Building resilience (before a crisis strikes)

by Irene Rosberg, *Programme Director, Executive MBA in Shipping and Logistics (The Blue MBA), Copenhagen Business School*

Repeated disruptions at the world's maritime chokepoints are exposing the fragility of supply chains built around a handful of efficient and predictable corridors. The answer is not to replace ocean shipping, but to create viable alternatives.

For decades, international trade rested on a fragile assumption: the shortest, most established shipping route would remain open, secure, and commercially viable. That assumption is now being tested across strategic maritime corridors. Security threats have disrupted traffic through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal; drought has constrained the Panama Canal; war has transformed the Black Sea; and ongoing tensions around Hormuz continue to expose vulnerable energy supply chains.

The shipping industry has demonstrated considerable resilience by rerouting vessels around the Cape of Good Hope. Companies have increased inventories, moved critical components by air and through combined sea-rail transport while diversifying suppliers and moving some procurement closer to their principal markets. These measures have kept trade moving, but at a significant cost. Longer voyages consume more fuel, absorb capacity, and increase emissions. Larger inventories tie up capital, while airfreight remains prohibitively expensive for most commodities. In short, emergency workarounds are not a sustainable transport strategy.

Overlapping security and supply-chain risks

Modern trade became efficient partly because enormous cargo volumes were channelled through a few maritime trade lanes. This reduced distances and costs when the system operated normally, but created a dependence that is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain.

Recent events have reinforced how disruption at one maritime chokepoint can spread quickly through the global economy. The UN Trade and Development reported in June 2026 that over 100 days of disruption in the Strait of Hormuz had increased freight, energy, and fertiliser costs, with continuing consequences for inflation and food security, particularly in vulnerable economies. Meanwhile, the International Maritime Organization has recorded 61 confirmed incidents affecting international shipping in the Red Sea since January 2024, showing that overlapping security and supply-chain risks can no longer be dismissed as isolated or temporary anomalies.

The oceans remain open, and ships can usually avoid dangerous areas, but commercially attractive alternatives are narrowing – a longer route is not necessarily economically sustainable. Shipping companies can calculate the extra fuel and charter costs of a diversion, but the wider consequences are less predictable. Schedules become unreliable, equipment is displaced, ports and terminals receive cargo outside the planned windows, and manufacturers must hold more stock, spreading the cost across the supply chain.

The question is therefore no longer simply how shipping should manage the next crisis, but whether industry and governments will invest in structural redundancy before another major corridor becomes constrained.

Modest but encouraging

The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, known as the Middle Corridor, warrants greater attention. Linking China and Central Asia with Europe through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, with onward connections across the Black Sea or Türkiye, it avoids Russia and offers an alternative to the Northern Corridor and maritime diversions around Africa.

Its strategic value does not lie in replacing deep-sea shipping, which remains indispensable. No rail-based corridor can reproduce its scale or cost efficiency for the vast volumes of energy, raw materials, and consumer goods moving between Asia and Europe. The Middle Corridor should instead complement maritime routes for cargo where value, urgency, or supply-chain importance justify a multimodal option. When it works efficiently, it can give shippers greater choice, reduce dependence on a single corridor, and improve landlocked economies' access to international markets.

The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route Association reported that

