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Connectivity As A Peace Strategy: The Zangezur Corridor And The Transformation Of Regional Geopolitics In The South Caucasus

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CONNECTIVITY AS A PEACE STRATEGY: THE ZANGEZUR CORRIDOR AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF REGIONAL GEOPOLITICS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

Abstract

The geopolitical dynamics in the South Caucasus region have changed significantly in recent years, especially after the Second Karabakh War. The post-conflict period has shaped new political and economic realities in the region, and at the same time, has made the issues of regional cooperation, economic integration, and the restoration of transport and communication links one of the most important topics on the international agenda. In this context, the concept of “connectivity” is gaining increasing importance not only as an economic but also as a geopolitical tool. In modern international relations, transport corridors and logistics networks act as important mechanisms that expand the regional influence of states and create economic interdependence.

Among such initiatives, one of the projects that stands out is the Zangezur corridor. This corridor is of strategic importance in terms of integrating the region into the wider Eurasian transport system. In this regard, the article examines what opportunities transport and logistics connectivity can create for stability and cooperation in post-conflict regions.

In particular, the question is raised: can regional transport initiatives, including the Zangezur corridor, transform the South Caucasus, historically characterized by conflicts, into a platform for economic cooperation and interdependence? The analysis shows that such projects are not only infrastructural in nature; they are also strategic tools that influence the formation of regional geopolitics. If these initiatives are supported by effective institutional structures and regional cooperation frameworks, the Zangezur corridor can strengthen the geoeconomic role of the South Caucasus and contribute to the transformation of the region into an important transport hub in the Eurasian space.

Keywords

Connectivity diplomacy, Azerbaijan, South Caucasus geopolitics, Zangezur Corridor, economic interdependence, Eurasian transport corridors, regional integration, post-conflict cooperation.

Introduction: The Emergence of a New Regional Order

Today the South Caucasus region has entered a phase of significant geopolitical transformation, mainly in the post-global pandemic era. In particular, the Second Karabakh War fundamentally changed the political and strategic realities of the region, leading to the end of the status quo that had persisted for decades. The post-conflict phase is characterized not only by the reshaping of the security architecture, but also by the emergence of issues such as regional economic cooperation, the restoration of transport-communication and economic ties, and the development of new transit routes.¹ These new realities have led to a reassessment of the role of the region in the international transport and trade system.

In modern geopolitics, transport and logistics networks are considered not only as economic infrastructure, but also as strategic tools that expand the regional influence of states. Against the background of the growth of global trade and the formation of new logistics routes in the Eurasian space, transport corridors have become important mechanisms serving to strengthen economic interdependence between states, deepen regional integration and promote political dialogue.² In this regard, the concept of “connectivity diplomacy” is gaining increasing importance in international relations and creates new strategic opportunities, especially for regions with a transit position.³

Thus, one of the most important projects of this highway and geostrategic importance is the Zangezur corridor, which has been the subject of the most news in recent times. This corridor, in addition to ensuring the restoration of direct transport links between the main territory of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, creates significant potential for the region’s integration into wider Eurasian transport networks. Especially, the connection of the corridor with international routes such as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route³ can strengthen the role of the South Caucasus as a strategic transit location between Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East.

The implementation of regional transport and logistics initiatives and their political and economic consequences against the backdrop of geopolitical re-transformation of world actors require special attention. The question of what opportunities such projects can create for regional stability and cooperation, especially in the post-

¹ International Crisis Group, *Improving Prospects for Peace after the Karabakh War*, 2021 - <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-conflict>

² OECD – *Connectivity and Trade Corridors in Eurasia*, 2023 - <https://www.oecd.org/en/regions/eurasia-region.html> ³ Joseph Nye

Soft Power and international influence discussion, Harvard Kennedy School, 2020, - <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/soft-power-means-success-world-politics>

³ World Bank – *Realizing the Full Potential of the Middle Corridor*, December 16, 2023, *Middle Corridor / TransCaspian Route analysis* - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/video/2023/12/16/realizing-the-full-potential-ofthe-middle-corridor>

conflict phase, remains relevant. One of the main questions in this regard is: do regional connectivity initiatives, including the Zangezur corridor, have the potential to transform the South Caucasus region, historically characterized by conflicts, into a space of cooperation based on economic interdependence?

