

A New Game in the South Caucasus: is Zangezur A Corridor of Peace or A New front for Conflict in the Region

Maia Kapanadze

Doctor of historical sciences Caucasus International University Faculty of Social and Humanitarian Sciences,
Associate Professor Head of the Scientific Analytical Center of Georgia and Iran Tbilisi, Georgia
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7460-5374>

Avtandil Oniashvili

Master of International Security Studies PMP (Project Management Professional) Ministry of Defense of Georgia
Training and military education command Tbilisi, Georgia

Abstract. This article examines the regional and geopolitical importance of the Zangezur corridor and its potential impact on the balance of power in the South Caucasus region. Using a neorealist theoretical framework, the article analyzes the competing positions and interests of the main stakeholders around the Zangezur corridor project Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran, Russia, and the United States. The article highlights the significance of the Zangezur corridor, arguing that it is not only an economic project but a high-stakes issue in a regional security dilemma. The dilemma in this case is that one side's success is perceived by the other side as a loss of position and a threat. The article posits that the opening of this corridor will significantly alter the region's transit map, create a new Turkey-Azerbaijan axis, reduce Russia's influence in the region, and, at some degree, harm the geopolitical positions of Georgia and Iran. At the same time, it will create new opportunities for the United States to strengthen its role and weaken Russia's influence.

Keywords: Region, Game, Conflict, Corridor, Dilemma.

I. Introduction.

The South Caucasus has historically been a crossroads for the confrontation of major political powers. Following the Second Karabakh War in 2020, a new regional agenda is taking shape, with the creation of the Zangezur corridor at its center. The implementation of this project could become a point of conflict between the countries of the South Caucasus, as the interests of both regional countries and international actors clash over the corridor.

This research aims to analyze the geopolitical significance of the Zangezur corridor through a neorealist lens and its potential impact on the relationships of the region's countries and external political actors, including Russia, Iran, Turkey, and the United States. The central thesis is that the Zangezur corridor is not just an economic project but a high-stakes issue for countries vying to strengthen their positions in the region. We believe the project's implementation would significantly change the regional balance of power, creating a new reality on the political agenda of the South Caucasus. The successful implementation of the Zangezur corridor project would likely harm the positions of Armenia and Iran, while strengthening the influence of the US and Turkey. It would also be a national success for Azerbaijan, the project's main initiator and supporter. The corridor could also have an indirect, negative effect on Georgia and Russia. Georgia's position as the sole transit country connecting Europe and Asia in the South Caucasus would likely be weakened, and Russia's already diminished influence would be further reduced. This article will examine the positions of the main regional actors - Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia - as well as external political actors, including Turkey, Iran, Russia, and the US.

The article also presents various scenarios about how the implementation of the corridor project will change the balance of power in the region and what impact it will likely have on the relationships of each country.

II. Theoretical Framework.

The most effective theory for analyzing the Zangezur corridor and its geopolitical consequences is Neorealism, which is also called as structural realism. In contrast to classical realism, which finds state behavior in human nature and the inherent drive for power, neorealism considers the anarchic structure of the international system to be the trigger that forces states to prioritize their own security and the attempt to occupy a superior position in a complex geopolitical system. Therefore, states constantly try to improve their position relative to other actors.¹ This theory, proposed by Kenneth Waltz, is a good instrument for understanding the interests of both the regional actors and the external forces involved in the ongoing processes in the South Caucasus.

From a neorealist perspective, the Zangezur corridor is not just an economic project; it is a new regrouping of regional actors that largely changes the picture in the South Caucasus and presents a new balance of power. This article applies the concept of a security dilemma, based on the idea that the improvement of one state's position is perceived as a threat by another, which ultimately leads to a cycle of conflict. For Azerbaijan and Turkey, the project is considered a national success, which involves opening new economic routes and strengthening their positions in this region.

III. Discussion

The Strategic Importance of the Zangezur Corridor.

The frozen conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia reignited in 2020 when the Azerbaijani army, supported by Turkish Special Forces and strengthened by Israeli weapons and armament, attacked Nagorno-Karabakh. Within 45 days, the Russian president tried to emphasize Russia's role in the region once again by deploying peacekeepers between the opposing sides. However, we see that Russia's influence in the South Caucasus is weakening, against the background of the activation of other actors and the difficult geopolitical processes taking place in the world (the Russia-Ukraine war, and others)².

