

THE ZANGEZUR CORRIDOR: GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRIES, REGIONAL INTEGRATION, AND THE IRANIAN-RUSSIAN POWER STRUGGLE IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

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Abstract. This study examines the geopolitical implications of the Iranian-Russian rivalry over the proposed Zangezur Corridor in the South Caucasus. Using a multi-theoretical framework, the research analyzes the strategic interests of key stakeholders, potential regional power shifts, and broader implications for international relations. The study reveals complex dynamics of competition and cooperation, highlighting how the corridor dispute reflects and shapes regional security complexes. It argues that the Zangezur Corridor serves as a microcosm of evolving geopolitical realities in the post-Soviet space, with significant implications for regional integration, energy politics, and great power competition.

Keywords: *Zangezur Corridor; South Caucasus; Geopolitics; Iran-Russia Relations; Regional Integration; Energy Politics; Strategic Partnerships*

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research methodology, combining extensive literature review with theoretical analysis. The research process involved the application of a multi-theoretical framework, integrating neorealism, geopolitical theory, complex interdependence theory, regional security complex theory, constructivism, and elements of game theory. A comparative analysis of stakeholder positions and interests was conducted, alongside a comprehensive review of academic literature, policy papers, and news articles related to the Zangezur Corridor and South Caucasus geopolitics. Potential scenarios and policy implications were developed based on the theoretical framework and gathered data, culminating in a synthesis of findings to provide a holistic understanding of the Zangezur Corridor's geopolitical significance.

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Novelty and Contributions of this Study

This study makes several novel contributions to the field of South Caucasus geopolitics and international relations. While much literature focuses on Azerbaijan-Armenia relations or Türkiye's role, this study uniquely emphasizes the often-overlooked Iranian-Russian dimension of the Zangezur Corridor dispute. By considering geographical, economic, and cultural factors alongside traditional security concerns, the study offers a more holistic analysis of the issue. Multi-theoretical integration provides a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding than previous single-theory approaches. The research also provides concrete policy recommendations for various stakeholders, contributing to both academic discourse and practical policy formulation. Furthermore, the study uniquely frames the Zangezur Corridor within broader discussions of regional integration and connectivity in the South Caucasus and beyond. Scenario development and stress testing for alliances offer valuable insights for policymakers and strategists.

Classification Codes

JEL Classification Codes:

- F50 (International Relations, National Security, and International Political Economy: General)

- F52 (National Security; Economic Nationalism)

- F59 (International Relations and International Political Economy: Other)

Political Science Classification (APSA):

- 3B (International Relations: Foreign Policy)

- 3C (International Relations: International Political Economy)

- 3F (International Relations: International Security and Conflict)

Introduction

The proposed Zangezur Corridor has emerged as a significant point of contention between Iran and Russia, two long-standing strategic partners. This analysis examines the geopolitical implications of this rivalry, exploring the underlying causes, potential consequences, and broader impact on regional dynamics. The corridor, which would connect Azerbaijan's mainland to its exclave, Nakhchivan, through southern Armenia, has become a focal point of regional power struggles and strategic realignments.

The pursuit of this corridor by Azerbaijan has far-reaching implications for the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus and beyond. The project not only challenges existing regional power dynamics but also evaluates the strength of established alliances, particularly the long-standing partnership between Iran and Russia.

This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the multifaceted issues surrounding the Zangezur Corridor, examining its potential to reshape regional connectivity, alter economic patterns, and influence security arrangements. By exploring the diverging interests of Iran and Russia in this context, we seek to shed light on the evolving nature of their relationship and its broader implications for the region.

Theoretical Framework

This study on the Iranian-Russian rivalry over the Zangezur Corridor is grounded in several interconnected theoretical perspectives from international relations and geopolitics. The core of this analysis is rooted in neorealist theory, particularly as articulated by Kenneth Waltz (1979). Neorealism posits that states operate in an anarchic international system where they must prioritize their security and survival. In this context, the actions of Iran and Russia regarding the Zangezur Corridor can be understood as attempts to maintain or enhance their relative power positions in the South Caucasus region (de Waal, 2003). The balance of power theory, a key component of neorealism, is particularly relevant here, as states seek to prevent any single actor from becoming hegemonically dominant. The rivalry over the Zangezur Corridor represents a manifestation of this balancing behavior, with both Iran and Russia attempting to prevent the other (or other regional actors like Türkiye) from gaining a decisive advantage.

Geopolitical theory, particularly as developed by Saul Cohen (2014), provides a framework for understanding the strategic importance of the Zangezur Corridor. Cohen's concept of "*shatterbelts*" – regions caught between competing great powers – is especially applicable to the South Caucasus. Additionally, the critical geopolitics approach offers insights into how different actors construct and manipulate geographical knowledge for political purposes. This perspective is crucial for analyzing how Iran and Russia frame the Zangezur Corridor issue to suit their strategic narratives.

While neorealism provides the foundation, the theory of complex interdependence, developed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (1977), offers a complementary perspective. This theory recognizes that states are connected through multiple channels and that military security is not always the primary concern. The economic and diplomatic aspects of the Zangezur Corridor dispute, including potential trade routes and regional integration, can be better understood through this lens.

Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's Regional Security Complex Theory – RSCT – (2003) provides a framework for understanding how security dynamics in a particular geographical area are interconnected. The South Caucasus, including the Zangezur Corridor, can be analyzed as a regional security complex where the security concerns of states in the region are so interlinked that they cannot be reasonably analyzed or resolved apart from one another.

The constructivist approach offers insights into how identities and interests are shaped through interaction. This perspective is valuable for understanding how historical narratives and cultural factors influence the positions of various actors regarding the Zangezur Corridor. While not a comprehensive framework for the entire study, elements of game theory can provide insights into the strategic decision-making processes of Iran and Russia in their rivalry over the Zangezur Corridor.

This multi-faceted theoretical framework allows for a comprehensive analysis of the complex geopolitical dynamics surrounding the Zangezur Corridor, incorporating elements of power politics, geographical strategy, economic interdependence, regional security dynamics, and the role of ideas and identities in shaping state behavior.