1.Connectivity, Economic Interdependence, and Peace Building: Conceptual Framework

In the framework of the new world order, modern international relations theory primarily examines the impact of economic and infrastructural connections on regional stability and collaboration. The growth of trade, transport and logistics networks, especially in the globalization era, has led to increased interdependence between states. In this context, the concept of economic interdependence⁴ appears as a crucial concept in international relations theory, suggesting that economic cooperation between states has the potential to reduce the risk of war.

One of the main ideas of the theory of economic interdependence is that the expansion of economic relations and trade leads to the formation of mutual interests between countries, which can reduce the likelihood of conflict. This method has developed particularly within the context of liberal international relations theory. The concept of “complex interdependence”⁵, put forward by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, it suggests that the growth of economic, political and diplomatic contacts between states creates interdependence, which in turn can limit classical forms of power politics. According to this approach, the more economically interconnected states are, the less likely they are to conflict, because conflict increases the risk of economic losses and regional instability.

In recent years, though, infrastructure projects have also become more important in international relations because of their geopolitical significance. At the global level, transport corridors and logistics networks are evaluated not only as business projects, but also as strategic tools that help states gain more regional power. In this context, the concept of “connectivity diplomacy” means that states cooperate together on transport, energy, and logistics projects to promote regional connectivity and make the economy more integrated.

From a geopolitical standpoint, the significance of transport corridors is also related to their facilitation of interregional economic integration. Zbigniew Brzezinski, evaluating the Eurasian space as the principal strategic area of global geopolitics, emphasized that dominance over transport and energy routes within Eurasia plays

⁴ Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977)

⁵ Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, “*Information Interdependence: Complex Interdependence in the Information Age*,” ResearchGate, 2013, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233093052_INFORMATION_INTERDEPENDENCE_Keohane_and_Nye's_complex_interdependence_in_the_information_age

an important role in reshaping the international balance of power.⁶ In this regard, the growth of Eurasian transport corridors is not only of economic but also geopolitical importance and creates new platforms for regional cooperation.

These theoretical methods demonstrate that transport and logistics infrastructure serve as both an instrument for economic development and a mechanism for peacebuilding. Especially in post-conflict areas, the restoration of trade and transport links leads to the emergence of mutual economic interests between states, which in turn creates an important basis for long-term stability. In this regard, regional connectivity initiatives, including projects such as the Zangezur corridor, are not only of an infrastructure nature, but also have significant potential in terms of strengthening regional economic integration and promoting geopolitical cooperation.

2.Strategic Significance of the Zangezur Corridor

The South Caucasus region has historically been an important geopolitical and economic transit space between Europe and Asia. At a time when modern international trade routes are changing, the region's transport and logistics infrastructure has become even more important strategically. In this context, the Zangezur corridor has been assessed in recent years not merely as a regional transport project, but also as a strategic endeavour capable of impacting geoeconomic and geopolitical changes on a Eurasian scale.

One of the most important things about the Zangezur corridor is the restoration of a direct land link between the main territory of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. Until now, the Nakhchivan region, which has been blocked for a long time because of historical and political reasons, has been able to communicate with other parts of Azerbaijan only through alternative routes. In this regard, the project acts as an important initiative that both strengthens the transport infrastructure and the economic and strategic unity of the state.

