

RESEARCH
ARTICLERussia-Azerbaijan cooperation within the framework of the
international north-south transport corridor (INSTC)

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Abstract

The International North-South Transport Corridor has emerged as a strategic initiative aimed at diversifying the global logistics network. Positioned along the western branch of the corridor, Russia and Azerbaijan have implemented a range of concrete cooperation measures to advance the implementation of this project. The study focuses examines Russia-Azerbaijan cooperation within the framework of the INSTC, from the perspectives of geopolitics, geo-economics, and international logistics. The analysis is based on the secondary documents, including academic sources, government reports and publications from international organizations. The research findings show that the cooperation between Russia and Azerbaijan has achieved many positive results, such as the establishment of the legal framework, the modernization of infrastructure, and a notable increase in trade volume. Both states have gained tangible benefits, and bilateral relations have been significant enhance through expanding trade, thereby laying a stable foundation for broader cooperation. Moreover, their long-term joint development plans demonstrate the vision and political will of both leaderships to transform the INSTC into a vital transport artery of the Eurasian continent.

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1. Introduction

The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is a strategic multimodal infrastructure project with a total length of approximately 7,200 km. It is designed to connect the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf region with the Caspian Sea and Europe, through a network of roads, railways and sea routes. This corridor is expected to shorten transportation time for goods from 45-60 days (via the Suez Canal) to 25-30 days, while lowering logistics costs by up to 30% compared to conventional routes (Kundu, 2024). In the context of geopolitical turmoil and a significant restructuring of the global supply chains, the INSTC has emerged as a viable alternative to traditional transit routes to Europe. It offers participating countries the opportunity to diversify trade flows and reduce dependence on Western-dominated logistics networks (Malysheva, 2024; Meshkin, 2024). In particular, after the outbreak of the Ukraine conflict in 2022, Russia sees INSTC as a critical strategic outlet for its economy, allowing it to circumvent the Western-imposed constraints and gain access to the markets of South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa (Aliyev, 2024).

As two pivotal countries situated along the Western route of the INSTC, Russia and Azerbaijan have been actively implementing a range of concrete cooperation measures to advance the project. During an official visit to Azerbaijan in August 2024, Russian President Vladimir Putin and his counterpart Ilham Aliyev reaffirmed their shared commitment to promote the development of the INSTC. President Aliyev emphasized that the INSTC route holds not only bilateral

significance, but also for the regional importance, as it enhances broader transport connectivity. He further noted that Azerbaijan has completed key infrastructure components on its territory to ensure the smooth operation of the corridor and is prepared to expand transport capacity in response to rising freight volume (Chaudhury, 2024a).

In recent years, Russia and Azerbaijan have constantly consolidated and refined the legal framework governing for their cooperation on the INSTC. Notably, in September 2022, the two countries and Iran signed a Joint Declaration on Commitments to the Effective Operation of the INSTC, with the goal of reaching a cargo throughput of 30 million tons (Sputnik Azerbaijan, 2022). Subsequently, in December 2024, the two governments signed an Intergovernmental Agreement on the Development of Transit Transport on the Western Route of the INSTC (Interfax, 2024). These developments underscore the strategic priority that both states attach to the advancement of the North-South Corridor at the current stage.

2. Literature Review

The idea of a trans-Eurasian transport corridor was initiated in the late 1990s, aiming to establish a direct rail link connecting Sri Lanka, India, Iran, and Russia as an alternative to the Suez Canal and the maritime route around Africa (Labin & Rzayev, 2025). The INSTC was officially launched on September 12, 2000, when Russia, Iran, and India signed an intergovernmental agreement in St. Petersburg on the establishment of the International North-South Transport Corridor. Subsequently, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Oman, and Syria joined the initiative, transforming the INSTC into a multilateral cooperation framework (Markelov, Karabushenko, Usmanov, & Golovin, 2022). After more than two decades of development, the corridor has grown to include a total of 11 member and observer countries (Vinokurov, Ahnbaev, Shashkenov, Zaboev, 2021), extending from Eastern Europe, through the Caucasus, and Central Asia, to South Asia, and the Middle East. Most recently, ahead of the BRICS Summit in October 2024, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan expressed formal interest in joining the initiative, demonstrating the growing economic appeal of the INSTC across the region (Chaudhury, 2024b).

Structurally, the INSTC is designed as a multimodal network comprising three principal routes. The Western Route connects Russian and Azerbaijani railway passes with Iran through shared border crossings. The Trans-Caspian or Central Route originates from the Russian ports of Astrakhan, Olya, and Makhachkala, with cargo transported across the Caspian Sea to the Iranian ports of Bandar-Anzali, Nowshahr, and Anirabad. The Eastern Route follows the eastern coast of the Caspian Sea, traversing Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, thereby linking these Central Asian countries to Iran via rail (Malysheva, 2021). Figure 1 illustrates the route network of the INSTC.

