

The Middle and Zangezur Corridors: Alternatives, or Mutually Complementary?



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The Caucasus, which marks the border between Europe and Asia, is playing an increasingly important role in the development of transport corridors connecting these two parts of the Eurasian continent. To understand the current state and future prospects of these corridors, it is necessary to briefly outline the main global trends shaping the modern world.

The unipolar world order that prevailed for decades, has, especially following the onset of Russia's war in Ukraine, begun to shift toward a new international structure, in which a single hegemonic power is no longer viable (Artner, Yin, 2023). It is in this post-hegemonic era that a multipolar world order is emerging (Sachs, 2024), with the United States and China standing out as separate fully-fledged poles, and Russia functioning as a partial pole (Papava, 2025).

Globalization, in turn, has acquired a confrontational character, aligned with the dynamics of multipolarity – again, due to Russia’s war in Ukraine (Papava, 2022a, 2022b). There is growing political and economic rivalry among the world’s leading powers (Papava, 2022b). In such circumstances, ensuring the resilience of global supply chains becomes crucial. The COVID–19 pandemic underscored this, as disruptions to global supply chains had a severely negative impact on the global economy (Marin, 2021; Spence, 2021).

Given the increasingly confrontational nature of modern globalization, some analyses even talk about the issue of “wars” between transport and trade corridors (Colibasanu, 2024).

When addressing transport corridor issues, it is first necessary to consider the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, which aims to develop global transport networks and now spans almost the entire globe (e.g., Ge, 2016).

Under the BRI, the land connection between Europe and Asia includes the following corridors:

- The Northern Corridor, or *New Eurasian Land Bridge*, linking China by transcontinental railway with Europe via Kazakhstan, Russia and Belarus;
- The Southern Corridor, linking China with Europe and the Mediterranean via Central Asia, Iran and Turkey;
- The Middle Corridor (also known as the *Trans-Caspian International Transport Route*), starting in China and crossing Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan and Georgia, to reach Turkey and the Black Sea.

Russia’s war in Ukraine and the economic sanctions imposed by the West against Russia have blocked the Northern Corridor.

The main challenge facing the Southern Corridor is security. Since 2022, Russia has been actively investing in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which aims to connect the northern ports of Russia with the southern ports of Iran, and further to India, through the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea. The joint implementation of INSTC and the Southern Corridor contributes to the strengthening of Iran’s role as a key country where these two corridors will intersect. This directly contradicts Western interests (Colibasanu, 2024).

Consequently, the Middle Corridor gains a relative advantage in facilitating transport between Europe and Asia, with Georgia playing a particularly prominent role (Charaia, Papava, 2017; Ismailov, Papava, 2018; Papava, 2021).

Given that the Middle Corridor is effectively a competitor to both the Northern and Southern corridors, it is not surprising that Russia and Iran are especially interested in hindering its use and development. However, China’s active involvement in the development and operation of the

Middle Corridor could act as a deterrent, discouraging Russia and Iran from taking openly hostile actions against it.

Following Azerbaijan's restoration of its territorial integrity and its regaining control over Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023, the proposal to establish the Zangezur transport corridor has gained renewed relevance. The 43-kilometer corridor would pass through the Syunik region of Armenia and connect Azerbaijan with its enclave – Nakhichevan, and, subsequently, with Turkey (e.g., Yıldız, 2025).

On August 8, 2025, in Washington, the President of the Azerbaijan and the Prime Minister of Armenia, along with the President of the United States, signed a Declaration that is intended to form the basis of a peace agreement (e.g., MassisPost, 2025). The agreement was subsequently initialed by the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, 2025).

Despite the relatively modest results of this agreement (Markedonov, 2025), US involvement in resolving problems in the Caucasus is encouraging (Blank, 2025). In particular, Armenia and Azerbaijan's support for the Zangezur Corridor, under the new name *the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity* (TRIPP) in the region, and its transfer to a private American company under a 99-year lease, is of great significance.

