

The International North–South Transport Corridor in Russian National Security Optics

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Abstract

This article contends that, in the context of growing, multifaceted, and long-term great-power competition, Russian national security depends upon developing a Eurasian transport network through a cohesive ‘whole-of-government’ approach. Such a network includes robust domestic infrastructure as well as a diversified and resilient network of international transport corridors, foremost the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) leading to the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and Iran. Investment in transport projects will enhance Russia’s economic and military security, and foster the socioeconomic development of

Russia's neighbors, yielding a strategically favorable environment for all Eurasia.

Keywords: international transport corridors (ITCs), International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), South Caucasus, Iran, Central Asia, great-power competition, national security, Eurasian security, whole-of-government approach.

As geopolitical rivalry intensifies, Russia's foremost challenge lies in effectively allocating its limited resources. Long-term transportation projects, particularly those spanning international borders, might be deprioritized in favor of the defense industry, the Special Military Operation (SMO), and counterbalancing Europe's military expansion. There are also growing concerns about the vulnerability of transport infrastructure and the reliability of foreign partners. Nonetheless, the paramount strategic significance of the transportation system must be recognized. Material, human, and managerial investments in international transportation projects support economic growth and national security.

THE TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM AS A CONDITION OF NATIONAL SECURITY

In Russia, the concept of 'national security' is understood more broadly than in the U.S. While U.S. law defines national security primarily as a combination of national defense and foreign relations (Legal Information Institute, n.d.), the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation (NSS-2021) explicitly recognizes the inseparable link and mutual dependence between national security and socio-economic development (National Strategy, 2021). Fundamentally, 'national security' is conceived as the protection of national interests from both external and internal threats.

And transportation and logistics are some of the most important things for national security and socioeconomic development, as

recognized in numerous Russian strategic plans, including the NSS-2021, the Transport Strategy (2021), the Military Doctrine (2014), and the Foreign Policy Concept (2023). For instance, NSS-2021 emphasizes that robust transport infrastructure and national connectivity are fundamental prerequisites for ensuring economic security. This requires creating centers of the economic growth, diversifying international cooperation, establishing alternative export and import routes, and mitigating the harm of Western sanctions.

Transport has always played a primary role in the mobilization, supply, and deployment of military forces. Russia increasingly focuses on operational mobility, force redistribution during crises, and strategic maneuvering. The concealment of military logistics, within the broader national network, has also become pertinent given the proxy conflict with NATO.

Even after the SMO, Russia's military expenditure is unlikely to fall below 4% of GDP. There are more diverse security threats upon Russia's borders than were on the Soviet Union's, and Russia faces them with significantly diminished strategic depth. Challenges must be met proactively and, if possible, beyond Russia's borders. For instance, the CSTO's timely intervention in Kazakhstan in January 2022 greatly helped to resolve the crisis, saving Russia, Kazakhstan, and the region as a whole from potential serious problems.

Enhanced mobility is crucial for maintaining robust defense capabilities and ensuring swift responses to crises, particularly within Russia's near abroad. The SMO and Russia's conflict with the West highlight the imperative of safeguarding Russia's security along its western borders. In early 2024, the Russian military's geographic organization was accordingly reformed (Kremlin, 2024b). NATO's expansion and the EU's transformation into an assertive military-political entity (Lavrov, 2025) pose significant security threats, including in the Baltic, Black, and Barents Seas. The possibility of nuclear escalation with NATO remains the greatest threat to Russia, given the catastrophic scale of possible damage.

There are also security challenges to the south: a persistent threat of destabilization in the North Caucasus, complex problems in Central Asia (Bordachev and Tebin, 2025), uneasy relations with Azerbaijan (Markedonov, 2025), strained ties with Armenia, and escalating tensions in the Middle East involving Iran, Israel, and the U.S.

Russia's current transport infrastructure heavily relies on a limited number of strategic arteries connecting its western, eastern, and northern regions. The heightened risk of conflict with NATO necessitates the development of alternative, non-European transport corridors, such as the Northern Sea Route and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). Even a limited escalation along the border with NATO could severely, if temporarily, reduce cargo traffic in the Baltic and Black Seas. Notably, ports in the Baltic and Azov-Black Sea basins handle approximately 62% of Russia's total seaport throughput, whereas the Caspian basin ports account for only about 1% (Morport, 2025). This is an obvious vulnerability.

