

## Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Cross-Border Trade and Business

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# IRON SILK ROAD TRANS–CASPIAN EAST–WEST–MIDDLE CORRIDOR INITIATIVE and BAKU–TBILISI–KARS RAILWAY LINE: IMPACT ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE

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## ABSTRACT

*The East-West Middle Corridor (Middle Corridor) with the Caspian Transit, which starts from Turkey with the Baku Tbilisi Kars Railway line, reaches the Caucasus region, from here over the Caspian Sea through Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, to Central Asia and China is one of the most important components of historical silk road resuscitation project. With this study, the contribution of Baku Tbilisi Kars railway line and Kars Logistics Center, which is the European and Turkish gateway of the middle corridor, to the silk railway in terms of international leasing.*

Keywords: Belt and Road Project, Middle Corridor, Iron Silk Road, Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway, Kars Logistics Center, Logistics, Supply Chain Management, FDI, International Trade.

## INTRODUCTION

Located in both Asia and Europe, Turkey has an important advantage in terms of logistics activities provided by two-way material flow from Asia to Europe. The road and belt project, introduced by China in 2013, has supported Turkey in using this advantage. Based on this opportunity, Baku Tbilisi Kars Railway line and Kars Logistics Center initiatives, which provide the connection of the middle belt of this initiative, have been completed. Turkey will become one of the most significant actors of world trade by such investments. In addition to the economic contributions to economic growth and regional development, these projects will also develop the rail silk route in Turkey and cultural communication with Turkish States.

## BACKGROUND

Railroads are an important issue in economic, social and political organizations in modern societies. For developed industries, general capabilities such as specialized industry, mass production, membership in world markets and logistics activities carried out with efficient means of transportation throughout the supply chain are of importance.

In logistics sector, different types of transportation, namely modes, are generally used in freight and passenger transportation. These modes have specific advantages and disadvantages. For example,

while road transport is considered the most flexible mode, railway has the lowest transportation cost and is a suitable mode for the transportation of bulky goods despite high investment cost. Development in foreign trade activities directly affects countries' growth. Increase in mass production by advancing technology necessitates bulk shipments. In this regard, railroad transportation is the most important alternative to sea transportation regarding mass transportation.

Turkey is a country located in both Asia and Europe. It is also located in an alternative transit zone that can be used for passenger and freight transportation between China and Europe. Researchers interest in creating a lower cost transportation network by utilizing this location of Turkey. For this reason, the Baku Tbilisi Kars (BTK) railway line, which is the stop of the Iron Silk Road and aims both freight and passenger transportation with the railway network on the China-London line from Asia to Europe, was established. This railroad is entirely 838.6 km, of which 503 km passes through Azerbaijan, 259 km through Georgia and 76 km through Turkey.

## **MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER**

In this study, an analysis will be conducted on Turkey's connections with other existing railway corridors in China. The middle corridor, to which the Baku Tbilisi Kars railway line will be connected to, will be discussed in terms of the chains established and being established from China to Europe.

## **Issues, Controversies, Problems**

Production moves from Asia to Europe in the world. While approximately 18% of total import was made in (United States of America: 14%) American continent and approximately 23% in Europe (Germany: 7%), the remaining major part was made in Asian (China and Taiwan: 14%) countries. In addition, whereas approximately 15% of total export was made in (United States of America: 8%) American continent and approximately 30% in Europe (Germany: 8%), the remaining major part was made in Asian (China and Taiwan: 17%) countries (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Trade, 2020). This shows that the material movement takes place in two-way from Asia to Europe. In this regard, all roads (railway, seaway, highway...) on this movement route and the countries where these roads are located are of paramount importance. With a high strategical importance, Turkey is a country serving as a bridge between Asia and Europe. For this reason, any logistics research that will affect international trade activities regarding Turkey draws attention.