Background: The Zangezur Corridor

Geographic and Strategic Significance

The Zangezur Corridor derives its name from the Zangezur region in southern Armenia, which separates Azerbaijan's main territory from its exclave of Nakhchivan. This narrow strip of land, bordering Iran to the south, has historically served as a critical link between Armenia and Iran. The proposed corridor would traverse this region, fundamentally altering the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus.

The corridor's potential to significantly impact regional security dynamics is evident in its strategic location. It would not only provide Azerbaijan with direct access to its exclave but also create a contiguous Turkic corridor stretching from the Caspian Sea to Türkiye and beyond. This geographical reconfiguration has profound implications for regional power balances and economic integration.

Historical Context

The concept of the Zangezur Corridor emerged in the aftermath of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The ceasefire agreement, brokered by Russia, included provisions for unblocking regional economic and transport links (de Waal, 2018). While not explicitly mentioned in the agreement, the idea of a corridor through Zangezur gained traction, particularly in Azerbaijan and Türkiye.

The corridor proposal must be understood within the broader context of historical territorial disputes and changing power dynamics in the South Caucasus. The region's complex history, marked by shifting borders and competing national narratives, continues to shape contemporary geopolitical aspirations and fears.

Stakeholders and Their Interests

The Zangezur Corridor involves a complex web of stakeholders, each with distinct and often conflicting interests:

1. Armenia: Concerns about potential loss of sovereignty and strategic depth.
2. Azerbaijan: Seeks direct access to Nakhchivan and stronger connections with Türkiye.
3. Iran: Fears potential isolation and loss of leverage in the Caucasus.
4. Russia: Balances between maintaining influence and managing regional stability.
5. Türkiye: Aims to enhance its influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Understanding these diverse and sometimes conflicting interests is crucial for analyzing the geopolitical implications of the Zangezur Corridor project.

Strategic Interests

Russian Interests

Russia's approach to the Zangezur Corridor is characterized by a complex balancing act, reflecting its multifaceted interests in the South Caucasus region.

The corridor presents Russia with an opportunity to manage the influence of other regional actors, particularly Türkiye and Iran. Russia's support for the corridor, albeit cautious, serves as a tool to counterbalance growing Turkish influence in the region while simultaneously keeping Iran's regional ambitions in check. Russia's involvement in the corridor negotiations allows it to maintain leverage over both Armenia and Azerbaijan, enabling Russia to exert influence on broader regional issues and potentially extract concessions on other matters of strategic importance.

Russia views the South Caucasus as part of its traditional sphere of influence. Russia's involvement in the Zangezur Corridor project is partly motivated by its desire to remain a key power broker in the region. By positioning itself as a mediator and guarantor of regional agreements, Russia aims to preserve its strategic relevance. Enhanced regional connectivity could provide new opportunities for Russian businesses and potentially strengthen economic ties between Russia and Türkiye, a significant trading partner.

Iranian Interests

Iran's opposition to the Zangezur Corridor stems from a combination of strategic, economic, and security concerns. Iran sees the corridor as a potential threat to its role as a transit hub between Asia and Europe. The new route could divert trade flows away from Iran, impacting its economic interests and strategic position. Iran views its border with Armenia as a strategic asset. The Zangezur Corridor threatens to disrupt this direct connection, potentially reducing Iran's leverage in the region and its ability to project influence northward.

There are concerns in Iran that the corridor could contribute to a form of strategic encirclement. Iranian policymakers view the project as part of a broader effort by Türkiye and Azerbaijan to expand their influence, potentially at Iran's expense. Iran has invested significantly in developing its transportation infrastructure to serve as a key link in regional and international trade routes. The Zangezur Corridor could undermine these efforts, redirect trade flows and diminish Iran's strategic importance in regional connectivity projects.

The divergence between Russian and Iranian interests regarding the Zangezur Corridor highlights the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of their strategic partnership. This situation presents a significant challenge to the long-standing alignment between Moscow and Tehran, potentially reshaping regional alliances and power dynamics.

Geopolitical Implications

Regional Power Dynamics

The proposed Zangezur Corridor has the potential to significantly alter the balance of power in the South Caucasus and surrounding regions. The corridor would create a direct link between Türkiye and the Turkic-speaking countries of Central Asia via Azerbaijan. This could significantly boost Türkiye's economic and cultural influence in the region, potentially at the expense of both Russian

and Iranian interests. The corridor could reduce Iran's strategic depth in the Caucasus. By providing an alternative route that bypasses Iran, the corridor might diminish Tehran's leverage in regional negotiations and economic projects.

While Russia has been supportive of the corridor concept, its implementation could present challenges to Russia's traditional dominance in the region. Moscow may need to recalibrate its approach to maintain its influence amidst changing regional dynamics. The corridor would strengthen Azerbaijan's position, both economically and strategically. This shift could lead to a recalibration of regional alliances and potentially marginalize Armenia's role in regional affairs.

Economic Impact

The Zangezur Corridor has the potential to reshape economic patterns and trade routes in the region. The corridor could offer new, potentially more efficient trade routes between Europe and Asia. This could lead to a redistribution of economic benefits and challenges for countries currently serving as key transit hubs. The corridor could affect energy transportation routes in the region, which might influence global energy markets, particularly concerning the export of Caspian oil and gas to European markets.

The corridor, if implemented with consideration for all regional actors, could foster greater economic cooperation and integration in the South Caucasus. This could potentially lead to new joint ventures and economic partnerships across the region. There are concerns that the corridor might sideline Iran in regional economic integration efforts. This could have significant implications for Iran's economy, particularly in its border regions.

Security Considerations

The Zangezur Corridor raises several important security considerations. The creation of a new transit corridor presents new challenges for border security and the potential for illicit activities. The need for robust border control mechanisms to address these concerns is evident. The corridor could alter the military balance in the region, potentially affecting the strategic depth of certain countries and changing the calculus for potential future conflicts.

