costs. For example, transportation of goods by the INSTC corridor saves 20 days,

and the cost of transit by sea from India to Europe is 40% lower than that by the Middle Corridor. So, using the latter would increase the costs and time required for cargo transportation.

A focus on similarities rather than differences. The diversity of countries and their different visions and policies should not hinder connectivity. Managing the differences would require redefining the nations' interests and using commonly shared rather than diverging approaches.

Maximizing creativity and flexibility of options. In the era of complexity, potential crises will make nations look for new approaches: identifying priorities, exploring new opportunities, assessing route accessibility and achievability of goals, developing flagship projects, and activating official and informal channels of cooperation. Therefore, maintaining openness on all initiatives and different options would facilitate and reinforce connectivity in the region.

Interrelatedness of events. As events happening in different regions tend to be interconnected due to the butterfly effect, transport corridors should not be regarded separately. For example, the corridors passing through the Middle East, Eurasia, and Transcaucasia have witnessed extensive negative changes in recent years, following the war in Ukraine, the tensions in Transcaucasia and the Black Sea, and especially the geopolitical tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Furthermore, the perturbations in the maritime corridor in the Red Sea must be seen through the lens of Yemen Houthis' reaction to Israeli aggression and occupation of Gaza in Palestine.

Bi-multilateralism. Both bilateralism and multilateralism are pillars of connectivity. The complementarity of bilateralism and multilateralism is a key factor in ensuring the stability of transport corridors. The spectrum of bilateralism-multilateralism includes trilateralism, plurilateralism, and minilateralism. For example, Iran-Russia relations complement BRICS, the SCO, and the EEU (Eurasian Economic Union) as multilateral bodies. From this perspective, many initiatives are complementary: e.g., Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul (ITI) corridor is part

of the ECO corridor; the Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran Railway corridor (KTI) is part of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) as well as of the Persian Gulf-Black Sea International Transport and Transit Corridor, the East-West Transport Corridor (i.e., Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA)), and also of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

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Several major transportation projects can significantly reshape the economic map of the world. In this regard, the three C's (confidence-building measures, cooperation, and complementarity) are the key factors in attaining sustainable security for the transport corridors' operation in the Middle East. Trust-building measures would contribute to positive engagement of all regional actors in developing new initiatives and building the necessary infrastructure. Collaboration and coordination of efforts in widening the transport network based on the above ten rules would benefit the nations' economic development despite their political differences. The complementarity of corridors would enhance regional connectivity and contribute to coherent and flexible economic diplomacy. All regional players, external powers, and international institutions should have a role in and responsibility for the transport corridors' secure operation.