International Trade activities have important effects on the economic growth of countries. One of the expectations regarding Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project introduced by China in 2013 is its contribution to international trade and economic growth. In the literature, the studies on green logistics have been focused on recently, and different approaches, investigating the effect of foreign trade for the countries within the BRI project, have been discussed. Khan et al (2021) has concluded that this initiative would have a positive effect on renewable energy in 69 countries that participated in BRI initiative. An et al (2021) have argued that better quality of transportation infrastructure, efficiency of customs clearance and adequacy of logistics services in China have reduced carbon emission level significantly due to energy saving in the supply chain process.

Wu et al (2021) has investigated the effect of foreign trade activities in China on the emission in BRI countries. It has been concluded that while import intensity from China reduced emission, export intensity increased emission. According to the research carried out by Majeed et al (2021) in 102 BRI countries, trade gap has increased financial development in Asia, Europe and Latin America but decreased in Africa. According to Belt and Road industrial robot trade relationship, several countries

such as China, Turkey and India are in the central position (Li et al, 2021). A study (Feng et al, 2020) comparing competitive advantages of countries with regard to trade has argued that Turkey and Russia are the countries with the largest competitive trade advantages, while China has the strongest mediation capacity with BRI countries.

As an element of the BRI project, BTK Railway Line is one of the actors of international trade, and the trade volume on this line will increase rapidly in the following years. In order to use this potential properly and to make future plans, investigations and applications should be conducted and submitted to policymakers.

### **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI):**

Technological developments and globalization have made cooperation between countries obligatory. Regarding this cooperation, the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) was launched by the Chinese government in 2013. In his state visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia in 2013, President Xi Jinping stated that the BRI was developed to promote infrastructure and trade across land and sea-based routes, which would accelerate the economy under growing feelings of globalization and protectionism (Buckley, 2020: 311; Du ve Zhang, 2018; Li et al, 2019). This initiative covers 72 countries with 65% of the whole world population (OECD, 2018). BRI initiative is of importance as it connects different regions in the world (Hussain et al., 2020:2). This initiative, by which technology, infrastructure, resource mobilization and labor mobility will be shared, will support countries in terms of industrial growth and economic progress (Rauf et al, 2018: 2). Financial investment flows of this investment change between USD 4 to 8 trillion, and more share has been assigned to the developing countries from this fund in order to develop their economies. Within the scope of BRI plans, 7000 projects will be completed by focusing on energy projects, infrastructure development, export and trade, market integration and skills diversification (Khan et al, 2021:480). For this reason, two significant financial funds have been established to finance the Belt and Road project. These are as follows: Silk Road Fund (2014) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB (2015) (Zhang et al, 2018:136).

Despite these advantages, it is discussed that this initiative, funded by China and of which infrastructure projects have been established, is focused on China while the roles of other project countries have not been considered (Calabrese and Cao, 2021). It is claimed that the goals of BRI are in accordance with the development aims of possible host countries, however, some infrastructure projects implemented have shown that little importance has been attached on long-term needs of the host countries. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, these issues caused tensions and fractures between China and several host countries regarding the design, development and execution of SME infrastructure projects mostly due to burden of debt and related 'asset acquisitions' (Buckley, 2020: 311).

Turkey has a significant role in the Belt and Road project due to its geopolitical position, stability and NATO membership. Turkey may act as a gate for China to Balkans and Europe as well as a key ally in the Middle East. Furthermore, as Turkey controls many strategic transitions, it is considered an integral country of the Belt and Road project (Akçay and Qingye, 2020: 2). Turkey is located in China's economic corridor of China-Central West Asia with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Iran, six belts that are rich in terms of energy and resources in the world.