Nowadays, against the backdrop of the diversification of global trade flows and the growing demand for more reliable alternative routes, Eurasian transport corridors occupy an important place in the geoeconomic strategies of states. The large infrastructure projects implemented by Azerbaijan in recent years - including the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and the port infrastructure developed in the Caspian basin - are part of a strategic policy aimed at strengthening the country's role as a transit hub in the Eurasian transport system. These projects, together with the Zangezur

⁶ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 129–148.

corridor, can contribute to the formation of new transport and trade networks in the region.⁷

In fact, from a geographical perspective, the strategic importance of the Zangezur corridor is also linked to its connection to wider Eurasian transport networks. In particular, the integration of the corridor with the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route could significantly increase the region's role in the global trade system. This route has been formed as an alternative logistics line connecting European markets through China, Central Asian countries, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Türkiye.⁸

In recent years, this route has become even more important because international trade flows have become more varied and people are paying more attention to the safety of supply chains. In this context, Azerbaijan, thanks to its geographical location and developed transport infrastructure, has the potential to become an important transit hub in the Eurasian trade system. In this context, the Zangezur corridor, acting as an important part of this system, can expand Azerbaijan's transport connections to the west and take successful steps towards regional economic leadership.

In the modern global economic system, the Eurasian space is increasingly becoming the center of geoeconomic competition and connectivity strategies. This trend is especially clearly observed against the background of the reshaping of international trade routes. Geopolitical analysts assess the Eurasian space as one of the main strategic areas of the global balance of power. For example, Zbigniew Brzezinski, emphasizing the strategic importance of Eurasia in global politics, noted that the opportunities for economic and political influence over this region play an important role in the formation of the international balance of power.⁹ At the same time, Parag Khanna, who studies modern "connectivity" theories, shows that one of the main indicators of global economic power in the 21st century is the position of states in transport and logistics networks.¹⁰ According to this approach, the modern world is increasingly becoming a "world of networks"¹¹, and transport infrastructure is considered one of the main tools of geoeconomic power.

Today, the Zangezur corridor should be assessed not only as a regional project, but also as an element of the new transport architecture that is being formed on a

⁷ Ilham Aliyev, "Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the meeting dedicated to transportation issues," Official website of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, January 28, 2025, <https://president.az/en/articles/view/68151>

⁸ World Bank, *The Middle Trade and Transport Corridor: Policies and Investments to Maximize the Relevance of a Trans-Caspian Route* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2023), 15–22, <https://shorturl.at/BhWT7>

⁹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 30–31.

¹⁰ Parag Khanna, *Connectography: Mapping the Future of Global Civilization* (New York: Random House, 2016), 1822.

¹¹ Robert D. Blackwell and Jennifer M. Harris, *War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 45–49.

Eurasian scale. In terms of national interests, the corridor can also allow Azerbaijan to expand direct transport links with Türkiye in the western direction, and as a result, access to European markets can be further strengthened. At the same time, this route can contribute to the formation of an alternative and more efficient logistics line to European markets for the countries of Central Asia. Thus, significant economic advantages can be achieved, such as increased trade turnover between the countries of the region, reduced transit costs, and shortened logistics times.

As a result, the Zangezur corridor is not only a regional transport project, but also a strategic initiative that can play an important role in shaping Eurasian geopolitics and geoeconomic relations. The concept of economic interdependence in international relations theory suggests that increasing trade and economic ties between states has the potential to reduce the risk of conflict. This corridor, in addition to strengthening Azerbaijan's internal economic integration, can create conditions for the country to become one of the main transit nodes in the Eurasian transport system. At the same time, the project can contribute to the expansion of trade and logistics relations between Central Asia, Türkiye and Europe, thereby creating an opportunity for the formation of a new stage of regional economic integration.

