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## ZANGEZUR CORRIDOR:

A NEW LANDSCAPE IN THE GEOPOLITICAL CONJUNCTURE OF THE WORLD

### **CORREDOR ZANGEZUR: UN NUEVO PAISAJE EN LA COYUNTURA GEOPOLÍTICA DEL MUNDO**

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#### ABSTRACT

The objective of this work is to analyze the strategic, economic, and geopolitical importance of the Zangezur Corridor and the potential benefits of its opening as a trade route. In the current global economic context, the main cargo flows worldwide are directed from Asia towards Europe. In this sense, the Great Silk Road, of which the Zangezur Corridor is a part, acquires fundamental relevance, especially for China and the European Union, whose economies would significantly benefit from this new connectivity route. After Azerbaijan's victory in the 44-day Patriotic War, a new geopolitical reality was established in the region, where the use of the Zangezur Corridor became one of the key elements enshrined in the tripartite statement signed on November 10th, which ended the conflict. We believe that the opening of the Zangezur Corridor will have a transformative impact on the geopolitical and economic dynamics of the region, providing new and valuable trade and interconnectivity opportunities for the countries involved, and strengthening their global positions. This strategic project has the potential to generate substantial political, economic, and security benefits not only for Azerbaijan, but also for Turkey, Armenia, and other nations in the region.

**Keywords:** Zangezur, Corridor, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Energy, Transport.

#### RESUMEN

El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar la importancia estratégica, económica y geopolítica del Corredor Zangezur, y los beneficios potenciales de su apertura como ruta comercial. En el actual contexto económico global, los principales flujos de carga a nivel mundial se dirigen desde Asia hacia Europa. En este sentido, la Gran Ruta de la Seda, de la que forma parte el Corredor Zangezur, adquiere una relevancia fundamental, especialmente para China y la Unión Europea, cuyas economías se verían significativamente beneficiadas con esta nueva ruta de conectividad. Tras la victoria de Azerbaiyán en la Guerra Patria de 44 días, se estableció una nueva realidad geopolítica en la región, donde el uso del Corredor Zangezur se convirtió en uno de los elementos clave consagrados en la declaración tripartita firmada el 10 de noviembre que puso fin al conflicto. Creemos que la apertura del Corredor Zangezur tendrá un impacto transformador en la dinámica geopolítica y económica de la región, brindando nuevas y valiosas oportunidades comerciales y de interconectividad para los países involucrados y fortaleciendo sus posiciones globales. Este proyecto estratégico tiene el potencial de generar importantes beneficios políticos, económicos y de seguridad no sólo para Azerbaiyán, sino también para Turquía, Armenia y otras naciones de la región.

**Palabras clave:** Zangezur, Corredor, Azerbaiyán, Armenia, Energía, Transporte.

## INTRODUCTION

The geostrategic importance of any region depends on its geographic location, natural resources, and political situation. Considering this, the South Caucasus region has been strategically very important, and on the other hand, it has acted as a barrier or buffer in the zone (Dodds, 2007; Hunter, 2017). However, since the First Nagorno-Karabakh War fought from 1988 to 1994, which ended in a ceasefire, one of the main consequences was that Nakhchivan has remained effectively cut off from the rest of Azerbaijan, a fact that always have dragged international attention (Croissant, 1998; Ibrahimov & Oztarsu, 2022; Modebadze, 2021). Therefore, an analysis of the geopolitical situation in that part of the South Caucasus would not be complete without considering the land corridor between Nakhchivan and the main part of Azerbaijan, commonly known as the Zangezur corridor. The Zangezur Corridor has socio-economic, geopolitical, and geostrategic features because it connects Central Asia, the Caspian region, Azerbaijan and Armenia with Turkey. This suggests that the opening of the corridor would expand the transport and logistics network between Azerbaijan, Turkey, Russia, and Armenia having a positive impact on regional trade and playing an important role in establishing economic cooperation in the South Caucasus (Aliyev, 2023; Dadparvar & Kaleji, 2024; Gulahmadov & Hajiyeva, 2023; Gulahmadov & Huseyn, 2023).