The INSTC has gained increasing scholarly attention from both geopolitical and geoeconomic perspectives. Luzyanin & Semenova (2023) emphasize the corridor's strategic relevance, suggesting that the INSTC could evolve into Russia's "New Silk Road", forming a network of strategic linkages connecting Northern Europe, Russia, Central Asia, Iran, and India. The corridor is expected not only facilitate trade flows but also to contribute to the modernization of underdeveloped regions such as the North Caucasus and the Caspian basin, ultimately enhancing Russia's economic autonomy and independence. Similarly, Volodin & Volodina (2023) argue that the INSTC positions Russia as a vital intermediary in Eurasian trade, and serves as a vehicle for both economic modernization and geopolitical projection. In parallel, Vardomsky (2023) highlights the INSTC's role in boosting Russia's trade turnover and addressing critical challenges in its foreign trade, particularly in the context of mounting international sanctions. Nevertheless, the study also identifies significant obstacles to the corridor's full utilization, most notable the lack of harmonization in transport and foreign trade policies between Russia and regional partners. Addressing this policy misalignment through enhanced coordination among stakeholders is thus considered a prerequisite for optimizing the effectiveness of INSTC in the long term.

In a recent study, Bifolchi (2024) emphasized the significance of the International North-South Transport Corridor in the context of Azerbaijan-Russia bilateral relations. Owing to its strategic location, Azerbaijan is regarded as a crucial gateway to the INSTC and plays a vital role in facilitating Russia's broader Eurasian strategy. By enabling connectivity between Russia, India, and Iran through Azerbaijani territory, the INSTC contributes to expanding Russia's geopolitical influence and provides a counterbalance to Western-led initiatives. Further exploring Azerbaijan's motivations, Bayramly (2024) identified several key drivers behind the country's active participation in the INSTC. These include the desire to increase transit volumes through national territory, enhance foreign trade capacity, and integrate the INSTC with other regional transport corridors to capitalize on Azerbaijan's geostrategic location. The study also notes that the INSTC may serve as a platform for Azerbaijan to elevate its geopolitical standing as a North-South transit hub, thereby attracting the greater attention from regional powers, such as Russia, Iran, and India, while simultaneously strengthening the country's position within broader Eurasian cooperation mechanisms.

Figure 1: The route network of the INSTC



Source: Eurasian Development Bank. Reports and Working papers 21/5

A growing body of literature has examined both the advantages and challenges associated with the development of the INSTC. On the one hand, the corridor is widely recognized for its potential to improve regional connectivity. According to a report by the Eurasian Development Bank (2022), the INSTC presents one of the most efficient routes to access key markets in South Asia, East Africa, and the Middle East. It is estimated that the corridor could shorten transit times by over 40% compared to traditional maritime routes, and lower logistics costs by up to 30% (Pal, 2024). Such improvements in efficiency and cost-effectiveness are expected to significantly increase trade volumes among participating countries (Hussain, Malik, & Mahmood, 2024). On the other hand, the INSTC faces a number of serious obstacles. Smagin (2023) pointed out that delays in the construction of the Rasht-Astara railway in Iran – caused by persistent financial and technical difficulties – has created a major bottleneck, hindering the corridor's overall progress. Even upon completion of this segment, the incompatibility between Russian and CIS rail gauge (1520 mm) and the Iranian standard gauge (1435 mm) will necessitate container transshipment at the Azerbaijan-Iran border, further complicating the logistics process. Zakharov (2023) identifies additional constraints, including imbalance in two-way cargo flows, seasonal disruptions due to the freezing of northern Caspian ports during winter months, and the underdeveloped condition of these seaports, which still lack modern infrastructure such as upgraded railway approaches and multifunctional logistics terminals. Despite these limitations, official data released by the Russian government indicate that the volume of cargo transported via the INSTC has exceeded 24 million tons, demonstrating the corridor's considerable growth potential and reinforcing its importance as a strategic logistics route in the evolving Eurasian transport landscape (The Russian Government, 2025).

3. Research methods

The article is grounded in the analysis of secondary sources, including academic publications, government reports, and documents from international organizations. Data drawn from these materials are systematically collated and synthesized to elucidate the current state of cooperation between Russia and Azerbaijan within the framework of the International North-South Transport Corridor. The study applies theoretical approaches from geopolitics, geoeconomics, and logistics management to enable a comprehensive assessment of the cooperation, taking into account both political and economic motivations as well as logistical dimensions of the partnership.

