

A map of Europe and surrounding regions, including the Black Sea, Caspian Sea, and parts of North Africa and the Middle East. The map is color-coded by country and shows major geographical features.

On Wider Europe

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Summary: The strategic weight of Central Asia derives from its proximity to several conflict zones, but also from its economic potential and vicinity to two major actors, Russia and China, both with uncertain relations with the West. The East-West Corridor linking Romania with Central Asia via Georgia and Azerbaijan brought a needed shift in the geopolitics of the region, both bringing the West closer to Central Asia and offering huge opportunities for the United States and the European countries.

The East-West Strategic Corridor: Multiple Opportunities and Benefits

by Iulian Chifu

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan not only physically changed their region, but created the need, and also the opportunity, for a new strategic outlook to the region. This did not occur during the planning phase of these operations, but later, when the problem of alternative routes to Afghanistan became crucial for transportation of military material and weaponry. The need for a short, straight, safe way to enter the heart of the continent offered countries along a corridor reaching from the European Union's eastern border to Afghanistan a renewed strategic importance. For example, Romania's participation in the "Coalition of the Willing" in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and later its membership in NATO, together with the common military facilities offered by Romania to the U.S. Army and its strategic partnership with the United States and the U.K., secured the Western flank of this corridor. This created an excellent opportunity for the United States and Europe to reach this region, and link it to the West.

Central Asia and its Rising Strategic Weight

Central Asia allows easy access to the Asian continent, and its neighbors are the most important actors in the region. The geopolitical influences here are diverse, and the balance that

some of the Central Asian states strive to strike between them is a real piece of art. The region is not only interesting for scholars, it also abounds in economic, social, and security opportunities for both the United States and the EU.

In the north of the region, the Russian Federation maintains old connections and designs new institutions for Central Asian states meant to ensure their (re)integration in a common project. While some of these states agree to maintain strong links with Moscow, others reject them. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) remains in place and its economic arm, now called the Eurasian Union, plays an important role in the exchanges between the countries of the former Soviet space. Kazakhstan is the only other country that joined the Customs Union, initially created by Russia and Belarus. On the other hand, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the military organization of former Soviet States, was joined by neither Turkmenistan, which maintains its neutrality, nor Uzbekistan, which retreated from the organization once it adopted the new rules of international involvement on the territories of the member states that had been proposed by Russia.

In the east, China is playing an increasing role as a major regional investor, contributing to diversification of energy exports of the countries in the region and breaking the Russian control over the northern energy route. Moreover, China is more and more involved in the politics of the region both through its investments and increased nominal influence, slowly outgrowing Russia's.

The south of the region remains turbulent and has become a net exporter of threats through drug trafficking and, more importantly, radical Islam and terrorism. The planned Central Asia-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline could be a major breakthrough for the region. It would potentially trigger development and pacification of Afghanistan, allowing for a much talked about modern recreation of the classical Silk Road. National reconstruction of Afghanistan in general offers a great opportunity for countries in Central Asia, whose proximity give it an important advantage for trade, employment of foreign labor force, and overall economic involvement.

To the west, the region is undergoing interesting and important changes in its relations with Europe. Germany, during its European presidency, launched the European interest in Central Asia, especially in Kazakhstan. Later, Turkmenistan became interested in selling its gas to Europe, to be shipped through the Trans-Caspian pipeline via Azerbaijan. With these developments, the East-West Corridor linking Romania with Central Asia via Georgia and Azerbaijan brought a needed shift in the geopolitics of the region, both bringing the West closer to Central Asia and offering huge opportunities for the United States and the European countries.

Central Asia is by no means cohesive: rivalries and unfriendly gestures between countries are a regular feature. It is not a democratic region either. On the contrary, regimes are cemented in old habits, with political dynasties and leaders promoting absolutist monarchy rules under republican institutions. No change of those rules is likely to happen until there is a sustained exposure of the population to Western values and way of life, which is a hugely important side effect of the East-West Corridor.

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Afghanistan, and Iran are all in close proximity, and any direct and safe access into the heart of Central Asia should be a strategic security incentive for the West. The U.S.-Romanian common military facilities in Constanta and the antiballistic shield elements to be placed in Deveselu, southern Romania, are one leg of the bridge leading into the heart of Central Asia. Central Asia's riches and economic potential should be of interest to the EU, which needs alternative sources and routes of energy. The entry of the United States and EU in the region would change the regional power game and would bring a needed counterbalance to Russia and China.

The East-West Corridor: Convergence of Interests between Actors

Most importantly, the East-West Corridor serves common interest and addresses strategic needs of all countries involved. For Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, this corridor offers direct access to a third major player in the region — Europe and/or the United States — and thus facilitates a change in the geopolitical balance of powers, making it easier for countries in the region to preserve their security, sovereignty, and integrity. A third major player is sorely needed, especially one that, as in the case of the United States and the EU, is accompanied by Western investments in resource development and energy, and by a transfer of knowledge and technology to the region.

Azerbaijan is another country benefiting from an increased importance of the corridor. Increased trade and contacts would ensure the stability of the country and the flow of investments, triggering extensive development. It would deter any Iranian attempt to transmit radical Islam or other instabilities into Azerbaijan.

For Armenia, a viable corridor would be a disincentive to Azerbaijan to use of force to solve the Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict. The benefits the corridor could bring would outweigh placing them at risk through an open conflict. Yerevan would be offered the chance of joining common projects with major dividends once the conflict settled. For the international community, the creation of the corridor would be a catalyst to solve the NK conflict, incentivizing those most capable of assisting the peace process. At the same time, the corridor would help develop overland transport from Azerbaijan via Georgia and Turkey to the remote enclave of Nakichevan, which is strategically important to Azerbaijan.