## **Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB)**

With the BRI project, seaway, railway and road transportation systems of countries will be developed and extended. This initiative has two components called Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR). Of these, Silk Road Economic Belt focuses on gathering China, Central Asia, Russia and Europe (Baltic) and connecting China to the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean via Central Asia and the Indian Ocean. On the other hand, 21st Century Maritime Silk Road has been designed to arrive in Europe from the coast of China via the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean on the one hand and to go to South Pacific from the coast of China via the South China Sea on the other hand (Xinhua, 2016).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China and Turkey are two countries located at two edges of the old silk road, which is closely related to "One Belt, One Road", a Chinese initiative (Jinghon and Kuzmin, 2021). When this initiative is considered in terms of railway networks, it is argued in terms of geography that Poland is the most proper center to connect railways from post-Soviet countries of Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) to railways planned from the Balkans and the Greek port of Piraeus. In addition, it is urged that the projection of Germany as a center in this respect is wrong as the Budapest-Belgrade railway goes further north. In addition, the Czech Republic is considered an alternative rail center, if not as much as Poland (Górski, 2018: 115).

Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor (Middle Corridor), which starts from Turkey and reaches the Caucasus region, and then Central Asia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) by crossing the Caspian Sea after Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, is one of the most important components of the project of reviving the historical Silk Road. The Middle Corridor starts in our country and then reaches Georgia, Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea, respectively with railway and highway connections, which then extends to PRC by following the route of Turkmenistan- Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan or Kazakhstan (via Caspian Pass). To this end, Baku/Alat (Azerbaijan), Aktau/Kuryk (Kazakhstan) and Turkmenbashi (Turkmenistan) ports are used for combined transport in the Caspian Pass (mfa.gov.tr, 2021).

Turkey has joined Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor initiative, starting in China and then crossing Central Asia (Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan) and then the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan and Georgia and which is known to be Middle Corridor, in order to adapt to these developments. This initiative mainly focuses on a network of road and railway transport modes with transitions in the Caspian Sea. If this corridor is used effectively, it is expected to help Turkey and Central Asian countries benefit from China-Europe trade and infrastructure investments (TEPAV, 2019).

There are many bilateral and multilateral cooperation initiatives among Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and China. Some of these are as follows: Turkey signed "Memorandum of Understanding Between The Government of The Republic of Turkey and The Government of The People's Republic Of China On Cooperation Within The Framework Of The Silk Road Economic Belt and The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative" on 14 November 2015 at the G20 Leaders' Summit held in Antalya (TBMM, 2015). In addition, Turkey signed Joint Cooperation Protocol with Azerbaijan and Central Asian Republics, and established a Coordinatination Council. The Lapis Lazuli-Transportation Corridor Agreement was signed to provide a regional cooperation among Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan to serve the belt road initiative (portseurope.com, 2021).

Although it is not within the scope of BRI, Trans Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline Project (TANAP) is important for Turkey as it will transport natural gas from the Caspian Sea to Europe via Turkey, as a