4. Results

Despite its strategic potential, the implementation of the INSTC progressed slowly during its initial phase (2005-2012). As noted by Zadonskaya & Velizade (2024), for an extended period, the development of the corridor was not regarded as a high priority by either Russia or Azerbaijan. Several key factors contributed to this inertia, including the absence of a stable logistics service system, difficulties in identifying consistent sources and hubs of cargo generation, inadequate coordination in infrastructure development along the entire corridor, and a lack of transparency in the cross-border payment mechanisms. Moreover, one of the key members – Iran – was under considerable pressure from international sanctions, which hindered its active participation. Most critically, there was limited demand from the business community and economic organizations of the member countries to utilize the corridor.

A notable shift occurred in August 2016 with the convening of the Russia-Azerbaijan-Iran Trilateral Summit in Baku. This event marked a pivotal turning point in the development of the INSTC, as the leaders of the three countries jointly pledged to mobilize resources for the completion of essential infrastructure, aimed at establishing a direct connection between the Persian Gulf and Russia, as well as onward to European markets. At this juncture, demand for the corridor had significantly increased: Russia sought to expand trade with the Persian Gulf and the Indian subcontinent; Azerbaijan aimed to boost its agricultural exports to Russia; and Iran endeavoured to secure new oil markets and expand its gas exports (Falyakhov, 2016). Following the Baku summit, cooperation among Russia, Azerbaijan, and other participating countries within the INSTC framework advanced considerably. Progress was recorded in multiple areas, including the establishment of a legal and regulatory framework, the modernization of transport infrastructure, and enhanced coordination in the operationalization of the corridor.

In the domain of policy and legal frameworks, Russia and Azerbaijan have signed a number of important cooperation agreements aimed at facilitating the development of the inter-state transport system, and addressing the growing needs of economic collaboration between partner countries. Both sides have acceded to various international agreements and conventions governing maritime, rail, road, and air transportation, thereby significantly streamlining logistics operations and enhancing the overall efficiency of cross-border transport. Notably, on February 14, 2020, the Russian government approved the policy document entitled “Complex of Solutions to Develop the Transport Potential of the International North-South Transport Corridor”. This document outlined a series of concrete measures to advance the INSTC, including the establishment of an International Transport Corridor Management Board responsible for providing expert consultation and analytical support for project implementation, a comprehensive study of the regional transport services market and evaluation of the feasibility of launching international maritime transport routes, the development a special economic zone for seaports in Astrakhan, and the planning of multimodal logistics centers aimed at optimizing supply chains. The document also called for a review and reform of customs and logistics-related regulations among INSTC member countries to ensure faster and more efficient goods clearance (Kondratiev, 2020).

Subsequently, on February 22, 2022, Russia and Azerbaijan signed a Joint Declaration on Allied Interaction, reaffirming their commitment to maintaining stability in the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea region. The declaration emphasized promoting cooperation in the Caspian area based on shared interests, the development of the INSTC using intelligent transport technologies, the assurance of security for cross-border routes, and the facilitation of free movement of goods in accordance with bilateral and multilateral commitments (Kremli, 2022). Progress continued in 2023 with the signing of an agreement on the operation and maintenance of the road bridge spanning the Samur River at the Russia-Azerbaijan border. A major advancement followed in December 2024, when the two governments concluded the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Joint Development of Transit Transport along the Western Route of the INSTC. Russian Deputy Prime Minister Vitaly Savelyev hailed this agreement as a historic milestone for the broader development of the entire corridor, with the stated goal of increasing transport volume along this route to at least 15 million tons in the coming years. The agreement entails a set of coordinated measures, including the establishment of a joint mechanism for upgrading

railway and road infrastructure, the simplification of border clearance procedures, and the adjustment transport tariffs to improve the corridor's competitiveness (The Azerbaijan State News Agency, 2024).

In terms of transport infrastructure, both Russia and Azerbaijan are actively investing and synchronizing upgrades within their respective territories, with the dual objectives of enhancing domestic connectivity and facilitating regional trade integration. On the Russian side, the central government has prioritized the expansion and modernization of strategic transport routes, notably the R-217 "Kavkaz" highway, which connects Astrakhan through Dagestan to the Azerbaijani border. The ongoing upgrade to a four-lane highway, coupled with the construction of bypasses at Khasavyurt, Derbent and Makhachkala, is expected to significantly enhance cargo traffic capacity. Russia has also completed the modernization of the Yarag-Kazmalyar road border checkpoint in 2023 and is currently reconstructing the Tagirkent-Kazmalyar and Novo-Filya vehicle checkpoints, with the goal of increasing daily clearance capacity by an additional 500 vehicles. Furthermore, the Derbent border railway station is scheduled for upgrading by 2027. Importantly, a trilateral pilot program involving Russia, Azerbaijan, and Iran was launched on December 25, 2024, to introduce an electronic queuing system for trucks at the Tagirkent-Kazamalyar checkpoint, aimed at reducing wait times and improving logistics efficiency (Ministry of Transport of the Russian Federation, 2024).