The corridor could have implications for existing security structures in the region, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). It might necessitate a reevaluation of security guarantees and alliances. The implementation of the corridor, particularly if not managed carefully, could exacerbate existing tensions in the region. This is especially true given the recent history of conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The Iranian-Russian Relationship: Stress Test

Historical Context

The relationship between Iran and Russia has been characterized by a complex interplay of cooperation and competition. The Syrian conflict has been a significant arena for Iranian-Russian cooperation, with their joint support for the Assad

regime demonstrating the potential for coordinated action in pursuing shared regional objectives. The roots of the Iran-Russia strategic partnership can be traced to shared geopolitical interests, particularly their mutual opposition to Western influence in the region. This alignment has been a cornerstone of both countries' foreign policies in recent decades.

Both Iran and Russia have consistently sought to counterbalance Western, particularly American influence in the Middle East and Central Asia. This shared objective has been a key factor in maintaining their strategic cooperation despite occasional differences.

Current Tensions

The Zangezur Corridor issue has exposed underlying tensions and diverging interests between Iran and Russia. While Russia sees potential benefits in the corridor project, Iran views it as a strategic threat. This divergence is forcing both countries to reassess their priorities and alliances in the region. There is growing sentiment within Iranian policy circles that Russia's support for the corridor constitutes a betrayal of their strategic partnership. This perception could have long-lasting implications for trust between the two nations.

The disagreement over the Zangezur Corridor could spill over into other areas of cooperation. It might affect joint military exercises, arms deals, and economic projects between the two countries.

Diplomatic Fallout

The Zangezur Corridor dispute has led to visible diplomatic tensions between Iran and Russia. In a rare move, Iran summoned the Russian ambassador to express its displeasure over Moscow's stance on the corridor. This can be interpreted as a sign of grave concern in Tehran about the potential implications of the project. The disagreement over the Zangezur Corridor could prompt Iran to reassess its foreign policy alignments, potentially seeking to diversify its strategic partnerships by looking to strengthen ties with other regional or global powers.

There have been instances of Iranian officials publicly criticizing Russia's position on the corridor. This unusual public airing of disagreements indicates the depth of the rift between the two countries on this issue.

Broader Regional Implications

Türkiye and Azerbaijan

The Zangezur Corridor project has significant implications for Türkiye and Azerbaijan, potentially strengthening their regional position. The corridor aligns with Türkiye's vision of greater integration among Turkic-speaking countries. It could facilitate cultural and educational exchanges, potentially strengthening pan-Turkic sentiments and cooperation. The corridor could boost trade volumes between Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Central Asian countries, with this increased economic interdependence potentially translating into greater political influence for Ankara and Baku in the region.

The corridor would significantly enhance Türkiye and Azerbaijan's geopolitical influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. It would provide them with a direct land connection, facilitating greater economic and political cooperation.

Armenia

Armenia faces significant challenges and potential opportunities with the proposed Zangezur Corridor. While potentially challenging, the corridor could also offer Armenia new economic opportunities if it can successfully integrate into the new regional transportation network. The corridor could affect Armenia's close relationship with Iran. Yerevan may need to carefully balance its ties with Tehran against potential benefits from improved regional connectivity.

There are concerns that the corridor could compromise Armenia's strategic position, potentially leaving it more vulnerable in future regional conflicts.

European Union and NATO

The Zangezur Corridor project has implications for the engagement of Western institutions in the region. The corridor project and its impact on Iran's regional position could influence EU-Iran relations. This might affect ongoing efforts to engage Iran on issues such as the nuclear deal and regional security. The changing geopolitical landscape might necessitate a reevaluation of EU and NATO strategies in the region. Western institutions may need to develop innovative approaches to maintain their influence and promote stability.

The corridor could affect European energy security strategies. It might offer new routes for Caspian energy resources to reach European markets, potentially impacting EU energy diversification efforts.

Potential Scenarios and Outcomes

Scenario 1: Escalation of Tensions

This scenario envisions an increase in regional tensions due to the Zangezur Corridor dispute. Continued disagreement over the corridor could lead to a significant deterioration in Iran-Russia relations, potentially impacting their cooperation in other areas such as Syria or nuclear technology. Iran might take more aggressive steps to obstruct the corridor's development, potentially including increased support for Armenian opposition to the project or efforts to leverage its economic ties with Armenia. In a worst-case scenario, there is potential for proxy conflicts or even direct confrontations. This could involve increased military posturing along borders or support for separatist movements in the region.

Scenario 2: Diplomatic Resolution

This scenario explores the possibility of a negotiated solution to the Zangezur Corridor dispute. A successful diplomatic resolution could help preserve the strategic partnership between Iran and Russia. Both countries have strong incentives to maintain their alliance in the face of Western pressure. A diplomatic solution

could involve a carefully negotiated agreement on the corridor's operation, potentially including guarantees for all parties' interests. Iran could be offered economic incentives or guarantees to alleviate its concerns about potential isolation. This could include preferential access to the corridor or joint economic projects.

Scenario 3: Status Quo Maintenance

This scenario considers the possibility of a prolonged deadlock over the Zangezur Corridor. While tensions would persist, they might not escalate to open conflict, instead manifesting as diplomatic friction and economic competition. A prolonged deadlock could lead to a gradual shift in regional alliances, with countries seeking new partnerships to advance their interests in the absence of the corridor's realization. Ongoing disagreements and technical challenges could lead to significant delays in the corridor's implementation, effectively maintaining the current regional status quo.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

For Russia

Russia should carefully balance support for the corridor with Iranian concerns. Russia should adopt a nuanced approach, support the corridor's development while also address Iran's legitimate security and economic concerns. This could involve proposing modifications to the corridor plan that accommodate Iranian interests. The importance of ongoing, high-level diplomatic engagement between Moscow and Tehran to manage disagreements and prevent a serious rupture in relations cannot be overstated. Russia could leverage its economic ties with Iran to offer compensatory measures, such as increased investment in Iranian infrastructure or preferential trade agreements, to offset potential losses from the corridor.

