



Jinhua launches its first China-Europe freight train of the Year of the Dragon in Jinhua City, east China's Zhejiang Province, on February 10, 2024.

● PICTURE ALLIANCE



economic footprint in Georgia, prioritizing infrastructure and strategic projects with significant regional implications. In May 2024, a Chinese-led consortium secured the contract to develop the Anaklia deep-sea port on Georgia's Black Sea coast: a project poised to bolster Georgia's role in the Middle Corridor and China's Belt and Road Initiative. Alongside this, Chinese firms have undertaken major infrastructure projects, such as constructing the Kvesheti-Kobi tunnel, the largest in Georgia, which further integrates the country into China's growing trans-Eurasian trade network. These ventures underscore China's strategic interest in positioning Georgia as a critical transit hub, in line with its broader goals of strengthening connectivity and influence across Eurasia.

China's strategy to expand its presence along Eurasian trade corridors hinges not only on constructing these routes but also on ensuring they are competitive and attractive to transporters. Assessing the competitiveness of these corridors — essential for understanding which routes are most viable for Asia-Europe transit — a July 2024 study evaluated various corridors based on current operational characteristics. The findings revealed that the Traditional Maritime Corridor leads in performance with a competitiveness index of 0.7203 (on a scale from 0 to 1). Following this are the Trans-Siberian Corridor at 0.4056, and then the Middle and Southern Corridors, with similar performance indices of 0.2864 and 0.2662, respectively.

To counter China and the CIRN informal alliance in their bid to expand influence across Eurasia — and potentially reshape global trade dynamics through corridors like the North-South route, which Russia is developing and which links the East-West networks to global maritime pathways — the West must actively work to bolster its presence along these strategic routes. Achieving this would require not only increasing Western investments in these transit corridors but also strategically prioritizing routes less vulnerable to CIRN influence. Investing in these corridors offers a strong return, not only because there is a clear business rationale for alternatives to the Northern Corridor — which is likely to remain under-utilized, given that even after the Ukraine war ends, Russia's reintegration into European trade will face substantial challenges — but also because such investments enable the West to maintain influence in the rapidly evolving infrastructure landscape, ensuring a balanced role in shaping global economic and trade routes.

From a geostrategic standpoint, China's central role in all trade routes connecting Asia makes disrupting CIRN dependent on Western investment in alternative corridors that bypass Iran and limit reliance on Turkey. Turkey's approach, balancing alliances and prioritizing immediate gains, has led it to align more closely with China and, at times, accommodate Russia, adding a layer of uncertainty. While Europe may tolerate this ambiguity, given its lower exposure to the impacts of a functional CIRN alliance on open global trade routes, the United States cannot afford such leniency. The United States relies on the smooth functioning of global maritime routes, which is one of its key geopolitical imperatives. Therefore, the United States needs to be aware of and mitigate any shift CIRN might introduce to current trade norms.

The intersection between Russia's North-South Corridor and the Middle and Southern Corridors, where China is expanding influence, poses a challenge not only for Eurasia but for the entire international trade system. Given China and Russia's stated long-term goals to reduce Western influence in global markets, the design of these corridors highlights their intent to establish a foundation toward that objective. Though not intended for the short or

medium term, should these new corridors establish rules that undermine the existing norms of open, free navigation — currently upheld by Western standards — the impact would reverberate across global trade. It is therefore likely that the West — both Europe and the United States — will explore ways to counter the influence projected by the CIRN alliance in Eurasia, including a close examination of the development of current trade corridors. The Middle Corridor has two variants: one that reaches Europe via Turkey and the Mediterranean, and another that connects to Europe through the Black Sea, accessing Romanian and Bulgarian ports. Alongside the Southern Corridor, these routes can be grouped as Middle Corridor A and Middle Corridor B, with a comparison highlighting the regions and countries they traverse. This analysis shows that the most favorable East-West corridor for the West, in terms of control and minimal complications, is Middle Corridor B. This route stretches from China through Central Asia and the Caucasus, then across the Black Sea directly into Europe, offering a reliable pathway with reduced geopolitical risks. The trade corridor variant that bypasses both Iran and Turkey goes through the Black Sea, an area currently at risk of escalating conflict. Russia's strategic aim to control Ukraine's southern coast, underscored by increasing attacks on the port of Odesa in recent months, heightens the security concerns surrounding this route. While currently, the Middle Corridor is slightly more competitive than the Southern Corridor considering the current operational status of multi-modal infrastructure, sustained Western support for investment could make it more feasible. At the same time, it may be that, through