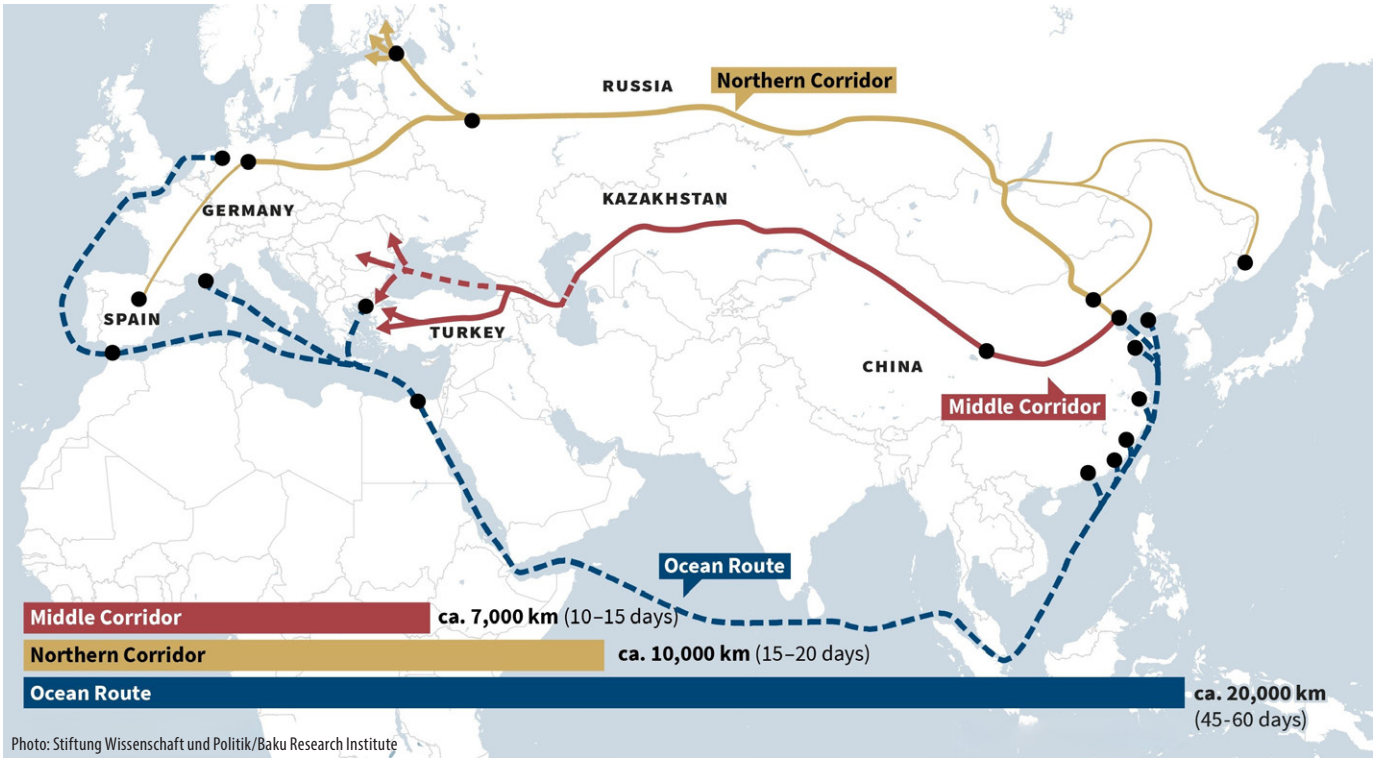


Photo: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik/Baku Research Institute

container traffic reached 76,900 TEUs in 2025, up 36% from the previous year, while container train delivery times reportedly fell to 12-15 days outside winter. Some 4.12 million tonnes moved through the Middle Corridor in 2025 (typically bulk goods – including fertilisers, grains, and construction materials – as well as metals and timber), representing significant growth from 2022's 1.5 million tonnes and 2023's 2.75 million tonnes. These figures are encouraging, though modest relative to established maritime services.

The World Bank has concluded that, with appropriate policies and investment, Middle Corridor freight volumes could triple by 2030 versus 2021 levels, while transit times could be halved. It also argues that the route's future extends beyond China-Europe traffic because regional trade may ultimately generate the majority of its economic value.

Functioning seamlessly

The Middle Corridor still faces serious physical and operational constraints because cargo must cross several borders and transfer between trains, ports, and vessels, creating points where delays and costs accumulate. Different railway gauges, shortages of rolling stock, limited port capacity, difficult Caspian conditions, and inconsistent inland connections all affect reliability. Investment in Aktau, Kuryk, Baku, Poti, and Batumi, alongside stronger connections to Türkiye and Europe, will be essential. The wider Black Sea network, including Constanța, could also benefit as cargo volumes grow and regional seaports play a larger role in Eurasian trade.

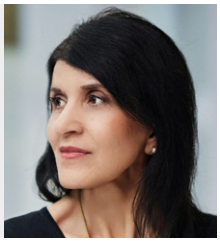
Following Azerbaijan's recent pivot towards the US, the Middle Corridor's capacity may extend with its very own southern (rail) leg, the Zangezur Corridor, which goes around Armenia to connect with Türkiye. But beyond infrastructure, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development has identified additional priorities including digital documentation, improved border crossings, market liberalisation, and more predictable tariff-setting. Specifically, customs procedures must be harmonised, transport documents digitised, and data shared among railways, ports, border agencies, shipping companies, and cargo owners.

A corridor cannot function seamlessly if each border introduces new paperwork, incompatible systems, or tariffs subject to discretionary changes. Reliability must become the principal performance metric. A route that delivers quickly on occasion but frequently encounters unexplained delays will struggle to secure long-term commitments. Shippers need transparent pricing, dependable schedules, and end-to-end tracking. Resilience comes from creating a portfolio of viable transport choices before a crisis begins, not searching for a substitute after disruption strikes.

Providing redundancy

Shipping will continue to carry most global trade, and established maritime routes will remain essential. Yet governments, infrastructure providers, cargo interests, and transport operators must stop treating alternative corridors as contingency options activated only during main-route disruptions.

The industry is not running out of routes but is losing confidence that the lowest-cost option will remain perpetually available. The Middle Corridor cannot solve every geopolitical or supply-chain problem, but it can provide crucial redundancy that a less predictable trading system increasingly requires. ■



An alumna of Rice Business, the Jönköping International Business School, California State University-Sacramento, and the Copenhagen Business School, **Irene Rosberg** has been with the last for over 25 years, currently as the Director of the Executive MBA in Shipping and Logistics, aka the Blue MBA, which won the prestigious Danish Maritime Prize for 2011. "Always in good humour, kind, and co-operative," Irene takes MBA students "through the challenging two-year programme with her strong passion and dedication," read Irene's pupils recommendations.