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Multilateral Connectivity and Strategic Geopolitics: Russia's Cooperation with Azerbaijan, Iran, and India in Advancing the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) as a Competitive Alternative to the Suez Canal

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Abstract

Recent global geopolitical turbulence—exemplified by the conflict in Ukraine, the imposition of sanctions on Russia, and the disruption of maritime security in the Red Sea amid the Israel–Hamas conflict—has exposed the vulnerability of established transport routes. High-profile incidents, such as the Ever Given blockage in the Suez Canal, have further highlighted systemic risks to international logistics. Against this backdrop, the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) has emerged as a strategic infrastructure priority for Russia in the twenty-first century. Beyond reinforcing Russia's integration into global transport networks, the project is framed as a key instrument to advance the country's broader objective of promoting a multipolar international order. Over the past decade, Russia has expanded cooperation with Azerbaijan, Iran, and India to operationalize the corridor as a strategic trade route that provides a viable alternative to the Suez Canal, while simultaneously enhancing Eurasian connectivity and trade diversification. The purpose of the study is to clarify the motivations, achievements, and persistent challenges within this multilateral cooperation. Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative approach, based on the analysis of academic literature, governmental reports, and documents issued by international organizations to assess the current state of Russia's engagement with its key partners in the INSTC framework. The results indicate that, although notable progress has been made in fostering trade flows and enhancing regional connectivity, the full-scale development of the INSTC remains constrained by persistent challenges. These include limited financial investment capacity, insufficient infrastructure modernization, and the constraining influence of the broader geopolitical environment.

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1. Introduction

The regions of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Caucasus have historically occupied a strategic position in international relations due to two key factors: their abundant mineral resources and their unique geopolitical role as a natural land bridge between Europe and Asia. The enduring legacy of the Silk Road testifies to the region's centrality in promoting commercial and cultural exchanges between East and West (Khan, 2021). In the contemporary era, the revival of intercontinental trade routes is increasingly materializing through the development of international transport corridors, most notably the International North–South Transport Corridor. This strategic initiative seeks to reconstruct and modernize historical trade routes, thereby fostering deeper economic integration and strengthening cooperation across the broader Eurasian space.

The INSTC is designed as a multimodal transport system integrating road, rail, and sea routes, with the principal aim of enhancing transport connectivity and facilitating trade among states along the corridor. With a total length of approximately 7,200 km, the INSTC is considered the shortest land-sea route connecting Asia with Europe, starting from the port of Mumbai (India), passing through Iranian ports on the Persian Gulf, crossing the Caspian Sea to reach Russia and Northern Europe (Rashid, 2018). Projections suggest that, once fully operational, the INSTC could reduce transit time by up to 40% and save up to 30% of transportation costs compared to the traditional route via the Suez Canal (Azmi et al., 2024).

The development of the INSTC as a multimodal transport network is structured along three main routes. The first, the Western Route, integrates road and rail infrastructure to facilitate freight transport between Russia, Azerbaijan, and Iran. The second, the Eastern Route, consists of a railway extending along the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea, linking Russia's Western Siberia and Ural regions with the seaports of Iran via Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. The third, the Trans-Caspian or Central Route, relies on a combined "river-sea" fleet to move goods from central regions of Russia to Iranian ports on the Caspian Sea, then moving by road or rail to Persian Gulf ports. According to estimates by the Eurasian Development Bank, the full realization of the INSTC requires the implementation of approximately 100 infrastructure projects with a total investment of USD 38.2 billion. Russia and Iran account for the largest share of these investment needs, representing 35% and 34% of the total capital, respectively (Vinokurov et al. 2022).

The institutional history of the INSTC began with the signing of the founding agreement by Russia, Iran, and India on September 12, 2000. A significant milestone followed in May 2002 in Saint Petersburg, where the transport ministers of the member states signed a protocol that formally adopted the agreement. The project subsequently expanded to include ten additional participants, including Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria (observer), Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Oman, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Ukraine. In 2012, the three founding states signed a trilateral memorandum of understanding establishing a financial mechanism for the project, thereby initiating a phase of detailed negotiations on specific components of the corridor between 2012 and 2015. However, these discussions were disrupted in 2016 due to the imposition of new international sanctions on Iran, which caused the project to lose momentum (Prikhodko, 2024; Khan et al., 2025).