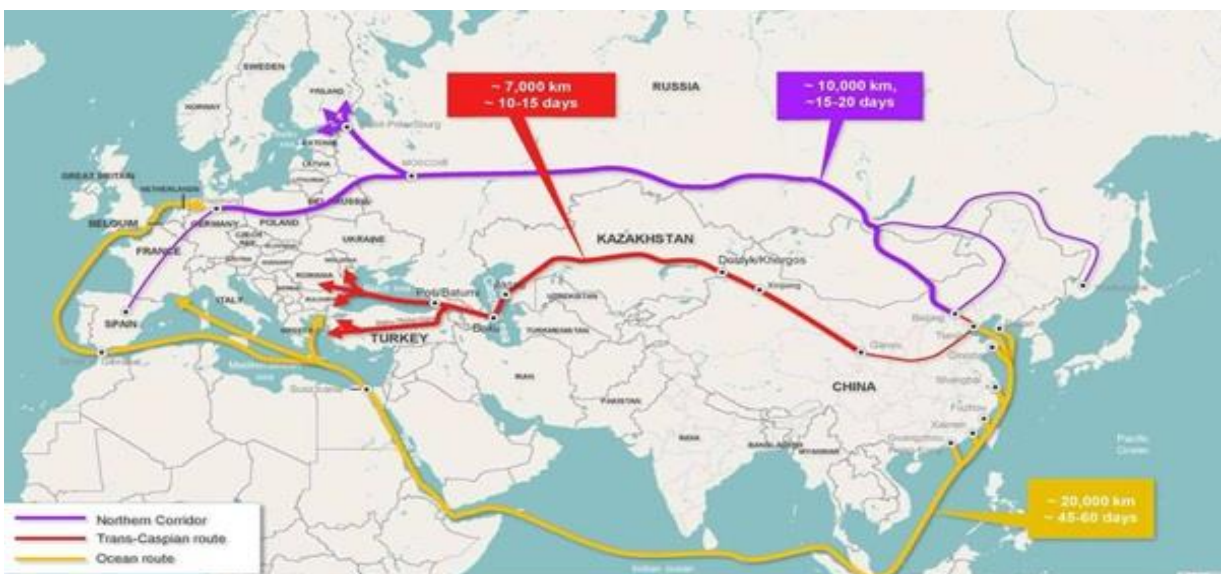
part of the European Union's Southern Gas Corridor. This line, in 1850 km length, will pass through 20 provinces of Ardahan, Kars, Erzurum, Erzincan, Bayburt, Gümüşhane, Giresun, Sivas, Yozgat, Kırşehir, Kırıkkale, Ankara, Eskişehir, Bilecik, Kütahya, Bursa, Balıkesir, Çanakkale, Tekirdağ and Edirne, and will end in the İpsala district of Edirne on the Greek border (TANAP, 2021).

In addition to its economic contribution, the iron silk road, to which the BTK line is connected, will also contribute to the unity and integrity of the Turkish World (Özpay, 2018). This historical railway line has important effects on the Turkish World in terms of economy, strategy and management, and the importance of the "logistics" sector is better understood in the globalizing world trade, where competition is getting live day each passing day by using the latest technologies (Bucsky and Kenderdine, 2020).

Figure 1. Trans-Caspian East-West Middle Corridor (Bulut, 2018).



Figure 2. Alternative Routes from China to Europe (bakuresearchinstitute.org, 2021).



## **Baku Tbilisi Kars Railway Line (BTK)**

Turkey is a part of international transportation routes due to its advantage caused by its location. Some of these roads are as follows:

- United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Europe (UNECE) E-roads,

Trans-European North-South Motorway (TEM), Trans-European Railway (TER) Projects and Euro-Asian Transport Links (EATL)

- Trans-European Transport Networks (TEN-T)
- TRACECA Routes
- Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) Road and Rail Corridors
- Black Sea Cooperation Organization (BSEC) Black Sea Ring Highways and Motorways of the Sea (Bulut, 2018)

The Baku Tbilisi Kars railway line is the starting point of the middle corridor in our country. The Baku Tbilisi Kars railway line was put into service in 2017 in terms of infrastructure. Chang'an Train of China Railway Express, which is the first freight train arrived in our country over the Middle Corridor (6 November 2019, Ankara) under the Belt and Road Initiative, completed its journey from China's Xi'an city to Prague, the capital of Czech Republic, in 18 days by using the transportation infrastructure of our country, including the Middle Corridor, BTK Railway and Marmaray Tube Pass (mfa.gov.tr, 2021). Now, Istanbul-China journey is completed in 12 days, and Kars-China journey is completed in 10 days with the BTK line. The amount of freight moving on the Kars route, which is connected to the BTK line, has reached 4000 tons per day. In 2021, this amount of freight will increase to 7000 tons and 9000 tons in the next year.

The BTK route, which is a Middle Corridor initiative, represents a Turkish policy aiming to establish an efficient transport connection with China. With this network, the Turkish railway network has established a railway connection to Kazakhstan and then to Central Asia and China via the Caspian roll-on/roll-off (RORO) connection through the Transcaucasian countries (Georgia and Azerbaijan) (Prokic and Stanimirović, 2019).