For Iran

Iran could explore ways to engage constructively with the corridor project, potentially securing economic benefits and influence over its implementation rather than outright opposition. Iran should consider diversifying its strategic partnerships, potentially deepening ties with China or exploring rapprochement with Western powers, to reduce its dependence on Russia and mitigate the impact of the corridor. Iran should engage in active diplomacy with all relevant parties, including Russia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, to ensure its interests are considered in any corridor implementation plans.

For Regional Actors

Regional actors should engage in multilateral dialogue to address security concerns. There is a need for a regional security dialogue that includes all stakeholders, addressing concerns about the corridor's potential military implications and developing confidence-building measures. A comprehensive

approach to regional economic integration that includes all countries is needed, potentially expanding the concept of corridors to a broader network of transportation and economic links. Regional countries should maintain balanced relationships with both Iran and Russia, avoiding over-reliance on any single power and preserving diplomatic flexibility.

Geopolitical Narratives, Strategic Calculations, and Regional Power Dynamics

Critical Analysis of Competing Narratives

The Zangezur Corridor has emerged as a discursive battleground where competing narratives shape both policy positions and public perceptions. Viewed through the lens of critical geopolitics, the corridor illustrates how various actors construct and instrumentalize geographical knowledge to advance strategic objectives and legitimize their actions.

Armenia's discourse centers on sovereignty and existential security, emphasizing the potential fragmentation of national territory and the strategic vulnerabilities posed by diminished connectivity with Iran – a key regional ally. This framing casts the corridor as a threat to national cohesion and long-term security.

In contrast, Azerbaijan presents the corridor primarily as a vehicle for economic development and regional integration. Azerbaijani officials frame it as a transformative infrastructure project that will facilitate trade, enhance connectivity, and generate mutual benefits across the region. This narrative strategically downplays geopolitical sensitivities and reframes the initiative as a neutral, forward-looking economic venture.

Iran articulates a markedly distinct perspective, rooted in national security and fears of strategic isolation. Iranian discourse portrays the corridor as a geopolitical threat – an encirclement strategy that undermines Tehran's regional influence. This framing resonates with long-standing concerns about foreign interference and reinforces Iran's emphasis on sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Russia adopts a pragmatically mediated narrative, positioning itself as a neutral arbiter seeking to manage post-conflict realities. Russian officials frame the corridor within the logic of stability and conflict resolution, carefully avoiding rhetoric that might alienate key regional actors, particularly Iran. This diplomatic balancing act reflects Moscow's effort to maintain influence while preserving regional equilibrium.

Türkiye's discourse is embedded in pan-Turkic cultural and historical narratives. The corridor is depicted as a restoration of natural ties between Turkic peoples, severed during the Soviet era. This framing situates the project within a broader civilizational context, appealing to domestic sentiments and reinforcing Ankara's vision of regional leadership grounded in cultural affinity.

These divergent narratives do more than reflect differing interests; they actively shape the boundaries of diplomatic possibilities. Control over the geographical imagination – defining what the Zangezur Corridor „is“ – constitutes a subtle yet

powerful form of influence. Whether cast as a development initiative, a security threat, or a cultural reconnection, the dominant narrative constrains responses, legitimizes certain policies, and delimits what outcomes are deemed acceptable or realistic.

Game Theory Application to Stakeholder Negotiations

The complex negotiations surrounding the Zangezur Corridor can be illuminated through the application of game theory principles. This approach reveals the strategic calculations underlying stakeholder behavior and offers insights into potential pathways toward cooperation.

Information asymmetrically complicates corridor negotiations. Different stakeholders possess varying levels of information about others' true intentions and red lines, creating trust deficits that inhibit cooperation.

The corridor negotiations can be characterized as a mixed-motive game, where actors have both complementary and conflicting interests. For instance, Armenia and Azerbaijan share potential economic benefits from regional integration but remain locked in security competition. This creates opportunities for issue linkage and variable-sum outcomes.

The corridor negotiations can be conceptualized as nested games played simultaneously across security, economic, and identity domains. Success in one arena may be sacrificed for advantages in another, creating complex trade-off calculations.

The concept of "*shadow of the future*" is particularly relevant. Expectations of continued interaction influence current negotiating positions. Countries with longer time horizons may be more willing to compromise for sustainable solutions.

The corridor negotiations represent a classic case of strategic interdependence, where each actor's optimal choice depends on the anticipated actions of others. Russia's position has evolved in response to perceived shifts in Iranian and Turkish strategies, creating a dynamic negotiation environment.

Game theory suggests several potential pathways toward more cooperative outcomes. Iterative engagement, clear communication, and identification of mutual gains could gradually shift the payoff structure. Third-party guarantees might address commitment problems, while incremental confidence-building measures could establish trust.

Energy Geopolitics of the Corridor

The Zangezur Corridor's implications for energy transportation and market access represent a pivotal dimension of its geopolitical significance. This aspect is aptly analyzed through the lens of Keohane and Nye's theory of complex interdependence (1977), which underscores how economic interconnections create multiple channels of influence among states. In this context, energy interdependence generates asymmetric leverage, as control over transit routes extends influence beyond the energy sector into broader political and security domains.

A key concern for Iran lies in the potential erosion of its role as a central energy transit hub. Having long positioned itself as a conduit for Central Asian

energy exports, Iran views emerging northern corridors as a direct challenge to its strategic relevance. The Zangezur Corridor, by establishing a direct land link between Azerbaijan and Türkiye, could significantly reshape energy transport patterns from the Caspian region. It offers a complementary route to the Southern Gas Corridor, thereby enhancing Europe's energy security through diversification of supply chains.

While competitive dynamics are inherent, the corridor also presents opportunities for cooperative energy initiatives. The development of shared infrastructure could foster mutual dependencies that discourage unilateral action and incentivize sustained collaboration. Moreover, the corridor aligns with Türkiye's broader strategic ambition to evolve into a critical energy hub connecting the Caspian and Central Asian regions with European markets. Strengthening this land bridge would enhance Türkiye's bargaining power in energy negotiations and bolster its geostrategic standing among both producers and consumers.