The development of international transport corridors (ITCs) plays a crucial role in strengthening and expanding interstate relations, fostering a multipolar world order, and supporting the socioeconomic growth of states aligned with Russia. Active involvement of government agencies, apart from private enterprises, in international transport initiatives improves the understanding of partner countries' realities and assessment of their situations. In Eurasia, transport projects help establish sustainable trade, economic cooperation, and political ties, thereby contributing to the stability and security of border areas and bolstering defense capabilities.

In his February 2024 Address to the Federal Assembly, President Putin emphasized the need for establishing a "new framework of equal and indivisible security in Eurasia" (Presidential Address, 2024), and in June 2024 at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he underscored the link between security, cooperation, and development, including as supported by international transport corridors (MID, 2024a; Trofimov, 2025).

Great-power competition (Russia and China against the West) has become a long-term reality (Pankova and Gusarova, 2020). The parties seek to avoid open conflict, fearing its uncontrolled escalation and unwilling to fully abandon economic cooperation. Efforts to use limited resources as effectively as possible lead to new forms of rivalry, such as indirect influence and managed competition in some regions (Safranchuk and Lukyanov, 2021).

Military and non-military capabilities are increasingly being placed within a single management framework (Bogdanov, 2023). Russia, China, and the West have developed new concepts, such as multi-domain operations and integrated deterrence (Vergun, 2022), military-civil fusion (Kania and Laskai, 2021), and non-military security measures (Prudnikov and Kuzmenko, 2023). Experts highlight a tendency towards the “weaponization of everything” (Galeotti, 2022) and “securitization of everything” (Nasu, 2021).

Russia’s international and national transport initiatives also facilitate non-military resistance against the West’s hybrid strategies, preventing the political and socio-economic destabilization of Russia’s neighbors.

However, Russia’s development of international transport corridors remains largely segmented along departmental lines, with a predominant focus on transport infrastructure. The maximization of Russia’s transit potential, above all as a bridge between the East and the West became a priority before the SMO. This task remains important but overemphasizing it now would be counterproductive and even dangerous.

The long-term and multifaceted nature of great-power competition, where economic, military, and foreign policy interests intertwine, dictates a ‘whole-of-government’ approach—integrating the state’s efforts and coordinating its policies across various spheres to effectively and synergistically use its resources. This is particularly crucial for Russian transport projects, given the multitude of spheres and stakeholders that they touch upon: the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Transport, other federal agencies, regional

authorities, commercial enterprises, scientific organizations, and foreign partners.

A whole-of-government approach could be achieved by establishing an interdepartmental working group within the Presidential Staff or the Security Council. Coordinating the financial, economic, and transport agencies, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the intelligence agencies, and the Southern and Central Military Districts, the working group would facilitate the exchange of information, define strategic priorities, allocate resources, and resolve conflicts. Care should be taken not to dilute responsibility for safeguarding Russia's national interests across various regions and sectors.

Currently, Russian stakeholders view the development of international corridors mainly or even entirely in terms of domestic infrastructure, often ignoring international projects and regarding Russian investments in them as a diversion of resources from Russia itself. However, a transport corridor's full potential can be fully realized only as a unified, coordinated, and seamlessly integrated system. Russia boasts one of the world's most multipronged and digitalized transport networks, but those of some of its neighbors are poorly developed, creating bottlenecks for transit through Eurasia.

ALTERNATIVE TRANSPORT PROJECTS IN EURASIA — CHALLENGE OR OPPORTUNITY?

To ensure Eurasia's sustainable economic development and security, and account for the diversity of (friendly and unfriendly) Eurasian states' transport projects and interests, diversification and a network-based approach are essential (Vinokurov et al., 2021; Vinokurov, 2024). At an October 2025 Dushanbe summit, President Putin highlighted this vision, stating: "all these and other Eurasian logistics projects could be combined into a single network" (Kremlin, 2025a).