In the BTK line, 1160 containers of import and 8239 containers of export were carried out until now. All these activities were made to the Turkic Republics and China in the middle belt. In the BTK line, while Citrus, Marble, Soybean Meal, Miscellaneous Food, Iron Ore, Construction Material, White Goods, Pipe, Borax, Manganese Ore are exported, Lentil, Wheat, Feed, Adipic Acid, Copper Cathode, Paper, Walnut, Silicone, Coil and Billet Sheet, Sunflower, Steel Construction are imported (Muharrem Toraman, face to face interview, June 2021).

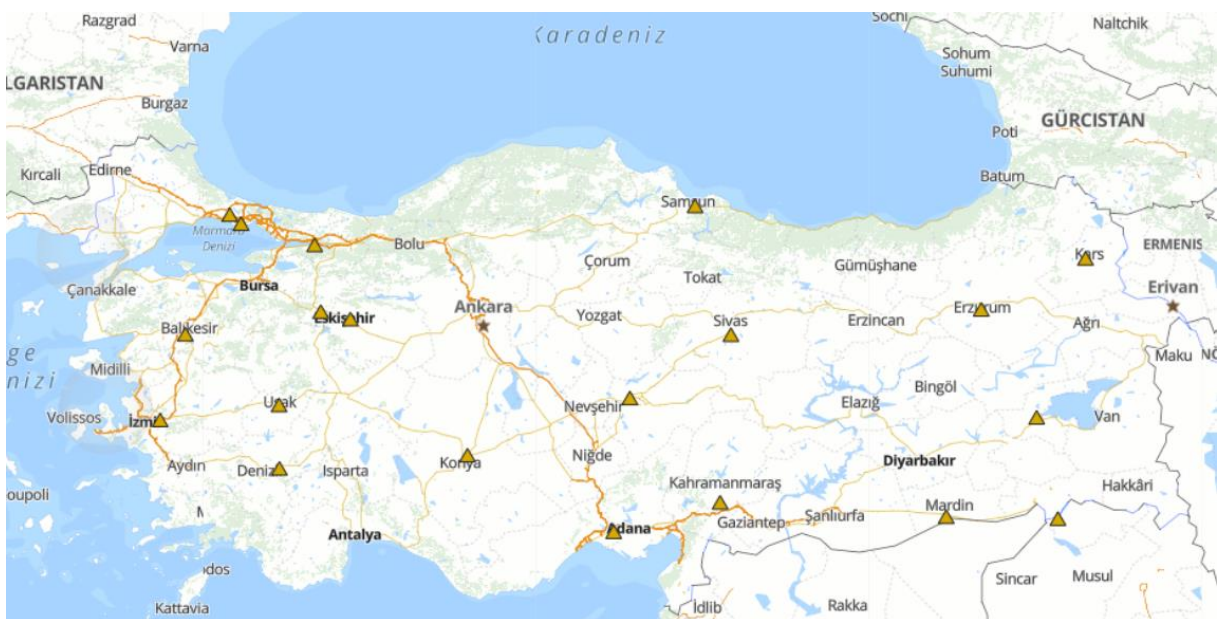
Figure 3. Baku Tbilisi Kars Railway (mfa.gov.tr, 2021).



### Kars Logistics Center (KLC)

The necessity and importance of integrated and value-added logistics activities are increasing each passing day to meet customer expectations. Logistics villages, in which such activities can be fulfilled by a holistic approach, have begun to become widespread so that logistics activities can be met (Bay and Erol, 2016: 124). These places are stated as *Logistics Centres, Logistic Bases or Logistic Villages* in the literature. Logistics Centres are the places, where all national and international logistics and transportation operations are managed and various business operations are directed (Yazdani et al, 2020).

Figure 4. Logistics Centers in Turkey (TCDD, 2021).