The Zangezur corridor project, which is mentioned in Article IX of the November 9, 2020 trilateral agreement (Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan), is not just an infrastructural plan. It has the potential to completely change the region's transit map and routes. The corridor represents a route connecting Azerbaijan to its own exclave, Nakhchivan, through southern Armenia, with which Azerbaijan will establish a direct land connection with Turkey. This, in turn, means the creation of a new transport route connecting Asia and Europe.³ Azerbaijan and Turkey present it as a guarantor of regional economic integration and peace. For Azerbaijan, this is an opportunity to end the isolation of the Nakhchivan exclave and strengthen its economic and strategic positions in the South Caucasus. For Turkey, the corridor is decisive for its "Middle Corridor" initiative, which aims to transport goods from Central Asia to Europe within the framework of China's "One Belt, One Road" project. The opening of this route will allow Turkey to strengthen its economic influence and create a direct transport link with a Turkic-speaking state in the same region (Azerbaijan).

The exact status and control mechanisms of the Zangezur corridor remain a subject of dispute. Despite the fact that Article IX of the agreement emphasizes that transport links should be opened, President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev often calls it "control," while the Armenian side considers it a violation of sovereignty. The issue of control is precisely the stalemate - which state will be responsible for border security and how all this will affect the other political actors - since the success of one side in this dilemma means the weakening of the political positions of the other group of states.

Armenia. Armenia's position is the most direct and, at the same time, defensive. It considers the Zangezur corridor a fundamental threat to its sovereignty and economic independence. If the Zangezur corridor were to truly become a reality and pass through the southern Syunik province, it would completely cut Armenia off from its ally, Iran, acting as an isolator and separator between the two countries. The country's prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, who emphatically presents Armenia's position, says that any economic and transport line passing through Armenian territory must remain under its control. The control of any junction on Armenian territory by foreign forces is a permanent risk to its security and reduces the country's protection.⁴

¹ Theory of International Politics, Kenneth N. Waltz, University of California, Berkeley, 1979. P 105-106.

² Michael Rubin, National Security Journal, The Zangezur Corridor: The Geopolitical Flashpoint You've Never Heard Of, July 31, 2025 P1.

³ US-controlled Zangezur corridor - a geopolitical deadlock for Tehran or a new order for the region? Qian Sharif, Radio Freedom, July 23, 2025, P1-2.

⁴ Explainer: The high stakes behind the Zangezur Corridor, Clare Nuttall, Glasgow, July 25, 2025, P 4-

5. <https://www.intellinews.com/explainer-the-high-stakes-behind-the-zangezur-corridor-392896/>

Since the second Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020, a change in Armenia's foreign policy vector has become evident. Pashinyan is trying to be more mobile and flexible in this new strategic game. His three meetings with Turkish President Erdogan after the aforementioned war meant much more than a symbolic gesture.⁵

Armenia's position is dictated by its own political desire to maintain its connection with its ally, Iran, not to lose the Iran-Armenia-Georgia economic corridor, which has several branches, and to maintain its political and economic weight in the region.

Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan is the main initiator and supporter of the Zangezur corridor project. Its position is based on the terms of the trilateral ceasefire statement signed in November 2020, which mentions the unblocking of all economic and transport links.

A few months after the 2020 agreement was reached, Ilham Aliyev created new economic zones in Azerbaijan and named one of them East Zangezur, which was located on the territories Azerbaijan had established control over after the war with Armenia. Following this, President Aliyev began to speak of West Zangezur (Armenia's Syunik province) as the "historical land" of the Azerbaijani people and promised that Azerbaijanis would return there.⁶

Azerbaijan supports the existence of this corridor with historical and economic factors. By opening the corridor, it will create a direct land connection with Nakhchivan, with which it now only has a land connection through Iran. By opening this corridor, Azerbaijan will also connect to Turkey and the so-called "Turkic corridor." This will allow it to diversify the cargo routes to Europe and not be solely dependent on Georgia, which will further increase its role as a transit hub. Azerbaijan will try to minimize Armenia's control over the Zangezur corridor, which would be a huge political and economic success for it in the region.

Georgia. Georgia is currently one of the main regional transport and cargo hubs in the South Caucasus, connecting Azerbaijan to Turkey and Armenia and Iran to Russia. Georgia's position on the Zangezur corridor is quite complex. The activation of the Zangezur corridor would mean a loss of position for Georgia. Diversifying Eurasian transport routes means relatively less transit for Georgia, which is, of course, not in the country's interest.⁷ Georgian officials have expressed a desire for a peaceful resolution of the issue but are careful not to damage relations with either Armenia or Azerbaijan, as both are important partners for the country. The potential for increased instability in the region is a significant concern for Georgia, which is trying to maintain a balance between neighboring countries.

Iran. Iran's position is firmly against any decision that would sever its land connection with Armenia. This is a "red line" for its foreign policy. The Zangezur corridor would not only cut off or weaken its connection with Armenia, but would also reduce Iran's transit opportunities to the north. This would cause economic damage and weaken its political influence in Armenia. The Armenian-Iranian connection somewhat balances the Turkey-Azerbaijan connection in the region, and the opening of the Zangezur corridor would completely disrupt this balance to Iran's detriment. Iran has repeatedly conducted military exercises near its northern border, emphasizing that this direction is important to it and that it will not easily give up its position.