Azerbaijan, for its part, has undertaken large-scale infrastructure projects to modernize its transport system in line with sustainable development goals. A key initiative is the comprehensive upgrade of the inland north-south railway from Yalama to Astara, establishing a seamless rail connection between Russia and Iran. The entire 1,520 mm single-gauge railway line has been rehabilitated, with the Baku-Yalama segment modernized through a \$400 million loan from the Asian Development Bank. Further upgrades and electrification are planned for the Alat-Astara segment in the near future. In parallel, road infrastructure has been significantly expanded, notably with the completion of the Yalama-Gazmalar border bridge in 2019 and the construction of a 129-km highway linking the Russian border to Baku in 2023. These developments contribute to the formation of a multimodal transport network that optimizes freight mobility. The reconstruction of road checkpoints in Khanoba and Shirvanly also simplified border procedures and ensures smoother border crossings (Bayramly, 2024).

Operational cooperation within the corridor has also witnessed tangible progress. Russia and Azerbaijan have agreed to establish a stable cargo flow via the Baku-Moscow railway, targeting an initial annual transport volume of 5 million tons, with a gradual increase to 15 million tons. Both sides have committed to applying preferential tariffs and formulating a unified transport rate policy to enhance the competitiveness of the corridor. In addition to railway initiatives, the two countries have prioritized maritime and inland waterway transport across the Caspian Sea. Russia is focused on upgrading the capacity of strategic ports – namely Astrakhan, Olya, and Makhachkala – to accommodate the increasing freight volumes. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan is modernizing the port of Baku and expanding its ferry fleet to support seamless connectivity between Trans-Caspian routes and the main INSTC corridor (Realhoe Vremya, 2025).

Thanks to the aforementioned coordinated efforts, the volume of goods transported between Russia and Azerbaijan within the framework of the International North-South Transport Corridor has shown consistent growth. According to data from the International Transport Corridor Management Board, the volume of rail freight between Russia and Azerbaijan in 2023 increased by 6% compared to 2022, reaching 4.8 million tons. Of this total, exports accounted for 3.4 million tons (70.8%), imports amounted to 553.6 thousand tons (11.5%), while goods transiting to Azerbaijan totalled 719 thousand tons, and transit flows in the opposite direction reached 38.2 thousand tons. In the same year, Russian carriers conducted 46,200 road freight shipments in transit through Azerbaijani territory, making an 8.8% increase from the previous year (Zadonskaya & Velizade, 2024). From January to July 2024, the volume of transit goods passing Azerbaijan via the INSTC rose to 434,651 tons, reflecting a 25% increase compared to the same period in 2023 (Azernews, 2024).

Despite ongoing geopolitical tensions and global economic instability, bilateral trade turnover between Russia and Azerbaijan in 2024 reached \$4.799 billion, representing a 10.1% increase compared to 2023. In the first four months of 2025 alone, bilateral trade amounted \$1.824 billion – an increase of nearly 40% year-on-year. Russia has emerged as Azerbaijan's third largest trading partner, following Italy and Türkiye, accounting for 10.01% of Azerbaijan's total foreign trade. This position is further reinforced by the fact that Russia remains the largest importer of Azerbaijani oil (TASS, 2025).

These statistics illustrate that the INSTC is gradually affirming its role as a strategic trade artery, contributing not only to the promotion of Russia-Azerbaijan bilateral trade relations but also the expansion of international cooperation across the broader region. At a high-level meeting in April 2025, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev emphasized that the INSTC brings mutual and multilateral benefits, asserting that all participating countries stand for gain from increased trade flows (Sputnik Azerbaijan, 2025). His statement reaffirmed the strategic vision of the role of the INSTC as a key pillar in the evolving Eurasian trade system.