the process, and as the war in Ukraine ends in a favorable way to the West, the Black Sea is getting back to an open and free sea, considering the interest of allowing for trade passage.

Western efforts to develop the Middle Corridor and promote an "open Central Asia" that welcomes investment beyond Chinese and Russian influence are already showing results. The EU-Central Asia Strategy and US involvement in regional connectivity projects have contributed to Kazakhstan's decision not to join BRICS in 2024, instead encouraging it to focus on its economic growth. Instead, the West's emphasis on regional cooperation without explicit bloc politics aligns well with Kazakhstan's independent foreign policy stance. Kazakhstan has expressed interest in the EU's Global Gateway initiative, which funds infrastructure projects, reflecting its openness to Western-backed development.

The development of Middle Corridor B — the route that reaches Europe via the Black Sea — could play a pivotal role in keeping the South Caucasus open to Western-backed growth, even amid its engagement with Russia and China. This potential rests on two factors.

First, as long as Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan, remains receptive to collaborating with the West on infrastructure projects, the South Caucasus stands to benefit from this openness. Second, the expansion of Middle Corridor B aligns with the Western "containment line" that spans from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea and the Adriatic. This initiative, also known as the Three Seas Initiative, aims to enhance infrastructure for both economic and military purposes and has become increasingly important since the war in Ukraine started. This strategic focus has already spurred

substantial investment in key port facilities like Gdansk and Constanta, along with the development of a railway connection between them. Looking ahead, these efforts may also support transforming the Danube into a commercial corridor with dual-use potential for military logistics. Simultaneously, the Via Carpathia, a transnational highway network linking the Baltic Sea to the Aegean and Black Seas to strengthen north-south transport and regional trade, remains a high priority for the Three Seas Initiative. While many projects receive EU funding, they also attract significant private investment, sustaining the idea that the return on investment is higher than most other classic infrastructure projects.

The success of this vision rests on the West's, particularly the US's ability to grasp the challenge posed by the informal CIRN alliance of China, Iran, Russia, and the support from North Korea, and on its commitment to formulating effective counterstrategies. At its core, much will depend on whether the Black Sea remains an open and accessible maritime area. If the conflict in Ukraine escalates in the coming months and Russia secures more of Ukraine's coastline, the Black Sea could take on a new strategic character, quite different from a scenario where Russia is forced to withdraw, allowing Ukraine to reclaim its exclusive economic zone there. In the first case, the CIRN alliance would gain not only territory but also a stronger influence over the definition of "free and open" trade corridors — an outcome with potential repercussions for maritime trade not only in the region but worldwide.

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Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze speaks during a ceremony marking the completion of a major tunnel on the Kvesheti-Kobi road section in Georgia on April 23, 2024. The China Railway Tunnel Group completed this tunnel, significantly boosting the country's connectivity.

● XINHUA



Given the rising coordination between CIRN's members, Tehran sees a chance to collaborate with both Russia and China in constructing the North-South Corridor and expanding its participation in what China refers to as the Silk Belt and Road Initiative. After all, Iran has been looking to establish parallel trade networks and systems for years before 2022 because of its own economic problems coming from being sanctioned by the United States and some other Western states due to its nuclear program. In the summer of 2024, Moscow and Tehran were set to invest about \$25 billion into developing internal waterways and railways to link Saint Petersburg to the ports of Chabahar and Bandar Abbas.