Ultimately, the energy dimension of the Zangezur Corridor exemplifies the principles of complex interdependence. It blurs the line between domestic and international affairs, highlighting how interconnected energy interests can both intensify rivalry and pave the way for cooperative regional integration. This interplay of competition and collaboration may serve as a foundation for a more stable and strategically balanced implementation of the corridor.

Post-Soviet Space Evolution

The Zangezur Corridor dispute serves as a microcosm of the broader evolutionary processes reshaping the post-Soviet geopolitical landscape. Viewed through the theoretical lens of Buzan and Wæver's Regional Security Complex Theory (2003), the conflict not only mirrors existing regional dynamics but also actively contributes to emerging realignments and identity transformations.

At its core, the corridor dispute reflects the shifting contours of great power competition in the post-Soviet space. Russia's traditional dominance is increasingly contested by assertive regional actors such as Türkiye and by global powers expanding their strategic footprint in the region. This evolving multipolarity underscores the corridor's role as a flashpoint in the reconfiguration of regional influence.

Simultaneously, the debate over the corridor encapsulates the persistent contestation of post-Soviet identities. Cohen's geopolitical framework (2014) reveals how physical geography shapes and reflects the construction of national and regional identities. In this context, the Zangezur Corridor has intensified divergent narratives of historical belonging and geopolitical orientation.

Buzan and Wæver's concept of regional security complexes is particularly instructive in assessing the corridor's broader implications. The dispute is catalyzing a reconfiguration of traditional security alignments, with the potential to interlink the South Caucasus and Central Asian complexes while diminishing the prominence of existing north-south connections, particularly those centered more tightly around Russia and Iran.

The South Caucasus, once viewed as a peripheral “*shatterbelt*” in Cohen’s terminology, is undergoing a strategic metamorphosis into a pivotal crossroads bridging multiple regions. Projects like the Zangezur Corridor are emblematic of this shift, enhancing the region’s connectivity and elevating its geopolitical centrality.

Underlying this transformation is a fundamental tension between sovereignty and integration that continues to define post-Soviet development. The Zangezur Corridor illustrates the delicate balancing act states must perform – advancing regional connectivity and economic integration while safeguarding core sovereign interests and political autonomy.

This analysis demonstrates how the Zangezur Corridor dispute is not merely a localized disagreement but part of a systemic transformation of post-Soviet space. As Buzan and Wæver would suggest, security dynamics in this region cannot be understood in isolation but must be analyzed as part of interconnected regional complexes that continue to evolve three decades after the Soviet collapse.

Divergent Risk Perceptions, Path Dependencies, and the Power of Identity

The dispute over the Zangezur Corridor is deeply embedded in the fundamentally different risk assessments held by its various stakeholders. These diverging perceptions shape policy positions, negotiating stances, and the overall feasibility of conflict resolution. While some actors approach the corridor as a security imperative, others see it through economic, geopolitical, or identity-based lenses. Understanding these differences is crucial in assessing the barriers to negotiation and the prospects for compromise.

Armenia’s stance on the Zangezur Corridor is driven by profound existential security concerns. Armenian policymakers view the corridor through the prism of territorial integrity and strategic depth, perceiving any concession as a potential threat to national survival. The country’s historical vulnerabilities, particularly in the context of its longstanding conflict with Azerbaijan, intensify these anxieties. Control over critical transportation links is not just a matter of infrastructure but an essential component of national defense, making any proposal that compromises sovereignty inherently unacceptable.

In contrast, Azerbaijan’s risk assessment is primarily framed in terms of opportunity costs. Baku’s calculations revolve around the economic and strategic benefits that would be lost if the corridor remains unimplemented. The absence of this route represents a missed opportunity for regional influence and economic expansion, rather than an immediate security threat. For Azerbaijan, securing the corridor is not just about connectivity but also about asserting its position as a key regional player in the South Caucasus.

Iran’s concerns stem from broader geopolitical anxieties, particularly regarding strategic encirclement. Iranian policymakers fear the corridor could facilitate an unbroken axis of Turkish and Azerbaijani influence along Iran’s northern border, thereby diminishing Tehran’s leverage in the region. The corridor’s implementation,

in their view, would not only alter trade routes but also recalibrate regional power dynamics in ways unfavorable to Iran's long-term strategic interests.

Compounding these divergent perceptions is the role of information filtering and institutional biases. Media narratives, bureaucratic interests, and entrenched threat perceptions within each country serve to amplify specific risks while downplaying others. This self-reinforcing feedback loop ensures that each state continues to interpret developments in a manner that aligns with pre-existing concerns, making consensus-building even more elusive.

Russia, though officially supportive of the corridor, harbors concerns about the dilution of its influence in the region. Moscow sees the project as a double-edged sword – while it could facilitate economic connectivity, it might also reduce Armenia's dependence on Russian-controlled routes. In a geopolitical landscape where leverage is often exerted through control over critical infrastructure, the potential circumvention of Russian territory presents a strategic dilemma for the Kremlin.

These conflicting perceptions create substantial obstacles to negotiated solutions. What one stakeholder sees as an acceptable level of risk, another may perceive as an existential threat. Addressing these differences requires mediators to acknowledge subjective risk assessments rather than focusing solely on objective calculations. Phased implementation strategies with built-in security guarantees, as well as robust monitoring mechanisms, could alleviate some of the worst-case scenario fears, making a compromise more tenable.

Beyond these immediate risk perceptions, the Zangezur Corridor dispute is also shaped by deeper historical and structural path dependencies that constrain current policy choices. The legacy of asymmetric economic development has resulted in structural disparities that complicate integration efforts. Post-independence economic trajectories have diverged significantly, with differing models of liberalization and distinct export profiles making regional economic cohesion more challenging than it was during the Soviet era. Moreover, entrenched historical narratives further restrict policy flexibility. Deeply ingrained territorial claims and identity-based historiographies create cognitive barriers to pragmatic compromise. These narratives, once established, become difficult to alter, even when evolving strategic interests suggest that reassessment may be beneficial.