Recent global geopolitical upheavals, most notably the conflict in Ukraine and the imposition of sanctions on Russia, have severely disrupted traditional transport routes. At the same time, attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea amid the Israel–Hamas conflict have underscored the vulnerability of international logistics networks (Khan et al., 2023; Taneja et al., 2024; Marobhe et al. 2025). The grounding of the Ever Given in the Suez Canal further illustrated the systemic risks faced by key maritime arteries (Wan et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2025; Chen et al. 2025). Against this backdrop, the INSTC has emerged as a strategic infrastructure priority for Russia in the twenty-first century. Beyond consolidating Russia's position within global transport networks, the corridor is conceived as an instrument to support the broader strategy of shaping a multipolar order.

In pursuit of this objective, Russia has intensified its cooperation with key partners to accelerate the development of the corridor. Along the Western branch, Russia and Azerbaijan have collaborated on upgrading infrastructure and refining the legal framework to facilitate cross-border connectivity. Russian–Iranian cooperation reached a milestone in May 2023 with the signing of an intergovernmental agreement to finance the construction of the Rasht–Astara railway, widely regarded as the decisive missing link for ensuring continuity across the corridor. To the south, India has assumed a proactive role through investments in Iranian port and logistics facilities, while simultaneously deepening its bilateral trade relations with Russia by capitalizing on the opportunities provided by the INSTC. Taken together, these initiatives reflect a coordinated effort to establish the INSTC as a strategic

transport axis—one that reduces dependence on traditional trade routes and fosters the emergence of a new economic and trade architecture across the Eurasian region.

Map of the International North-South Transport Corridor. Source: *Geopolitical Monitor*.

2. Literature Review

The International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) has increasingly attracted scholarly attention across the fields of geopolitics, international trade, and logistics. Recent research has largely concentrated on assessing the benefits and motivations of the principal states involved in the project.

Aliyev (2024) underscores the geo-economic and geo-strategic significance that Russia attaches to the INSTC. His study indicates that after being isolated by Western sanctions, Russia views the INSTC as a mechanism to reorient trade towards Asia, leveraging opportunities to export energy to India and import essential goods without relying on Western-controlled routes. Similarly, Luzyanin & Semenova (2023) argue that the INSTC constitutes a potential "New Silk Road" for Russia, establishing a strategic connectivity network linking Northern Europe, Russia, Central Asia, Iran, and India. According to their study, the project not only stimulates trade growth and modernizes underdeveloped regions such as the North Caucasus and the Caspian littoral, but also enhances Russia's economic autonomy and secures its geopolitical position. Given these strategic implications, the INSTC is gradually taking shape as an important geopolitical instrument for Russia on the international stage.

Meanwhile, Bayramly (2024) and Zadonskaya & Velizade (2024) analyze Azerbaijan's role as a crucial transit bub situated at the intersection of Russian and Iranian routes. Their findings indicate that participation in the INSTC strengthens Azerbaijan's geo-economic standing, attracts transit cargo flows, and catalyses the development of domestic transport infrastructure. For Iran, Kaleji (2023) stresses the urgency of completing the Rasht–Astara railway in cooperation with Russia, framing it as a means to secure Iran's ambition of serving as a transport corridor between the Indian Ocean, Russia, and Europe, while simultaneously benefiting from substantial transit revenues. Complementing this perspective, Ravandi-Fadaei (2023) argues that the successful implementation of the INSTC promises not only considerable economic returns capable of reinforcing domestic stability and elevating Iran's international standing, but also contributes to resolving certain foreign policy challenges—most notably by stabilizing relations with Azerbaijan through shared economic interests.

Pal (2024) evaluates both the potential and the challenges of the INSTC within the framework of India's regional connectivity strategy. His findings suggest that the corridor offers India the prospect of more efficient access to Eurasian markets by substantially reducing transport time and costs compared to the traditional route via the Suez Canal. At the same time, the INSTC faces enduring obstacles, including uneven infrastructure development

and persistent geopolitical risks in Central Asia. These challenges necessitate sustained diplomatic engagement and significant financial investment if the corridor's full potential is to be realized. Similarly, Zakharov (2023) examines Russia–India connectivity relations, noting that geographical distance and regional instability have historically compelled bilateral trade to rely on maritime routes around Europe, resulting in elevated costs and prolonged delivery times. In this context, the INSTC is viewed as a means of overcoming these structural bottlenecks. However, Zakharov emphasizes that its effective operation depends on coordinated measures among member states, particularly in the harmonization of customs procedures and the strengthening of soft infrastructure.