Both Russia and Azerbaijan remain firmly committed to the long-term development of the corridor and have set ambitious goals for the future. According to current development plans, stakeholders aim to increase the volume of cargo passing through the corridor to 30 million tons annually by 2030. In the long term, they expect the INSTC to handle up to 100 million tons of cargo per year, positioning it among the busiest and most significant trade routes on the Eurasian continent (ERAI, 2025). To realize this vision, the timely completion of the Rasht-Astara railway segment in Iran by 2027 has been identified as a top priority. This segment is a critical link in establishing a continuous railway connection from the port of Bandar Abbas in southern Iran through Azerbaijan to Russia and onwards to Europe. Following Russia's decision in 2023 to finance and provide technical support for the project, the completion of the railway is considered feasible within the set timeline, potentially unlocking a major breakthrough for the INSTC (Kaleji, 2023). Once operational, the Trans-Iranian railway is expected to reduce the transit time for shipments from India to Russia from current 45-60 days (via Suez Canal) to approximately 20 days, while simultaneously lowering transport costs by up to 30%, providing a compelling alternative for businesses and significantly enhance the corridor's competitiveness. In doing so, the International North-South Transport Corridor may eventually emerge as a viable rival to the Suez Canal, as envisioned by the participating countries.

5. Discussion

Active cooperation between Russia and Azerbaijan on developing the International North-South Transport Corridor is fashioning a credible alternative to traditional transport routes. For Russia, the corridor assumes particular strategic importance in the current geopolitical context, as it reinforces allied interaction with Azerbaijan and deepens bilateral economic interdependence, thereby mitigating some of the pressure exerted by Western sanctions. For Azerbaijan, partnering with Russia on the INSTC elevates its geostrategic profile by making the country an indispensable node in the emerging Eurasian trade network. This pivotal role enables Azerbaijan to preserve a balanced foreign policy posture – strengthening its economic partnership with Russia while maintaining constructive ties with Western states.

The corridor already generates positive economic spillovers for both countries. For Russia, it diversifies export pathways at a time of relative isolation and reduces time and costs for shipments to South Asian and Middle-Eastern markets, thereby enhancing the competitiveness of Russian goods. Azerbaijan benefits from higher revenue streams derived from transit fees, port services, and rail operations; as freight volumes rise, transport and logistics are expected to make an increasingly significant contribution to the country's gross national income. Furthermore, the INSTC also stimulates regional development within Azerbaijan, attracting infrastructure investment, creating new employment opportunities, and intensifying trade with Russia.

Among the corridor's three branches, the Western Route linking Russia, Azerbaijan, and Iran, has emerged as the system's backbone due to its shortest geographical distance and the busiest traffic volume (Fedulov, 2023). Nevertheless, several challenges still constrain its full potential. The first relates to geopolitical risk. The entire route depends on Iran's timely completion of its infrastructure yet the Rasht-Astara railway has suffered repeated delays despite existing agreements. A second issue concerns regional security along the Eurasian instability belt – most notably the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, where renewed tensions could disrupt transit flows. A third hurdle is the absence of a unified cross-border coordination mechanism, which hampers information transparency and long-term planning. Fourth, marked asymmetries in transit flows complicate efforts to balance the economic interests of all stakeholders. Finally, competition from other connectivity projects, particularly China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the EU-backed Transport Corridor of Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA) poses additional strategic and commercial pressure. Addressing these challenges will require a flexible, multilateral governance framework and equitable risk-sharing arrangements to secure the corridor's long-term sustainability.

6. Conclusion

Cooperation between Russia and Azerbaijan within the framework of the International North-South Transport Corridor holds significant implications not only for bilateral relations but also for the broader regional transport connectivity system. The collaborative process has yielded a number of tangible results, particularly in the establishment of a legal framework, the gradual completion of critical infrastructure projects, and the harmonization of transport procedures and policies. Consequently, the volume of goods transported along the corridor has constantly increased. Both Russia and Azerbaijan have derived substantial benefits from this cooperation. For Russia, the INSTC offers a strategic alternative trade route to access potential markets in Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. For Azerbaijan, the corridor has reinforced its role as a key logistics hub in the region, generating economic gains from the growing volume of transit freight. Simultaneously, the expansion of trade flows has served to strengthen relations between Russia and Azerbaijan, laying a stable foundation for broader cooperation in other domains. Despite some challenges such as dependence on Iran's project progress in completing its segment of the corridor and the ongoing geopolitical risks in the Caucasus region, the

overall outlook for the INSTC remains positive, bolstered by the sustained commitments of both Russia and Azerbaijan. The long-term joint plans undertaken by the two countries underscore the vision and political will of their leadership to transform the corridor into a vital artery of the Eurasian transport. If implemented in a coordinated and timely manner, the INSTC has the potential not only to generate substantial economic benefits for its participants but also to contribute to the diversification of global trade routes.

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