Beijing, similarly, sees transport projects as catalysts of economic growth and vital tools of economic resilience amid escalating

competition with the U.S., especially given the vulnerabilities of maritime transportation routes. India's objectives, on the other hand, are primarily economic, though political considerations are increasingly emerging, too.

A Eurasian transport network aligns with the independence and multivector policies (Tokayev, 2024) of states like Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. This also aligns with Russia's vision of the Global Majority (MID, 2023) and Eurasian security.

Since the USSR's dissolution, the Caucasian and Central Asian states have mostly strengthened their statehood and economies. However, except for Georgia, their domestic stability is threatened by their landlocked status, water and energy shortages and (especially in Azerbaijan (Ivanter, 2025) and Kazakhstan) undiversified economies. Domestic destabilization, in turn, presages increased migration, terrorism, extremism, and drug trafficking. Russia benefits if the Transcaucasian and Central Asian states are sovereign and resilient (Bordachev and Tebin, 2025).

Thus, most regional actors—Russia, China, India, and smaller powers—view the development of transport infrastructure, and the strengthening of trade and economic ties, as essential for economic and security objectives. Despite regional contradictions, this is a non-zero-sum game.

The U.S., the U.K. and the EU are also active in the post-Soviet space, particularly in Central Asia and Transcaucasia. For them, peace and stability in Eurasia are not primary matters. But they have replaced a focus on 'color revolutions' with long-term transport and energy projects and other investments. Eurasia and especially Central Asia remain in the focus of Western expert analysis (Ziegler, 2024). Illustrative are the 2023 and 2025 meetings between U.S. presidents and Central Asian leaders—particularly within the C5+1 format—and the inaugural EU-C5 summit in 2025. Within the EU's €12 billion Global Gateway Initiative, €3 billion is allocated for transport projects. Additionally, indirect military cooperation is expanding, including through the U.S. National Guard's State Partnership Program (Kelleher, 2025).

Within the U.S., even stark advocates of China's containment warn against excessive focus on direct competition with Beijing, instead calling for a recommitment to hegemony across Eurasia, viewed as a cohesive political space rather than a collection of disparate subregions (Mazza and Khatiri, 2025). This approach is clearly seen in the U.S.'s focus on logistics, including the announcement of the Trump (Zangezur) Corridor (Yıldız, 2025).

The West is primarily interested in energy, trade, critical resources, the containment of Russian influence (Mankoff, 2025), and the counterbalancing of China's Belt and Road Initiative with own projects. Facilitating economic development in the Caucasus and Central Asia is viewed as strengthening countries' sovereignty and (though this is not necessarily true) as thereby counterbalancing Russia and China.

While some of the West's activities in the post-Soviet space—'color revolutions,' military deployments, and intelligence and NGO operations—at least indirectly threaten Russia, initiatives fostering economic development, socioeconomic stability, and interconnectedness may even be beneficial to Russia.

Moscow should not actively oppose alternative transportation projects like the Zangezur Corridor (TRIPP), the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, or the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway. Many of these projects are initiated by countries friendly to Russia and are likely to remain regional or local in scope, or uncompetitive compared to routes through Russian territory. Furthermore, alternatives may complement Russian projects, rather than necessarily competing with them (Martirosyan, 2025). As long as these initiatives increase post-Soviet states' internal socioeconomic and political resilience, they conform with Russian interests. Rather than opposing alternatives, Russia should focus on making its own projects as competitive as possible. Especially given that the U.S. and the EU have so far confined themselves to statements and plans instead of actual investments.

The diversification of international projects must be rooted in the diversification of national ones. For instance, efforts should encompass

not only the INSTC, but also a network of North-South corridors connecting Russia to Asia and linking the Trans-Siberian Railway to the Northern Sea Route (Karaganov, 2025).

THE INSTC IN EURASIAN SECURITY

The INSTC illustrates the principles of diversification and networking. One branch should not be selected to the exclusion of the others, as all three—western, eastern, and trans-Caspian—are viable.

The sea route across the Caspian appears to be the most sustainable, though it involves loading and unloading at Russian and Iranian ports.