3.Regional Power Dynamics and Geopolitical Competition

Transportation and economic integration projects in the South Caucasus are not only tools for economic cooperation but also significant geopolitical instruments in shaping the regional balance of power. In this context, the Zangezur corridor can be seen as a crucial point where the strategic interests, security concerns, and geopolitical competition of the main actors in the region intersect.¹²

For Azerbaijan, the Zangezur corridor is not only a transport project, but also part of a long-term geopolitical strategy. The opening of the corridor could provide a direct land connection between the main territory of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, as well as turn the country into one of the main logistics centers of the Middle Corridor.¹³ The main strategic goal for Baku is to implement the corridor on the basis of regional cooperation and mutual benefit and to ensure its integration into international transport networks. At the same time, Azerbaijan emphasizes that strengthening regional stability and economic interdependence is an important tool for long-term peace.

For Armenia, the Zangezur corridor is an issue that creates both potential economic opportunities and serious political and security discussions. On the one hand, Armenia may gain an opportunity to partially overcome its long-standing economic and logistical isolation by joining regional transport projects. However, some political

¹² Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2018

¹³ Svante E. Cornell, "The Transport Corridors of the South Caucasus", Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analysis Paper, 2021.

forces within the country express concern that this project may affect Armenia's sovereignty issues. Therefore, Yerevan's position is mainly formed on the issue of implementing the project within the framework of Armenia's territorial integrity and legal sovereignty.¹⁴ Generally, Armenia's main concern is that the project may affect its territorial sovereignty, and the balance of power in the region may further shift in favor of Azerbaijan.

Russia is considered one of the main actors with traditional influence in the region. Russia, as one of the main geopolitical actors trying to maintain its historical influence in the South Caucasus, assesses the Zangezur corridor as both an opportunity and a potential risk. For Moscow, the opening of transport routes in the region is important in terms of strengthening the integration of the Eurasian economic space. However, at the same time, Russia fears that the formation of new alternative geopolitical and economic routes in the region could reduce its influence.¹⁶

Turkiye supports the project as part of a broader regional integration strategy. For Ankara, the Zangezur corridor is of great strategic importance in terms of establishing a direct land connection between Turkiye and Azerbaijan and at the same time strengthening the transport integration of the Turkic world.

On the other hand, the European Union views the expansion of transport and energy relations in the region primarily from a geo-economic and energy security perspective. Especially for Europe, the development of alternative energy and trade routes extending from the Caspian region to Europe is considered one of the strategic priorities. In this context, the re-establishment of transport relations in the South Caucasus can contribute to the creation of new economic bridges between Europe and Asia.¹⁵

Consequently, the Zangezur corridor can be considered not only a regional transport project but also a significant geo-economic initiative that can reshape the geopolitical balance, regional cooperation model, and strategic competition dynamics in the South Caucasus.

Conclusion: From Geopolitical Rivalry to Regional Connectivity

The new geopolitical realities that have emerged in the South Caucasus in recent years point to a significant transformational phase that will determine the future development trajectory of the region. The political and security environment,

¹⁴ Laurence Broers, *Armenia and Azerbaijan: Anatomy of a Rivalry*, Edinburgh University Press, 2019. ¹⁶ Richard Giragosian, "Russia's Role in the South Caucasus After the 2020 War", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022.

¹⁵ European Commission, *EU Strategy on Connecting Europe and Asia*, Brussels, 2018.

especially after 2020, has brought the restoration of transport and economic ties in the region to the forefront not only as an economic project, but also as an important element of the peacebuilding strategy. In this context, the Zangezur corridor can be seen as a strategic initiative with the potential to reshape the geoeconomic map of the South Caucasus.

As the article shows, the opening of the corridor could contribute to increasing economic interdependence between the states of the region, the formation of new trade and transport routes, and the strengthening of connectivity in the Eurasian space. At the same time, the interests of various regional and international actors indicate that this process includes elements of both cooperation and strategic competition. However, in the long term, the Zangezur corridor could be not only a transport project, but also a real opportunity for the South Caucasus to become an important strategic hub in the Eurasian connectivity system. In this regard, the development of regional connectivity can contribute to the formation of a new security and development model based on cooperation rather than geopolitical competition.

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