It should also be noted here that the documents signed in Washington, specifically those related to TRIPP, have provoked mixed reactions from countries with vested interests in the Caucasus (e.g., Hao, 2025). Iran, in particular, is unhappy about the potential presence of the United States on its northern border (Oztarsu, 2025), while, for Russia, losing control over the situation in the Caucasus is fundamentally unacceptable (Anisonyan, 2025).

Although the implementation of the Zangezur Corridor could radically change Armenia's geopolitical position and bring it closer to the West (DiPirro, 2025), some Armenian experts fear that TRIPP may not only provoke a clash of geopolitical interests, but also contradict Armenia's national interests. Specifically, they argue that it could undermine the country's sovereignty (for example, Vardanyan, 2025), and also cement the tragedy of the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians (Beglaryan, 2025).

In contrast to Armenia, for both Azerbaijan and Turkey, TRIPP is not only fully acceptable, but directly in line with their strategic and economic interests.

To understand China's position regarding TRIPP, it is necessary to understand the relationship between the Middle and Zangezur corridors, especially since both provide transport links between Azerbaijan and Turkey.

The Middle Corridor, which connects Azerbaijan with Turkey via Georgia, in addition to highway transportation, includes railway transportation using the Baku-Tbilisi-Akhalkalaki-Kars railway

(Khalilova, 2025), as well as the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline and the South Caucasus gas pipeline. Meanwhile, the Zangezur Corridor is expected to support an intermodal railway and highway transportation (Blank, 2025), and some publications suggest it will eventually include oil and gas pipelines (e.g., Kaylan, 2025). However, until the capacity of the above-mentioned pipelines passing through Georgia is fully developed, the construction of new pipelines through the Zangezur Corridor is unlikely to be economically feasible.

In several publications, the Middle Corridor is rightly framed as a component of the BRI, passing as it does through China, Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia and reaching Turkey and the Black Sea. Within this context, the Zangezur Corridor is viewed as a branch, of the Middle Corridor (e.g., Blank, 2025; Gasimli, ed., 2015:10).

The crux of the matter is that the Middle Corridor is part of the BRI, and, therefore, for the Zangezur Corridor to be recognized as its extension, Beijing must first acknowledge it as such. So far, Beijing has neither confirmed nor denied this interpretation (e.g., Hao, 2025). Apparently, Beijing’s decision will largely depend on whether Washington permits Chinese access to the Zangezur Corridor, which will be under US control (Heybatov, 2025).

If Beijing chooses to incorporate the Zangezur Corridor into the Middle Corridor framework, it would be logical to regard the two branches as separate – Georgian and Zangezur (or Armenian).

Until there is official confirmation that for Beijing the Zangezur Corridor is a ramification of the Middle Corridor, then, in my opinion, it is more correct to consider these two corridors independently, each of which connects Azerbaijan and Turkey – one through Georgia, and the other through Armenia.

Considering the Middle and Zangezur corridors independently does not mean that they should be *alternative* to each other. On the contrary, they should be considered as *mutually complementary*, and this should be the key to *harmonizing* the various economic interests of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia (Papava, 2025b; Papava, Tokmazishvili, 2008). It is the complementarity of the Middle and Zangezur corridors that should become the basis for ensuring economic security based on maintaining the resilience of the relevant supply chains.

It is important to note that, historically, the volume of cargo transported via the Middle Corridor has been minimal compared to the Northern Corridor. For instance, in 2021, only 8 percent of the cargo volume transported through the Northern Corridor was carried via the Middle Corridor (Pavliashvili et al., 2024, p. 82).

In light of the ongoing blockade of the Northern Corridor, the possibility of simultaneous development of the Middle and Zangezur corridors as complementary routes appears promising. The key issue in this matter is achieving a balance of interests—not only between the United States

and China, but also among all countries in the region, so as to secure a peaceful future for the Caucasus.

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