Efforts to operationalize the INSTC's potential have begun to yield concrete results. According to data from the Russian Ministry of Transport and the Directorate General of the International Transport Corridor, freight volume along the INSTC in 2024 grew by 19%, reaching 26.9 million tons, underscoring the dynamic development of the corridor (ERAI, 2025).

3. Data Sources and Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach, focusing on content analysis of secondary sources. Data were collected from academic works, government reports from Russia, Azerbaijan, Iran, and India, along with documents from international organizations. Based on this, the study conducts a comprehensive and systematic assessment of the current state of cooperation between Russia and its three key partners—Azerbaijan, Iran, and India—in the development process of the INSTC. The study's objective is to clarify the motivations, achievements, and persistent challenges within this multilateral cooperation.

4. Research Results and Discussion

Russia-Azerbaijan Cooperation

Situated on the Western branch of the INSTC, Azerbaijan occupies a strategic bridging position between Russia and Iran through the South Caucasus, rendering Russia–Azerbaijan cooperation a critical determinant of the project's overall success. In its initial phase, however, the corridor did not figure prominently in bilateral relations, owing to a combination of objective and subjective constraints. Key obstacles included the instability of logistics services, irregular cargo flows, uncoordinated infrastructure systems, opaque payment mechanisms, the adverse impact of international sanctions on Iran, and limited demand from the business community to utilize the route (Zadonskaya & Velizade, 2024).

A decisive turning point occurred during the Russia–Azerbaijan–Iran summit held in Baku in August 2016, where the leaders of the three states expressed strong political commitment to enhancing infrastructure coordination in order to transform the corridor into an effective link between the Persian Gulf, Russia, and Europe. The impetus for this commitment derived from distinct yet complementary strategic priorities: Russia sought to expand trade with the Persian Gulf region and India; Azerbaijan aimed to increase agricultural exports to the Russian market; and Iran needed reliable outlets for its oil and gas resources (Falyakhov, 2016). Since that time, cooperation under the INSTC framework has demonstrated tangible progress, reflected in the consolidation of the legal basis for interaction, the promotion of infrastructure modernization, and the gradual operationalization of the corridor with steadily improving efficiency.

Institutional cooperation between Russia and Azerbaijan within the framework of the INSTC has been formalized through the signing of several key agreements. The Joint Declaration on Allied Interaction of February 2022 reaffirmed both parties' commitment to advancing the INSTC by introducing smart transport technologies, ensuring route security, and facilitating cargo flows in line with bilateral and multilateral commitments (Kremli, 2022). This was followed in December 2024 by the conclusion of an Intergovernmental Agreement on the Development of Transit Transport along the Western Route of the INSTC, which set the target of increasing freight volumes on the Russia–Azerbaijan segment to at least 15 million tons annually in the coming years. The agreement established a coordination framework to support infrastructure modernization, streamline border-crossing procedures, and adjust transit tariffs with the aim of enhancing the corridor's overall competitiveness (The Azerbaijan State News Agency, 2024).

Practical cooperation has also prioritized the modernization of border-crossing facilities and the improvement of internal connectivity, thereby ensuring uninterrupted traffic flows. On the Russian side, substantial investment has been directed toward upgrading major transport arteries leading to the Azerbaijani border. The R-217 Kavkaz highway, running from Astrakhan through Dagestan to the Azerbaijani frontier, is being expanded to four lanes, with additional bypasses constructed around Khasavyurt, Derbent, and Makhachkala to significantly increase freight capacity. Russia completed the modernization of the Yarag-Kazmalyar checkpoint on the Dagestan–Azerbaijan border in 2023 and is currently renovating the Tagirkent-Kazmalyar and Novo-Filya checkpoints, upgrades expected to boost daily processing capacity by approximately 500 vehicles. In the railway sector, the Derbent border station is scheduled for modernization before 2027 to synchronize with Azerbaijan's infrastructure improvements. A notable development occurred in December 2024, when Russia, Azerbaijan, and Iran jointly launched a pilot program introducing an electronic queuing system for trucks at the Tagirkent-Kazmalyar crossing, reducing waiting times and enhancing logistics efficiency. Collectively, these measures underscore Russia's emphasis on strengthening the operational reliability of critical nodes along the Western Route of the INSTC through Azerbaijani territory (Ministry of Transport of the Russian Federation, 2024; Zadonskaya & Velizade, 2024).