In technical terms, modernization contributes significantly to meeting global freight demand through better interaction between countries and the harmonization of related operations (Bersenev et al.,



2020). The logistics centres, which have been made widespread, enable intermodal transport activities. While 60% of Turkey's foreign trade activities carried out in 2020 were transported by sea and 30% by road, the rate of railway remained at 0.5%. This rate is too low for railway transport mode, which has the biggest advantage in terms of cost after maritime transport mode. It is also very low for Turkey, which has a railway network from one end to other (1280 km).

Kars Logistics Center (KLC) will increase this rate by means of the Asian trade that will be connected with the BTK Railway line. Kars Logistics Center is established on a 400000 m<sup>2</sup> area, which is very close to the city center and organized industrial zone. This center has a highway connection, and its distance to airport is 12 km and the nearest port is 277 km. While the theoretical capacity of KLC was approximately 1700 tons per day, its actual capacity was approximately 1190 tons until the opening date of 21/05/2021. Following its opening, theoretical capacity will be achieved rapidly.

## **SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The followings are suggested so that Turkey provides advantage regarding competition in the markets of other countries and becomes an effective actor in the BRI initiative: first of all, in order to show that the idea of reviving the Great Silk Road between China and Turkey is not a dream and to draw the interests of investors in this regard, it will be beneficial to increase mutual cooperation between China and Turkey. Secondly, the developments in the BTK line should be monitored well and the extent of its potential should be determined. This may provide Turkey with a leader role among BRI countries. Thirdly, Turkey and Russia have been determined as the countries with the most competitive advantage in international trade among the BRI countries. This advantage should be evaluated by a professional network system. Fourthly, the movements on the middle belt line should be made more effective by determining the regional cooperation of the countries on the middle belt line, their areas of expertise in production and the advantages specific to these countries. Lastly, it should be ensured to remove the factors to decrease speed such as communication, information sharing, lack of experience, hardware deficiencies that may cause a slowdown in international trade activities on this network. One of the activities to be performed in this respect has been fulfilled in the Turkish side of BTK. The first dual gauge rail was established in Turkey in order to prevent any problem that may be caused due to the difference of the rail line with a width of 1520 millimetres used in countries such as Russia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan and the rails of 1435 millimetre standards used in Turkey and Europe.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

The most significant contribution of this study is to discuss the BTK line as a gate of the BRI project, located on the iron silk road and introduced by the Chinese government in 2013, in the middle belt. In this study, a general perspective has been provided, and BTK specific evaluations have been made. In further studies, models, which will reveal the effects of this line on macro variables by various econometric models, may be established. Such models will be useful for policy-makers in future planning. In addition, its benefits to regional development can also be analyzed.

In addition to these, the rates of using railway instead of maritime transport can be estimated for Turkey by using different estimation methods. This is important for the preparation of a future projection.

## CONCLUSION

Turkey is one of the most important countries of the road silk road that will be revived by the BRI. It is one of the rare countries, which is a bridge between Asia and Europe, in which all modes of transport such as maritime, railway, road, airway, pipeline, inland waterway are made. This provides Turkey with a great advantage in terms of intermodal transportation. BTK railway line and KLC, which have been established for this purpose, will provide many advantages to Turkey in terms of using these advantages. Turkey opens the European gate of the material flow that will start from China, Asia to Europe. Public institutions, private establishment, universities and non-governmental organizations, which will contribute in this regard, should work together and share their knowledge and skills.

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## **KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS**

**Modes:** Expresses the direction used in transportation. Seaway, railway, highway, airway etc.

**Middle Corridor:** The Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor Initiative.

**Belt and Road Initiative (BRI):** The initiative announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping during a series of visits to Central Asian and South Asian countries at the end of 2013.

**Baku Tbilisi Kars Railway Line (BTK):** It is a regional railway line that directly connects Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey.

**Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB):** It is a world-famous trade route starting from China and extending to Europe through Anatolia and the Mediterranean.