The INSTC's western branch through Azerbaijan serves as a stabilizing factor for Transcaucasia and (together with a potential route connecting Armenia to Georgia, Abkhazia, and Russia) should help counterbalance the TRIPP. The western branch would also strengthen relations between Moscow and Baku, which is highly interested in economic diversification. Russia's current tensions with Armenia and Azerbaijan do not preclude cooperation here. When the EU unilaterally severed decades-old trade and economic ties with Russia for ideological and political reasons, it lost access to markets and affordable energy resources. With respect to Azerbaijan and Armenia, Russia should not follow the EU's example. Abandoning major joint initiatives, like the INSTC's western branch, would only deepen tensions and make the crisis in relations persistent.

The INSTC's eastern branch, through Central Asia, is somewhat less politically risky than the western route. It will further integrate Russia with Central Asia, and link Siberia to India. This is particularly important given India's interest in strengthening ties with Central Asia and developing the port of Chabahar in Iran (Topychkanov, 2025).

The INSTC's key advantage is often cited as shorter delivery time compared to routes through the Suez Canal. However, at present time savings do not directly translate into lower shipping costs, much more significant is the increased resilience. Russia would be more connected with the Global South and East and less dependent on maritime routes through the Baltic and Black Seas that are vulnerable to NATO. And, should relations with the EU partially normalize (although this appears

unlikely in the near term), Russia could fully leverage these new capabilities, though this is of secondary importance.

THE INSTC'S STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE BEYOND THE POST-SOVIET SPACE

With its millennia-old cultural heritage, a substantial population (87.5 million (IMF, 2025), exceeding Central Asia's), significant economic potential, and a central geographic position, Iran plays a key role in the INSTC and southern Eurasia. It has the power to either unify or fragment the region. A stable and developing Iran is a reliable partner for Russia and other Eurasian nations. Conversely, a destabilized Iran would generate regional threats. Its conflict with Israel and the U.S., economic troubles (including from Western sanctions), and problems with modernization temper optimistic projections.

Iran's involvement in a full-scale war would directly threaten Russia. The Russia-Iran Comprehensive Partnership Treaty (Kremlin, 2025b) does not include the explicit guarantees of military assistance that were concluded with North Korea (MID, 2024b). But Iran's destabilization and/or fragmentation would trigger mass migration, foster terrorism and extremism, and thereby heighten the risk of destabilization in Transcaucasia, Central Asia, and Russia's border regions (Bordachev, 2025).

By supporting Iran's economy and facilitating the potential rapid delivery of military and humanitarian supplies, the INSTC reduces the likelihood of such destabilization (Ravandi-Fadai, 2023).

An important additional factor is Pakistan's contradictions with the U.S. and its improved relations with Iran (which, specifically with reference to the INSTC, raises U.S. experts' concern (Durso, 2025)). This opens new military and logistical opportunities for Russia, including expanded cooperation with Afghanistan on projects like the Trans-Afghan Highway, after the resolution of the recent Afghanistan–Pakistan conflict.

Pakistan's transport and logistics cooperation with Iran and Russia, against the background of the U.S.–Pakistan contradictions in the strategic sphere and the U.S.–India disputes over tariffs, as well as India–

China normalization contribute to South Asian and Eurasian stability and security. In such a change in the regional political landscape, the significance of the Pakistan-China interaction, traditionally viewed with concern by New Delhi, is likely to diminish.

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The INSTC's rather low volume of cargo traffic often raises doubt about the project's viability. Russia's dependence on the vulnerable transport routes via the Baltic and Black Seas is unlikely to dwindle rapidly or fundamentally change in the near future. Thus, the establishment of alternative routes, not vulnerable to NATO's dominance, is critical for Russia. This demands the reduction of red tape and the creation of a reasonable surplus of infrastructure capacity. Supply creates demand. If Russia's relations with the West improve, the project will remain important for enhancing Russia's potential as a transit state in a normalized political environment. It will also serve as a safeguard against efforts to stifle the Russian economy by blocking its Black and Baltic Sea routes in the case of escalating tensions with the West. Moreover, Russia will benefit from a stimulus to develop its eastern territories and to deepen integration with Eurasia.

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