Since the Zangezur Corridor is the subject of the study conducted in this paper, first of all, it is significant to define what is meant by a corridor. A corridor is traditionally an area of land that connects two regions and has strategic significance for those two regions and sometimes for the surrounding countries and even the international community. Specifically, the Zangezur Corridor is the stretch of land between the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic (under an Azeri government) and Azerbaijan itself. The length and breadth of the corridor is a matter of some debate, but it is about 43 km (Pekçetin, 2023), and the corridor stretches to the Armenian border to the north and the Iranian border to the south. The corridor is situated in an incredibly mountainous region, and this geography not only encompasses what defines the Zangezur Corridor but is also a factor that significantly affects the corridor's geopolitical significance and strategic value (Caucasus, 2023; Sofuoglu, 2022). The Zangezur Corridor per se didn't exist at the time of the Armenian-Azeri conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. The corridor is actually a common reference for a space that encompasses the regions of Kelbajar and Lachin. During the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, these regions held significant strategic value as buffer zones against attack and supply lines for both Armenian

and Azeri forces in the Karabakh region. However, the fact that these regions were a part of Azerbaijan and continue held and occupied by Armenian forces has continued to be a thorn in the side of Azerbaijan (Muradov, 2021).

Since then, the topic has been of great significance in the past, present, and future of conflict resolution involving Armenia, Azerbaijan, and potentially with implications for other powers. Nevertheless, although it is of vital strategic importance to these countries, the topic on its own has rarely been academically discussed and researched especially in the English language, with a biased tendency of authors in Armenian and Karabakhi topics extensively touching upon it according to the author's perspective. Because of that, this paper seeks to provide an unbiased view of the topic related to the Zangezur corridor providing a better understanding and appreciation of its strategic, economic, and geopolitical importance.

## DEVELOPMENT

The Zangezur Corridor has the potential to have certain political and economic effects on the countries of the region in a different form. We can summarize the political and economic effects of this corridor for Azerbaijan as follows:

- The direct road connection with Nakhchivan would be fully ensured.
- The air communication with Nakhchivan has cost the state budget additional millions of dollars. The opening of the road will reduce transportation and communication costs by millions of dollars.
- The economic potential of Nakhchivan will be used more effectively as a border region.
- The diversification of Azerbaijan's international transport and communication routes will take place, and this will increase the ability to identify possible threats, as well as precautions against risks.
- Trade relations with Turkey will develop further.
- The access of Azerbaijani products to the eastern and western markets will be fully ensured.

The Zangezur Corridor has many regional advantages at the legal level. This is a great opportunity for countries in the Caucasus and Asia. Thus, the Zangezur corridor not only plays a role in the political aspect but at the same time it can be discussed as a solution to legal and economic issues. The regional perspectives of the Zangezur Corridor are listed below:

- The importance of expanding international transport links is increasing.

- It lays the foundation for regional integration and relations.
- It brings new dividends and investments to the region.
- It creates new geostrategic positions.
- Sovereign cooperation in the region is expanding in a new aspect.

The corridor will enable the expansion of the railway network between Azerbaijan, Turkey, Russia, Armenia, and Iran, and will open many trade routes from the Asia-Pacific to Turkey, connecting Central Asia, the Caspian region, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. This will further strengthen the East-West Corridor, the North-South International Transport Corridor, and the Caspian Transport Network. It will also facilitate the operation of the Caspian to Europe Oil and Gas Pipeline System. The opening of the corridor will increase the transit capacity of the region, which plays an important role in the energy supply lines of the European Union, the United States, Russia, and China (Mohammadov, 2020).

President Ilham Aliyev noted the strategic importance of the Zangezur corridor in various regional and international forums, including in his speeches at the 77th Economic and Social Commission of the United Nations (UN) for Asia and the Pacific. The president of Azerbaijan said in his interviews and speeches that the corridor will create a new opportunity for Turkey, Azerbaijan, and the region as a whole, including Armenia: "The construction of a railway between Armenia and Iran has been discussed for probably 20 years, but in reality, there is nothing yet. Because this project requires at least three billion dollars. But there is a railway line between Nakhchivan and Iran - they can use it" (Aliyev, 2021, p. 3).

