

POLITICAL SCIENCES

FROM ENERGY CORRIDORS TO DIGITAL CORRIDORS: PROSPECTS FOR KAZAKHSTAN–GCC COOPERATION IN AI GOVERNANCE AND DATA INFRASTRUCTURE

Abu Shawer Omar Ahmad

2nd year PhD student, Department of International Relations, Sorbonne-Kazakhstan Institute, Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University, Almaty, Kazakhstan

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-1883-8588>

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Abstract

The redistribution of global influence in the twenty-first century is no longer defined exclusively by control over physical resources or transportation routes. Increasingly, strategic power is embedded in digital infrastructure, data governance frameworks, and artificial intelligence regulation. Kazakhstan and the Gulf Cooperation Council states—particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar—have historically interacted through energy trade and capital flows. Yet their simultaneous digital transformation agendas remain largely unconnected at the institutional level. This article introduces the concept of a digital corridor as an analytical lens for examining the prospects of structured cooperation in data infrastructure and AI governance between Central Asia and the Gulf region. Drawing on international political economy and structural power theory, the study evaluates national digital strategies and assesses whether converging diversification priorities create a realistic foundation for regulatory dialogue and infrastructure interconnection. The analysis argues that although a formal digital corridor does not currently exist, strategic convergence and shared modernization objectives make such cooperation both plausible and potentially consequential for regional positioning within emerging global digital governance structures.

Keywords: Digital corridors, AI governance, Data sovereignty, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, International political economy

International political economy is experiencing a structural transition. In previous decades, strategic relevance was largely associated with pipelines, ports, and maritime routes that connected producers and consumers of hydrocarbons. Today, however, digital ecosystems—comprising data centers, cloud infrastructure, and regulatory standards—play an increasingly decisive role in shaping economic resilience and geopolitical influence. Control over data flows functions as a contemporary form of structural power, shaping the environment within which states operate and compete [5, p. 24].

Kazakhstan and the Gulf Cooperation Council states share comparable developmental trajectories. Both regions have historically relied on hydrocarbon revenues while simultaneously seeking economic diversification under conditions of global uncertainty. Kazakhstan's State Program "Digital Kazakhstan," adopted in 2017, emphasizes modernization of public administration, digital industry development, and technological infrastructure expansion [1, p. 3]. In parallel, Saudi Arabia institutionalized data governance through the creation of the Saudi Data and Artificial Intelligence Authority within the broader framework of Vision 2030 [2, p. 12]. The United Arab Emirates advanced regulatory experimentation through its National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence 2031 [3, p. 7], while Qatar embedded AI policy within its long-term national development planning [4, p. 15].

Despite these parallel transformations, Kazakhstan–GCC cooperation remains primarily concentrated in traditional domains such as energy trade, logistics, and sovereign investment. There is no structured framework linking their digital infrastructures or harmonizing their AI governance regimes. This absence should

not be interpreted as stagnation but rather as an undeveloped dimension of otherwise expanding relations.

From a structural power perspective, influence in the digital era derives not merely from technological ownership but from the capacity to shape standards, protocols, and regulatory norms [5, p. 30]. A potential digital corridor would therefore extend beyond technical connectivity. It would require regulatory dialogue, cybersecurity coordination, mutual recognition of data protection principles, and interoperable cloud environments. Without governance compatibility, infrastructure alone cannot produce sustainable digital integration.

Complex interdependence theory further suggests that digital integration generates both opportunity and vulnerability [6, p. 45]. Greater connectivity enhances innovation and market access, yet it simultaneously increases exposure to cyber risks and external regulatory pressures. For Kazakhstan, deeper engagement with Gulf partners could diversify technological partnerships and reduce asymmetric reliance on dominant global platforms. For GCC states, Central Asia offers geographic connectivity between European and Asian markets, potentially reinforcing their role as transregional digital hubs.

However, political coordination and trust-building mechanisms remain essential preconditions. Regulatory divergence, cybersecurity sensitivities, and shifting geopolitical alignments may complicate harmonization efforts. Without institutional anchoring—such as memoranda of understanding in digital governance or regular intergovernmental consultations—digital interaction risks remaining ad hoc rather than strategic.

The transition from energy corridors to digital corridors therefore represents not a replacement of traditional connectivity, but an expansion of its logic into the digital domain. As global influence increasingly depends on servers, standards, and algorithmic architectures, Kazakhstan and the GCC states face a shared strategic question: whether parallel digital ambitions can evolve into coordinated frameworks that enhance autonomy, resilience, and bargaining capacity in the emerging digital order.

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