Institutional inertia presents yet another challenge. The existing regional frameworks – such as the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization – have established patterns of interaction that resist fundamental reconfiguration. The bureaucratic structures of these organizations are designed to maintain existing alignments rather than facilitate new ones, thereby slowing any attempts at integration beyond the status quo.

Legal and regulatory incompatibilities further complicate the corridor's implementation. Three decades of independent development have resulted in distinct regulatory regimes, customs procedures, and transportation laws that now serve as friction points. Addressing these technical challenges requires not only political will but also significant harmonization efforts, potentially with the involvement of external mediators or international institutions.

The Soviet-era infrastructure legacy also continues to shape connectivity options. Transportation networks were originally designed to serve an integrated USSR rather than facilitate cross-border interactions between newly independent states. This legacy has left gaps in regional connectivity that now function as barriers to cooperation. Nevertheless, external shocks – such as the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war – can function as catalysts for rethinking established patterns and exploring new regional frameworks. International financial institutions could play a critical role in facilitating this transition by providing the necessary resources and technical expertise.

At its core, the Zangezur Corridor dispute is not only about economic and security interests but also about identity. A constructivist perspective reveals that state positions are deeply influenced by identity constructions and social meanings.

Identity-based alliance formations play a significant role in shaping stakeholder positions. Cultural, religious, and historical affinities often dictate alliance patterns more than purely strategic calculations. This dynamic is particularly evident in Azerbaijan and Türkiye's alignment, which is deeply rooted in pan-Turkic identity narratives. The corridor represents more than a logistical route; it is a symbol of the reestablishment of Turkic unity across the region.

Iran's opposition to the project is similarly tied to identity concerns. Iran's perception of the Caucasus is shaped by its historical conception of Persian civilization and its cultural influence in the region. The corridor, from this perspective, is not just a geopolitical challenge but also a cultural and civilizational threat. For Russia, the dispute intersects with its broader great power identity. Moscow's engagement is driven by its self-image as the principal arbiter of post-Soviet space. Supporting the corridor aligns with this identity, but any shift that reduces Russian leverage presents a challenge to its hegemonic aspirations. Armenia's resistance to the corridor is likewise an identity issue. Sovereignty and territorial integrity are core components of Armenia's post-Soviet national identity. Any compromise on this issue is perceived not just as a strategic loss but as an affront to national dignity and historical memory.

Given the centrality of identity in shaping these positions, traditional material incentives may not be sufficient to bridge divides. Creative diplomatic framings, which accommodate key identity narratives while allowing practical cooperation, could offer a way forward. The insight that identities are stable but not immutable suggests that sustained interaction and dialogue may gradually shift perceptions, creating new possibilities for resolution over time.

Concluding Remarks

The Zangezur Corridor, as a focal point of geopolitical rivalries, regional integration, and the Iranian-Russian power struggle in the South Caucasus, encapsulates the complexities of 21st-century geopolitics. This study has illuminated the intricate interplay of strategic interests, historical narratives, and identity politics that shape the region's future. The corridor is not merely a

transportation route; it is a symbol of competing visions for regional order, a battleground for influence, and a test case for the resilience of alliances in a rapidly changing world.

The rivalry between Iran and Russia over the Zangezur Corridor underscores the fragility of their strategic partnership. While both nations have historically aligned against Western influence, their diverging interests in the South Caucasus reveal the limits of this alignment. Iran's opposition to the corridor, driven by fears of strategic encirclement and economic marginalization, contrasts sharply with Russia's pragmatic support for the project to balance Turkish influence and maintain its role as a regional power broker. This tension serves as a stress test for Iranian-Russian relations, potentially reshaping their long-standing partnership and forcing both countries to reassess their regional strategies.

The broader implications of the Zangezur Corridor extend beyond the immediate stakeholders. For Türkiye and Azerbaijan, the corridor represents an opportunity to strengthen their geopolitical influence and advance pan-Turkic integration. For Armenia, it poses existential security concerns and challenges its strategic depth. For the European Union and NATO, the corridor raises questions about energy security, regional stability, and the future of engagement in the South Caucasus. The corridor's potential to reshape trade routes, energy markets, and security arrangements highlights its significance as a nexus of regional and global power dynamics.

The competing narratives surrounding the Zangezur Corridor reveal how geographical knowledge is constructed and manipulated to advance strategic objectives. Azerbaijan's development narrative, Türkiye's pan-Turkic discourse, Iran's security framing, Russia's pragmatic mediation, and Armenia's sovereignty concerns all shape the policy options and diplomatic possibilities for resolving the corridor dispute. These narratives, deeply rooted in historical and cultural contexts, underscore the importance of addressing identity concerns alongside material interests in any negotiated solution.

The application of game theory to the corridor negotiations highlights the strategic interdependence of stakeholders and the potential for both conflict and cooperation. The mixed-motive dynamics of negotiations, the shadow of the future, and the challenges of information asymmetry all complicate the path toward a diplomatic resolution. However, iterative engagement, confidence-building measures, and third-party guarantees could create opportunities for more cooperative outcomes.

The energy geopolitics of the Zangezur Corridor, analyzed through the framework of complex interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 1977), illustrate how economic relationships create multiple channels of influence between states. The corridor's potential to alter energy transport routes, enhance Europe's energy security, and strengthen Türkiye's position as an energy hub underscores its significance in the global energy landscape. At the same time, Iran's concerns about the diminishment of its role as an energy transit hub highlight the competitive dynamics that complicate regional integration efforts.

The Zangezur Corridor dispute also reflects broader evolutionary processes reshaping the post-Soviet space. As Buzan and Wæver's Regional Security

Complex Theory (2003) suggests, the corridor is reconfiguring traditional security alignments and linking the South Caucasus and Central Asian security complexes more closely. The transition from a peripheral “*shatterbelt*” to a central crossroads, as Cohen (2014) describes, elevates the strategic significance of the corridor and underscores its role in the systemic transformation of the post-Soviet space.