On its side, Azerbaijan has actively invested in modernizing its national transport infrastructure in accordance with sustainable development objectives and its strategic role as a regional transit hub. In the railway sector, the country has completed a comprehensive upgrade of the North–South railway line running from Yalama on the Russian border to Astara on the Iranian border, thereby ensuring uninterrupted connectivity between Russia and Iran. The modernization of the Baku–Yalama section was financed through a USD 400 million loan from the Asian Development Bank, while the Alat–Astara section is undergoing further upgrades and electrification scheduled for completion in the coming years. In the road sector, Azerbaijan has expanded its highway network along the North–South axis. Notable achievements include the completion of the Yalama–Qazımənmməd border bridge in 2019 and the inauguration of a new 129-kilometer highway linking the Russian border with Baku in 2023. At the same time, several border checkpoints—such as Khanoba and Shirvanly—have been modernized to streamline procedures and alleviate congestion, thereby improving overall efficiency in cross-border transport (Bayramly, 2024).

Beyond investments in physical infrastructure, Russia and Azerbaijan have also prioritized operational cooperation to enhance the efficiency of the corridor. Both sides agreed to establish a regular Baku–Moscow railway service with an initial freight capacity of approximately 5 million tons per year, with plans to gradually expand this volume to 15 million tons. To attract additional cargo flows, the two countries committed to introducing preferential tariff regimes and developing a unified freight policy for transit goods along the corridor. Maritime transport across the Caspian Sea has also been designated a priority. Russia is upgrading the capacity of its key ports—Astrakhan, Olya, and Makhachkala—while Azerbaijan has expanded the Baku port and strengthened its ferry fleet in order to integrate the Central Asia–Caspian route with the main INSTC axis (Realnoe Vremya, 2025).

These coordinated measures have already produced tangible results, as evidenced by the steady increase in transport volumes and bilateral trade. In 2023, rail freight between Russia and Azerbaijan amounted to approximately 4.8 million tons, representing a 6% increase over 2022. Of this total, transit cargo transported through Azerbaijani territory between Russia and Iran accounted for a substantial share, amounting to approximately 719,000 tons in 2023. This upward trend persisted in 2024, when transit cargo volumes in the first seven months alone totaled 434,651 tons—a 25% year-on-year increase (Zadonskaya & Velizade, 2024). The modernization of INSTC infrastructure and operational mechanisms has likewise contributed to the expansion of bilateral trade. In 2024, trade turnover between Russia and Azerbaijan reached USD 4.799 billion, reflecting a 10.1% increase compared with the previous year. This growth positioned Russia as Azerbaijan's third-largest trading partner, after Italy and Turkey, accounting for 10.01% of Azerbaijan's total foreign trade turnover (TASS, 2025).

Russia – Iran Cooperation

Stretching from the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf, Iran occupies the central segment of the INSTC, serving as the key link between South Asia and Russia (Fawn & Bruder, 2022). Cooperative relations between Russia and Iran within the framework of the INSTC are inherently strategic, reflecting the convergence of interests between

two states subject to Western sanctions. Since 2022, the urgency of establishing alternative trade routes has accelerated bilateral collaboration, encompassing both infrastructure development and institutional coordination aimed at realizing the corridor's potential. For Russia, the INSTC represents an opportunity to deepen economic ties with India, whose imports of Russian oil have surged by more than 2,200% since the onset of the conflict in Ukraine. For Iran, the corridor promises substantial transit revenues—estimated at approximately USD 100 per ton of cargo transiting its territory, an amount equivalent to the price of a barrel of oil (Sharifli, 2023).

The cornerstone of Russia–Iran cooperation is the completion of the trans-Iranian railway connection, widely regarded as the most critical missing link in the INSTC. A major breakthrough occurred in May 2023, when the two countries signed an agreement to jointly construct the 164-kilometer Rasht–Astara railway section, thereby establishing the final segment of a continuous rail link from Russia to the Persian Gulf. Under the terms of the agreement, Russia pledged a EUR 1.3 billion preferential loan, while Iran assumed responsibility for construction and committed to repaying the capital through future transit fee revenues. Scheduled for completion in 2027, the line is expected to enable the direct movement of goods from Moscow and St. Petersburg to the port of Bandar Abbas, while simultaneously facilitating the flow of goods from India, Iran, and Arab states into the Russian market at reduced cost, greater speed, and higher volume (Kaleji, 2023).