On June 16th, 2022, during his speech at the opening ceremony of the 9th Global Baku Forum on "Threats to the Global World Order", President Ilham Aliyev addressed this issue and stated:

The non-opening of traffic to Nakhchivan in the past year and a half since Armenia signed the act of capitulation is a violation of the relevant provision of the tripartite declaration. We expect the communications to follow the tripartite statement signed by Armenia on November 10th, 2020, regarding the opening of communication with the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic for Azerbaijan. Unfortunately, it has been a year and a half since Armenia signed the act of capitulation, but there is still no progress. This is unacceptable. First of all, this is a violation of the provisions of the tripartite declaration by Armenia. It also creates an imbalance in the region, because according to the same statement, Azerbaijan has committed to unhindered movement from Armenia to the Karabakh

region of Azerbaijan, where the Armenian population lives. For a year and a half, Armenia has been using the Lachin road for this unimpeded connection. However, Azerbaijanis cannot use the Zangezur corridor, the road through Armenia, which will connect us with Nakhchivan. This is not fair and we will not agree to it. (Taghizadeh, 2022, p. 2).

With this, the head of state once again expressed the official position of Azerbaijan.

The importance of the Zangezur Corridor was highly appreciated, both from a historical point of view and from the point of view of changing geopolitical processes. The main obstacle that reduced the possibility of using the corridor was undoubtedly Armenia's policy of aggression, and this policy was put an end to as a result of the "44-Day War". Therefore, the issue of opening the Zangezur Corridor was brought up by Azerbaijan and included in the tripartite declaration. All the countries of the region have been able to use the opportunities created due to the closure of the Zangezur Corridor for many years. The opening of the corridor will fundamentally affect all the countries located in the region, their transport policy, and the transport architecture of the region in general. Therefore, to understand the new realities created by the opening of the corridor in the region, both from the geopolitical and transport points of view, it is useful to determine in what way the corridor affects each of the countries located in the region.

After the bitter defeat in the Second Karabakh War, the attitude towards the opening of new transport corridors and the implementation of the integration policy in Armenia is ambiguous. While the Armenian radical nationalists call this situation a geographical "suicide", the supporters of integration want to turn the country into a socio-economic, geopolitical, and geostrategic power. In this regard, although Armenia lost the war, it may gain geopolitical advantages in the new process. We tried to find research papers (in English, Russian, Azerbaijani, and Armenian languages) that substantiate the "negative aspects" of the Zangezur Corridor for Armenia and its citizens. However, except for a few rhetorical statements that we find in various sources, there is not a single solid study highlighting these "negatives".

Armenia's occupation of Azerbaijan's lands, and conflicts with Turkey and Georgia, isolated the country and destroyed the possibilities of political maneuvering. The results of the Second Karabakh War actually opened up new opportunities for Armenia in domestic and foreign policy. Therefore, the Zangezur Corridor is a way out of geopolitical encirclement for Armenia. The corridor creates a geopolitical opportunity for Armenia to take advantage of

the processes emerging in the Caucasus by improving relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan. Armenia can develop relative economic prosperity, security, and good relations with the West, and prevent human migration by eliminating unemployment and mass poverty. Notice, that even the head of the Union of Armenian Exporters, Raffi Mkhjan, stated that the opening of Armenia-Azerbaijani routes will turn the country into a “gateway to the Caucasus” (de Waal, 2021).

The conclusion is that the opening of the Zangezur Corridor will be beneficial for Armenia. The fact that the borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan were closed did not allow Armenia to get a safe and stable land route to its main economic partner, Russia. After the beginning of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, the railway providing movement from Armenia to Russia or in the opposite direction was closed. The only land route available is the one through Georgia, which is geographically difficult and usually closed in bad weather.

This has always caused interruptions in transportation from Armenia to Russia and vice versa. At the same time, political disagreements between Georgia and Russia have led to the closure of this road in some cases. In general, the opening of the Zangezur corridor is consistent with the policy of the Armenian authorities, who are looking for ways to eliminate or at least reduce their dependence. However, the Armenian government is being cautious in this matter, as it fears a backlash against the authorities. Opinions against the opening of the corridor are mainly put forward by Armenian nationalists supported by foreign actors (more precisely, some circles in Iran, Russia, and France). It has also become a tool for the opposition to influence the current government. Therefore, as soon as the political situation stabilizes and the benefits of opening the corridor are realized, Armenians should come to terms with it. But, if political statements are not followed by practical actions, this creates serious doubts about the national and political will of Armenia and makes Yerevan prone to foreign interventions. Emphasizing that Armenia is prone to provocations to delay the opening of the Zangezur corridor, Russian expert Yevgeny Mikhailov says that this is Yerevan's dependence on a foreign actor and claims that it will not refuse to participate in such a promising project (Mikhailov, 2021).