The divergent risk perceptions of stakeholders create significant barriers to negotiated solutions. Armenia’s existential security concerns, Azerbaijan’s opportunity cost focus, Iran’s strategic encirclement fears, and Russia’s influence dilution concerns all shape their policy positions and negotiating stances. Effective mediation requires acknowledgment of these subjective risk perceptions and the development of mechanisms to address them.

The path dependencies created by historical decisions and institutional patterns further complicate the implementation of the Zangezur Corridor. The Soviet-era infrastructure legacy, institutional inertia in regional organizations, entrenched historical narratives, and legal and regulatory framework incompatibilities all constrain current policy options. Conversely, external shocks and international financial institutions could play a catalytic role in overcoming these path dependencies and creating new possibilities for regional integration.

Finally, the constructivist perspective reminds us that state interests and positions are fundamentally shaped by identity constructions and social meanings. The Zangezur Corridor dispute reveals how sovereignty, pan-Turkic identity, Persian civilization, and great power narratives influence stakeholder positions and constrain potential solutions. Addressing these identity concerns, alongside material interests, is crucial for any attempt at resolution or reconciliation.

In conclusion, the Zangezur Corridor serves as a microcosm of the challenges and opportunities facing the South Caucasus and the broader international order. It embodies the tension between competition and cooperation, between historical legacies and future possibilities. The path forward will require not just astute diplomacy and strategic acumen, but also imagination and empathy. It will demand the ability to see beyond immediate interests to long-term regional stability and prosperity. As the situation continues to evolve, it will serve as a litmus test for the capacity of regional and global powers to navigate the complex currents of 21st-century geopolitics.

The Zangezur Corridor stands as a testament to the enduring relevance of geography in international relations, while simultaneously challenging us to transcend simplistic geographical determinism. It is a reminder that in the complex world of international politics, the most enduring solutions often lie not in the triumph of one perspective over others, but in the delicate balance of competing interests and the creative synthesis of diverse viewpoints. As scholars and policymakers continue to grapple with this issue, they would do well to keep in mind the multifaceted nature of the challenge and the rich theoretical toolkit available for its analysis. For understanding the Zangezur Corridor, we gain insights not just into a specific regional dispute but also into the very nature of power, perception, and possibility in our interconnected world.

*Appendices: The Zangezur Corridor
– Geopolitical Rivalries and Regional Integration*

Appendix A: Stakeholder Analysis

Table A.1: Primary Stakeholders and Their Core Interests in the Zangezur Corridor

Stakeholder	Primary Interests	Key Concerns	Strategic Objectives
Armenia	Preservation of sovereignty and territorial integrity	Potential loss of strategic depth; Isolation from Iran	Maintain border with Iran; Ensure security guarantees
Azerbaijan	Direct access to Nakhchivan exclave	Ensuring uninterrupted access; International recognition of corridor rights	Connect mainland with Nakhchivan; Strengthen ties with Türkiye
Iran	Preservation of border with Armenia; Maintain regional influence	Strategic encirclement; Loss of transit hub status	Prevent isolation; Maintain economic leverage in region
Russia	Maintain influence as power broker; Regional stability	Balancing relations with Iran and Türkiye; Preserving regional dominance	Manage competing regional influences; Maintain leverage over Armenia and Azerbaijan
Türkiye	Enhanced influence in Caucasus and Central Asia; Pan-Turkic integration	Ensuring corridor implementation; Managing Iranian opposition	Create contiguous Turkic corridor; Strengthen position as energy hub

Appendix B: Theoretical Framework Application

Table B.1: Application of Theoretical Frameworks to Zangezur Corridor Analysis

Theoretical Framework	Key Theorists	Application to Zangezur Corridor	Key Insights
Neorealism	Waltz (1979), Mearsheimer (2001)	Analysis of power balancing behaviors	Explains Iranian and Russian attempts to maintain relative power positions in South Caucasus
Balance of Power Theory	Paul (2004)	Understanding prevention of hegemonic dominance	Illuminates competition to prevent any actor from gaining decisive advantage
Geopolitical Theory	Cohen (2014)	Analysis of shatterbelts and strategic regions	Helps understand South Caucasus as region caught between competing powers
Critical Geopolitics	Ó Tuathail (1996)	Examination of geographical knowledge construction	Explains how actors frame corridor narratives for strategic purposes
Complex Interdependence	Keohane & Nye (1977)	Analysis of multiple connection channels	Addresses economic and diplomatic aspects beyond military security
Regional Security Complex Theory	Buzan & Wæver (2003)	Understanding interconnected security dynamics	Explains how security concerns in region are interlinked
Constructivism	Wendt (1992)	Analysis of identity and interest formation	Addresses how historical narratives influence positions on corridor
Game Theory	Axelrod (1984)	Strategic decision-making analysis	Provides framework for understanding Iran-Russia rivalry dynamics

Appendix C: Economic Impact Analysis

Table C.1: Potential Economic Impacts of the Zangezur Corridor

Economic Dimension	Potential Positive Impacts	Potential Negative Impacts	Affected Stakeholders
Trade Routes	New, more efficient routes between Europe and Asia	Redistribution of economic benefits	All regional countries, particularly Iran
Energy Transportation	New routes for Caspian oil and gas to European markets	Disruption of existing energy transit arrangements	Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Iran
Regional Economic Integration	Greater economic cooperation; New joint ventures	Economic marginalization of excluded parties	All regional countries
Transit Hub Status	Enhancement of Azerbaijan and Türkiye's transit position	Diminishment of Iran's role as transit hub	Iran, Azerbaijan, Türkiye
Border Region Development	Economic development in previously isolated regions	Potential economic dislocation in certain areas	Armenia, Azerbaijan

Appendix D: Security Implications Assessment

Table D.1: Security Dimensions of the Zangezur Corridor

Security Dimension	Key Considerations	Potential Risks	Mitigation Approaches
Border Security	New challenges for control mechanisms	Potential for illicit activities	Robust border control systems
Military Balance	Altered strategic depth for certain countries	Changes to regional military calculus	Security guarantees and confidence-building measures
Existing Security Structures	Implications for CSTO and other arrangements	Revaluation of security guarantees	Multilateral security dialogue
Regional Tensions	Potential exacerbation of existing conflicts	Heightened Armenia-Azerbaijan tensions	Careful implementation with international monitoring
Proxy Conflicts	Risk of escalation through proxies	Support for separatist movements	Diplomatic engagement and third-party mediation