Alongside the development of hard infrastructure, Russia and Iran have undertaken a series of coordinated measures in the sphere of soft infrastructure to enhance transport efficiency within the INSTC. A notable initiative is the agreement to establish a Green Customs Corridor, designed to facilitate trade by simplifying and expediting customs procedures along the route. Within this framework, Iran has introduced a special mechanism enabling Russian companies to rapidly conclude contracts with Iranian partners, thereby lowering transaction costs and improving operational efficiency (Sharifli, 2023).

The outcomes of these joint efforts are reflected in the steady growth of bilateral trade turnover. In 2023, the value of Russia–Iran trade reached nearly USD 3 billion, and by the end of 2024 it had surpassed USD 4 billion (ERAI, 2025). Nevertheless, the prospects for Russia–Iran cooperation under the INSTC framework remain constrained by a number of structural and institutional challenges. The most prominent technical barrier is the discrepancy in railway gauges: Russia and Azerbaijan employ the 1,520 mm gauge, whereas Iran operates on the international standard of 1,435 mm. This incompatibility necessitates transhipment at the Astara border, raising costs and undermining operational efficiency. Moreover, Iran's transport infrastructure suffers from long-standing underinvestment, compounded by difficult terrain around the Caspian region, outdated equipment, and limited port and warehouse capacity. Addressing these deficiencies requires investment levels that far exceed Iran's self-financing capacity, while Russia itself faces financial constraints and sanctions-related risks (Sharifli, 2023). Additional barriers arise in the financial and insurance domains: Iran's exclusion from the SWIFT system forces transactions to be routed through intermediary banks in the United Arab Emirates, increasing costs and administrative complexity, while many international insurance providers remain reluctant or unwilling to cover shipments transiting Iranian territory (Kaleji, 2023).

Russia – India Cooperation

India, along with Russia and Iran, has been a founding member of the INSTC since its inception in 2000 and today occupies a pivotal position in driving the project's implementation. For India, the INSTC holds strategic significance: it not only provides an alternative route to the Suez Canal but also opens opportunities to exploit export potential to participating states, particularly the resource-rich countries of Central Asia (Taneja et al., 2024). As Pal (2024) notes, the INSTC could become a "game-changer," elevating India from a peripheral position to a prominent actor in the Eurasian geopolitical and economic space.

For Russia, cooperation with India in the INSTC carries notable geo-strategic meaning. It enables Russia to consolidate ties with a major rising power of the Global South, thereby contributing to a rebalancing of its external relations at a time when its engagement with both China and the West faces structural constraints. In terms of trade, bilateral turnover has surged since 2022, mainly due to India seizing opportunities to import crude oil and discounted goods from Russia. By 2024, Russia–India trade had reached a record USD 66 billion—representing a fivefold increase in just five years and a 9% rise compared to 2023—with both sides setting an ambitious target of USD 100 billion by 2030 (TASS, 2025).

India has also been at the forefront of operationalizing the INSTC through pioneering field studies. In 2014, the Federation of Freight Forwarders' Associations in India (FFFAI) organized trial shipments along two routes: Nhava Sheva–Bandar Abbas (Iran)–Baku (Azerbaijan) and Nhava Sheva–Bandar Abbas–Amirabad (Iran)–Astrakhan (Russia) via the Caspian Sea. These pilot projects generated detailed data on logistical operations, infrastructure capacity, administrative procedures, as well as banking and insurance arrangements, thereby laying an empirical foundation for subsequent institutional coordination among the corridor's participants (Sanjana, 2019).

A central pillar of India's infrastructure development strategy for the INSTC is the Chabahar port project in Iran. India's involvement dates back to 2003, when a Memorandum of Understanding was signed committing substantial Indian investment to the port's development. Progress, however, was significantly delayed due to the imposition of international sanctions on Iran. A major breakthrough came in 2016, when India and Iran concluded a new agreement under which New Delhi extended a USD 150 million line of credit for the port's construction and operation. This was followed by a commercial contract between India Ports Global Ltd. (IPGL) and an Iranian partner, along with a supplementary commitment of USD 85 million to equip berths. The most recent milestone was reached in May 2024, when the two sides signed a ten-year operational contract for the terminal—an achievement that marked the culmination of nearly a decade of negotiations (Shukla, 2024).