For Georgia, the East-West Corridor would help stabilize the country, ensure the security of the East-West link, and grant a heightened level of security vis a vis the pressure coming from the fortified separatist regions and the Russian capabilities placed there. Trade, transportation, and energy could help Georgians rebuild the country and make it more attractive for the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to rejoin, while simultaneously binding Georgia more closely to the West. The country would perceive this as strong support for the democracy growing roots in the country and for the effort toward strong institution building and governmental accountability.

The benefits of this strategic corridor would also likely spill over to neighboring countries. Turkey would find itself linked closer to Azerbaijan and to those Central Asian countries with a Turkic historical identities and links. Turkey could also assume important tasks in securing the East-West Corridor, especially in the Black Sea, where it commands the most important NATO fleet. This way it could physically protect the corridor against any disruptions in trade, transportation, or energy routes.

Ukraine would be a major beneficiary of the East-West Corridor, not least, because of the opportunity it offers for trading the Central Asian countries and for importing oil and gas. Ukraine has already announced its interest in the AGRI LNG project, joining Romania, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Hungary, and is planning to build a deliquefying factory in Odessa, complementary to the one planned in Constanta, Romania. They would both deliquefy LNG shipped from Kulevi, Georgia. Ukraine has had quantities of gas under contract in Turkmenistan for years, but

the Russian transportation system makes it impossible to exploit them.

A Concept with Multiple Strategic Benefits

The East-West Corridor is a logical strategic evolution. The region has been subject to reflection and to construction of strategic concepts since 1997. The U.S.-Romanian Strategic Partnership, launched in 1997 in Bucharest after the visit of President Bill Clinton, has a central place in the Wider Black Sea Region strategic concept. U.S., Western, and Romanian strategists have since built and refined this framework.

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NATO also became involved in the conceptualization of the Wider Black Sea Area in 2002, when three countries in the region became NATO members and all the others, including the Russian Federation, entered partnership agreements with the Alliance or harbored aspirations of joining it. The NATO Bucharest summit in 2008 offered the climax, when Ukraine and Georgia were offered guarantees for their eventual membership of the Alliance.

The EU embraced the strategic concept after 2007. Three months after the integration of Romania and Bulgaria into the EU, Romania succeeded in promoting the Black Sea Synergy, a form of cooperation between the EU and the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), the most important organization in the region. Unfortunately, the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 blocked this project. Today, the EU is in the process of transforming the Black Sea Synergy into a proper Black Sea Strategy.

Moreover, the countries in the Black Sea Region, the Caucasus, and Central Asia succeeded in building the Black Sea-Caspian Sea Foundation, based in Bucharest and promoting regional cooperation in a more inclusive concept than that of the Wider Black Sea Area. Since 2009, the concept of Black Sea-Caspian Sea Cooperation started gaining substance, cohesion, and inclusiveness through a series of projects that promote cooperation between the countries in the region.



Romania's efforts to maintain excellent relations with Georgia and Azerbaijan, as well as with Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, led to the launching of the AGRI-Azerbaijan-Georgia-Romania Interconnector. These relations represent solid grounds for further political support and an eventual intergovernmental agreement for the East-West Corridor. More importantly, it paves the way for the United States, NATO, and EU to commit to this endeavor. With political support, a road map and pool of common projects could immediately be put in place, which, complemented by solid political guarantees, would make the corridor a feasible, solid, and mutually profitable construct.

The East-West Corridor is of immediate benefit. Should it enjoy the political support of the countries involved and public support of the United States, NATO, and the EU, it would be the background needed to promote a series of much needed projects covering trade, transportation, energy exports, and investments. In the shorter term, it would allow for a safe retrieval of military equipment now in Afghanistan.

The corridor offers another important strategic benefit: it could prove to be a solid deterrent for all conflicts in the region and an important strategic incentive to stabilize the regions to the south of this corridor — Syria, Iran, Greater Middle East — but also to the north, especially the Northern Caucasus.

The existence of the corridor would offer a stable *modus vivandi* for the region in spite of the frozen conflicts: it would prevent these conflicts from being reheated. It would also prevent new conflicts from emerging since its benefits to the countries in the region would encourage their interest in the sustainability of the East-West Corridor, which would become more important than provoking each other. In this strategic framework, existing conflicts could be negotiated and solved over time, and the context could prove attractive, in the midterm, even to Russia.

Understanding the strategic importance of the East-West Corridor and ensuring the political support of countries involved, and that of neighboring countries that see the benefits of its existence, is a first step towards its concrete existence. The commitment to secure the corridor for trade, transportation, energy, and military routes would offer guarantees for investors.

The United States, NATO, and EU can and should play the role of direct guarantors, either by joining the political agreement and/or by assuming pieces of its physical security. This would be much in line with official strategies and documents, as the EU has a stated interest in the critical energy infrastructure, especially oil and gas pipelines, and as NATO assumed responsibility for the safety of both energy and military transportation routes. The East-West Corridor emerges as the best strategic solution to fulfilling these commitments and promoting and advancing common interests.

About the Author

Iulian Chifu is a professor of conflict analysis and decision-making in crisis at the National School of Political and Administrative Studies in Bucharest. He is the founding director of the Conflict Prevention and Early Warning Center, and is currently an advisor for strategic affairs, security and foreign policy to the president of Romania.

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