In addition, the Zangezur Corridor provides important functionality in terms of legal and international relations. The main advantage of this corridor is that it provides regional strength and can also create a basis for solving transport issues. The fact that the corridor plays a leading role in solving functional issues increases its perspective in the eyes of many countries. However, until now Armenia

and its partners have ignored the issues related to the prospects of this corridor and prioritized their own political interests, which harms the regional development of the corridor. In general, both the Zangezur Corridor and the “3+3” platform created in the region will strengthen friendship, neighborliness, and solidarity among the peoples of the region, as well as guarantee sustainable peace, stability, security, tranquility, and development in the region. The “3+3” platform was put forward by the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, and the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, after the 44-day war. The platform includes the regional cooperation of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Russia, Turkey, and Iran.

Speaking about the importance of the platform, Ilham Aliyev said: “It will serve not only post-war issues but also regional development in our region in general. Because if we manage to create such a format of cooperation between the six countries of the region, it will be the main guarantee against any new acts of hostility. This will become an important factor of regional cooperation and will bring many benefits (Ibrahimov & Oztarsu, 2022).” Speaking about the “3+3” format, Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that the activation of the platform with the participation of Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Iran, and, if accepted, Georgia will prove regional peace. Thus, for the Zangezur Corridor to work at its full capacity, cooperation within the “3+3” format should also start. Otherwise, the Zangezur Corridor can be limited to being a project that only Azerbaijan, Iran, Turkey, and Armenia can benefit from. If the “3+3” format does not work, the great opportunities of the Zangezur Corridor will remain closed for Georgia and Russia. It is precisely because of Russia-Georgia relations that the “3+3” format remains a potential for now.

At the same time, the so-called Middle Corridor can become the safest route for China-Europe transit, and this project will meet the needs of dozens of countries and provide huge profits. The profits that the countries located in this region will get after the project is realized show how important the Zangezur Corridor is on a global scale. Also, the strong security system created by Azerbaijan in the region, which ensures territorial integrity, will greatly help the energy supply, which has become the biggest problem in Europe. The hydrocarbon reserves of Azerbaijan and the energy resources of other countries that can be transferred through our territory will be a great contribution to the energy security of Europe as a whole for decades to come.

Shortly, the cargo carriers of the Central Asian countries, who are extremely interested in the shortest routes in the direction of Turkey, are planning to join the Zangezur

Corridor. Cotton and textiles, ore concentrates, fertilizers, products of chemical enterprises, and the food industry - this is far from the complete list of products that Central Asian countries can pass through the new corridor. According to preliminary calculations, the transportation of trailers and railway containers by ferry, Ro-Ro, and Ro-Pax ships across the Caspian Sea to the port of Alat, and then to the Mediterranean ports of Turkey via the Zangezur route will be carried out on a large scale, more so than by any other alternative land route.

## CONCLUSIONS

The opening of the Zangezur Corridor is of serious importance for Azerbaijan and Turkey, as well as for Armenia, and for the strategic prestige of the Caspian Sea and the region as a whole. Cargo is transported to our region through the Caspian Sea from Central Asian countries, including Russia: the opening of the corridor will solve this problem and a new trade route will emerge. Not only the countries in question, but even China is expected to use this route. This can lead to the formation of a new geopolitical and economic environment in the region. If Armenia agrees to the opening of the corridor, Yerevan can participate in the new economic projects that will be created. It is believed this is important for Armenia itself. On the other hand, it should be noted that there exist contradictions and correspondences between the North-South Corridor and the Zangezur Corridor. In any case, due to several insurmountable conditions, these corridors must pass through Zangezur in one way or another. Corridor geopolitics, as presented, touches not only the interests of the beneficiary countries at the regional level but also geopolitical interests and projects at the global level. When the Zangezur Corridor project was put forward by Azerbaijan, several political, economic, and strategic directions were taken into account. This corridor will cover the southwestern regions of Azerbaijan supporting the development of economic relations.

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