The strategic location of Chabahar, situated near the entrance to the Persian Gulf, makes it a linchpin of India's "Connect Central Asia" policy, providing direct access to markets in Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Russia without reliance on transit through Pakistan (Sanjana, 2019). The port's significance is further enhanced by its exemption from international sanctions, which enabled India to formally incorporate the project into the INSTC framework during the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit in March 2023. To support this role, India has also committed to advancing complementary connectivity infrastructure, most notably the planned railway linking Chabahar to Zahedan. This project is based on a Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2016 between Indian Railways' IRCON and Iran's Construction and Development of Transportation Infrastructures Company (CDTIC) (Taneja et al., 2024).

Alongside its investments in seaport development, India has deepened cooperation with Russia in the field of logistics within the framework of the INSTC. In 2022, a Memorandum of Understanding between RZD Logistics (Russia) and CONCOR (India) established a framework for collaboration in developing multimodal logistics services (Taneja et al., 2024). Since then, several practical initiatives have been launched, including Russia's introduction of an electronic transit customs clearance mechanism in May 2024—an important step toward building an integrated digital logistics platform (RBC, 2025).

Bilateral cooperation has increasingly focused on optimizing the use of the INSTC to expand trade between Russia and India. According to assessments by RZD Logistics, the corridor has already delivered significant benefits, reducing transport costs by 56% and generating a 1.7-fold increase in cargo volumes. The diversification of traded goods is another important outcome, illustrated by the launch of the "Agroexpress" service in May 2024, which transported 31 containers of Russian grains and oats to India via the Eastern branch of the corridor (Sputnik, 2025). Expansion plans are also underway: Russia has announced its intention to increase coal exports to India through southern Iranian ports. To support these flows, the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL) allocated 300 containers in 2023 as part of the initial phase of the Russia–India cargo shipment program across the Caspian Sea (Tehran Times, 2024).

Despite notable progress, bilateral cooperation within the INSTC continues to face significant challenges. The most pressing issue is the persistent imbalance in trade flows. Russia primarily utilizes the corridor for exports, which account for 71.9% of total cargo, while imports from India remain limited. This imbalance results in the frequent return of empty containers, thereby reducing transport efficiency and increasing overall costs. The problem is particularly acute along the Eastern branch, where exports constitute as much as 98.9% of total flows, dominated by commodities such as coal, metals, and agricultural products. Trade statistics from 2023 highlight the scale of this asymmetry: Russia recorded a trade surplus with India of USD 63 billion (ERAI, 2025). Addressing this disparity will require coordinated measures to diversify the structure of traded goods and stimulate reciprocal trade flows.

In addition to trade imbalances, the INSTC is constrained by systemic obstacles. These include the lack of harmonization in transport policies across member states, incomplete alignment of international standards and regulations, and cumbersome customs and licensing procedures. The absence of a unified railway tariff along the corridor further undermines its competitiveness and hinders the attraction of new cargo flows (Vinokurov et al., 2022). Moreover, the unstable geopolitical environment in Central Asia and the South Caucasus continues to pose risks to infrastructure development and the sustainable operation of the project (Pal, 2024). In light of these challenges, India has simultaneously pursued alternative strategies, most notably the proposed Vladivostok–Chennai maritime route, which aims to establish a direct connection with Russia's Far East and thereby complement the INSTC.

5. Conclusion

The rising prominence of the International North–South Transport Corridor in the 2020s as an alternative trade route highlights the urgent need to restructure the Eurasian connectivity landscape. Cooperation between Russia and its three cornerstone partners—Azerbaijan, Iran, and India—is shaped by the intersection of geo-economic imperatives and geopolitical calculations, thereby positioning the INSTC not only as an economic infrastructure project but also as a strategic undertaking. Recent progress has yielded tangible results in the construction and gradual operationalization of the corridor, contributing to a notable expansion of regional trade flows. Nonetheless, the prospects for the INSTC's comprehensive development remain constrained by a set of persistent challenges, most prominently financial constraints, uneven infrastructure development, and the volatility of the broader geopolitical environment.

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Ethical Considerations

This study is based exclusively on secondary sources, including published academic literature, government reports, and documents from international organizations. No primary data collection involving human participants was conducted. Ethical research practices were followed by ensuring accurate citation, acknowledgment of intellectual contributions, and avoidance of plagiarism or misrepresentation.

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