Iran states that it is against changing borders in the South Caucasus region and will only support a policy of improving transport routes there when it is based on the principles of respecting the sovereignty and recognizing the territorial integrity of the countries involved.⁸ After the Iran-Israel military confrontation in 2025, the implementation of the Zangezur corridor project would be quite painful for Iran, as it would be a further political defeat, especially given the possibility that the US could become the force responsible for monitoring the corridor in the region.

Turkey. Turkey is a strong supporter of the Zangezur corridor. It views it not just as a tool for the economic connection between Turkey and Azerbaijan, but as part of a "Greater Turkic World (Greater Turan)" extending from the Mediterranean Sea to Central Asia, which is part of a much larger policy. The Zangezur corridor will help Turkey deepen its economic ties with Azerbaijan and diversify routes from Asia to Europe and the Mediterranean Sea, which will further

⁵ "Armenian government approves bill to launch EU accession bid," Felix Light, Reuters, January 9, 2025. P 1-2. <https://www.reuters.com/world/armenian-government-approves-bill-launch-eu-accession-bid-2025-01-09/>

⁶ Armenian Foreign Policy Priorities After The 2021 Early Parliamentary Elections, Benyamin Poghosyan, Georgian Foundation of Strategic and International studies, 2021, P7. <https://www.gfsis.org.ge/files/library/opinion-papers/168-expert-opinion-eng.pdf>

⁷ Corridors of Power: How Connectivity Becomes the New Battleground in the South Caucasus, Sergi Kapanadze, June, 2025, P3. <https://tinyurl.com/22ar2hby>

⁸ Iran Reaffirms Stance on Zangezur Corridor and Regional Integrity, Caucasus Watch, 29 Jul 2025, P1. <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/iran-reaffirms-stance-on-zangezur-corridor-and-regional-integrity.html>

strengthen Turkey's position in the region.⁹ This reduces the positions of Georgia and Iran and gives Turkey more leverage to implement its own policy in the region. From a "Turkish perspective," the Zangezur corridor project would be a success following the joint Turkey-Azerbaijan military operation in 2020, and a joint achievement of Turkey and Azerbaijan in the war with Armenia.

United States.

The interests of the United States in the South Caucasus region are characterized by complex and shifting dynamics. Behind its actions lies a wide range of interests, such as the promotion of democracy and the improvement of energy transit routes. By doing so, it advances its own role and seeks to weaken Russia's influence in the region through its involvement. US involvement is directed precisely toward this goal. At the same time, the increasing role of the US would put Iran, one of Russia's main allies in the region, in an even more disadvantageous position. The US is also trying to balance Turkish influence and advance its own role.

The United States has always supported the territorial integrity of Armenia. American foreign policy documents from 1919-20 clearly show the challenges facing the newly formed Armenian state at the time, among which the Zangezur corridor is mentioned.¹⁰

US involvement in the South Caucasus region has changed against the backdrop of geopolitical events that occurred in 2020. The second Karabakh war in 2020, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the weakening of Russia's position in the South Caucasus region have created a political vacuum that the US is effectively trying to fill.

Parallel to the US position, the EU's position on the Zangezur corridor project is also positive. The EU favors all transit routes that bypass Russia and the territories under its influence.¹¹

Conclusion. Based on the discussion above, it is clear that the Zangezur corridor is not just a logistical and economic project for the neighboring countries of the South Caucasus, but its significance goes beyond regional frameworks and attracts the interest of global actors. We believe its implementation will significantly change the balance of power in the region.

As the analysis through a neorealist lens has shown, the Zangezur corridor represents an object of the struggle for power and security at a regional level, with the involvement of global actors, driven by the structure of the anarchic international security system. The improvement of the positions of Azerbaijan, Turkey, and the US, and the establishment of economic connections and the strengthening of logistical routes, are perceived by Armenia, Iran, and Russia as a loss of position and create a security dilemma.

The future of the South Caucasus largely depends on the Zangezur corridor project. Its implementation will re-evaluate and change the geopolitical and security architecture of the region. Its implementation will create a Turkey-Azerbaijan axis. For Azerbaijan and Turkey, the corridor represents a national success that promises new economic routes and strengthens their strategic alliance. At the same time, with the implementation of the Zangezur corridor project, Georgia's position in the region will also be harmed, as it will no longer be the only transport and transit country connecting Asia and Europe economically.

The resolution of this issue will affect not only the economies and security of the direct players, but will also be a crucial test of the new geopolitical arrangement that is being formed in the post-Soviet and post-Karabakh South Caucasus.

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¹⁰ Zangezur in U.S. State Department Documents (1919-1920), Lilit Hovhannisyan, NAS RA, Yerevan, Armenia P361-362. <https://tinyurl.com/2zbt4upn>

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