Appendix E: Iran-Russia Relationship Analysis

Table E.1: Evolution of Iran-Russia Relations in Context of the Zangezur Corridor

Energy Aspect	Current Situation	Potential Impact of Corridor	Strategic Implications
Transit Routes	Iran positioned as potential route for Central Asian resources	New northern routes could undermine Iranian position	Changed leverage in energy negotiations
Caspian Resources	Southern Gas Corridor as primary route	Complementary land route through corridor	Enhanced European energy security through diversification
Collaborative Projects	Limited cross-border energy cooperation	Potential for shared infrastructure development	Creation of mutual dependencies encouraging cooperation
Turkish Energy Hub	Türkiye seeking to enhance position	Strengthened connection to Caspian and Central Asian supplies	Enhanced Turkish negotiating position with producers and consumers
Energy Interdependence	Existing patterns of dependency	New interdependencies through corridor implementation	Creation of leverage extending beyond energy sector

Appendix F: Scenario Analysis

Table F.1: Potential Scenarios for Zangezur Corridor Development

Scenario	Key Characteristics	Probability Factors	Impact Assessment
Escalation of Tensions	Deterioration of Iran-Russia relations; Iranian obstruction efforts; Proxy conflicts	Continued disagreement; Failed diplomacy; Hardline positions	High negative impact on regional stability; Economic costs; Security risks
Diplomatic Resolution	Preserved Iran-Russia partnership; Negotiated agreement on corridor operation; Economic incentives for Iran	Mutual interest in avoiding conflict; Economic benefits; International pressure	Positive impact on regional integration; Economic development; Maintained alliances
Status Quo Maintenance	Prolonged deadlock; Diplomatic friction; Economic competition; Delayed implementation	Technical challenges; Entrenched positions; External factors	Mixed impact; Continued uncertainty; Limited regional integration

Appendix G: Competing Geopolitical Narratives

Table G.1: Analysis of Stakeholder Narrative Framing on the Zangezur Corridor

Stakeholder	Primary Narrative Frame	Key Discursive Elements	Strategic Purpose of Narrative
Armenia	Sovereignty and Security	Territorial integrity; Existential threats; Strategic isolation	Generate domestic and international support for opposition to corridor terms
Azerbaijan	Economic Development	Regional integration; Prosperity; Connectivity	Downplay geopolitical implications; Present corridor as mutual benefit project
Iran	Security Threat and Encirclement	Foreign interference; Sovereignty concerns; Historical influence	Justify opposition; Rally domestic support; Appeal to international norms
Russia	Pragmatic Mediation	Problem-solving; Post-conflict reconstruction; Practical solutions	Position as neutral arbiter; Maintain influence with all parties
Türkiye	Cultural and Historical Reconnection	Pan-Turkic integration; Historical ties; Natural connections	Embed project in broader historical-cultural context; Legitimize involvement

Appendix H: Energy Geopolitics Assessment

Table H.1: Energy Dimension Analysis of the Zangezur Corridor

Energy Aspect	Current Situation	Potential Impact of Corridor	Strategic Implications
Transit Routes	Iran positioned as potential route for Central Asian resources	New northern routes could undermine Iranian position	Changed leverage in energy negotiations
Caspian Resources	Southern Gas Corridor as primary route	Complementary land route through corridor	Enhanced European energy security through diversification
Collaborative Projects	Limited cross-border energy cooperation	Potential for shared infrastructure development	Creation of mutual dependencies encouraging cooperation
Turkish Energy Hub	Türkiye seeking to enhance position	Strengthened connection to Caspian and Central Asian supplies	Enhanced Turkish negotiating position with producers and consumers
Energy Interdependence	Existing patterns of dependency	New interdependencies through corridor implementation	Creation of leverage extending beyond energy sector

Appendix I : Path Dependency Factors in Regional Integration

Table I.1: Historical and Structural Constraints on Zangezur Corridor Implementation

Path Dependency Factor	Nature of Constraint	Impact on Integration	Potential Mitigation
Economic Development Asymmetries	Different economic models and liberalization levels	Complicates harmonization of regulations and standards	Phased implementation with transitional arrangements
Historical Narrative Entrenchment	Established narratives about territorial rights	Limits flexibility in negotiations	Alternative framing emphasizing mutual benefits
Institutional Inertia	Existing regional organizations and frameworks	Resistance to new integration initiatives	Complementary rather than competing institutional designs
Legal/Regulatory Incompatibilities	Divergent post-Soviet legal developments	Technical barriers to integration	Harmonization efforts with international assistance
Soviet Infrastructure Legacy	Transportation networks designed for USSR integration	Physical connectivity gaps	New infrastructure investments targeting missing links

Appendix J: Identity Politics Analysis

Table J.1: Identity Factors Influencing Stakeholder Positions on Zangezur Corridor

Stakeholder	Key Identity Elements	Manifestation in Corridor Positions	Implications for Resolution
Iran	Persian civilization identity; Regional influence self-conception	Opposition based partly on cultural marginalization fears	Need to address identity concerns alongside material interests
Türkiye/Azerbaijan	Pan-Turkic identity narratives; Linguistic and cultural connections	Support framed as restoration of natural connections	Creative framing accommodating identity narratives while allowing cooperation
Russia	Great power identity; Arbiter of post-Soviet space	Assertion of primary role in shaping regional arrangements	Gradual identity evolution through sustained interaction
Armenia	Post-Soviet sovereignty conception; Christian identity	Resistance to perceived territorial compromise	Recognition of identity threats in proposed solutions
Regional Powers	Identity-based alliance formations	Partnerships shaped by cultural and historical affinities	Addressing predispositions toward certain configurations

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