

## STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF THE ZANGEZUR CORRIDOR FOR SOUTH CAUCASUS–BALKANS AND BALKANS–IRAN CONNECTIVITY

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### ABSTRACT

The opening of the Zangezur corridor, within the context of the new geopolitical realities in the South Caucasus following the 2020 war, could significantly impact interregional relations, particularly Caucasus–Balkan and Iran–Balkan connectivity. Using realist and neorealist frameworks, the article argues that the corridor would activate the Middle Corridor, positioning the Balkans as a key hub for Eurasia transit and trade, enhancing energy supply diversification and security. This would mean significant economic gains for the Balkan countries, shorter and more reliable supply chains, and enhanced energy security, particularly through reduced dependence on Russian gas.

Despite Iran's initial objections, the corridor's potential to foster regional stability and integration could offer Iran alternative transit routes, energy export opportunities, and participation in new diplomatic platforms. The Zangezur Corridor might appear to weaken Iran's role as a transit country. However, analyses demonstrate that the opposite is also possible. A stable and integrated region could create new opportunities and prospects for Iran. These include access to alternative transit routes (e.g., the North-South corridor), energy exports to the Balkan market, participation in new diplomatic platforms, and the deepening of cultural ties. Iran's benefit will depend on its pragmatic approach, which in turn requires the strengthening and preservation of the current reformist wing in power.

Thus, the Zangezur corridor may create a win-win scenario for regional development and cooperation.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the 44-day war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which resulted in the Republic of Azerbaijan liberating its internationally recognized territories from occupation, led to significant geopolitical changes in the Caucasus region. The processes that unfolded both before and after the war demonstrate that the newly emerging geopolitical realities are not limited to bilateral relations between the two states, but are directly linked to the struggle among major powers for control over trade routes connecting Europe and Asia.

The Karabakh knot and the severed communications between Armenia and Azerbaijan – caused by Armenia's military aggression against Azerbaijan – have been among the main reasons why the most optimal and shortest route of the Greater Middle Corridor could not operate at full capacity. This situation, in effect, deprived not only Central Asia and the Caucasus but also the Balkan region of significant economic revenues. The shipment of goods from China to Northern and Western Europe via the northern route through Russian territory – excludes the Balkan countries from major transit revenues. Likewise, the delivery of Chinese goods through Central Asia and then via Iran to the Persian Gulf or the Mediterranean shores increases the strategic importance of Southern European states at the expense of the Balkans.

By contrast, the China–Central Asia–Caucasus–Anatolia line – known as the Middle Corridor – inevitably places the Balkan states at the center of Europe-bound transit. This would transform the Balkans into a major “trade hub.” Therefore, the opening of the Zangezur corridor, which is currently being discussed both by regional states and global powers with vested interests in the region, holds considerable significance for the Balkan countries as well.

Within the Islamic Republic of Iran, the conservative camp views the Zangezur corridor with skepticism. They argue that it could weaken Iran's economic and geopolitical leverage, depriving it

of critical tools of influence. However, the current reformist leadership in Iran, led by President Masoud Pezeshkian, appears to adopt a more pragmatic approach to the issue.

This raises important questions: How might the opening of the Zangezur corridor affect Iran–Balkan and Caucasus–Balkan relations? And how do the Balkan states and Iran perceive this issue?

## **METODOLOGY**

The events and processes discussed in the article have been analyzed within a realist and neorealist framework. The dominant thesis adopted is that states act based on power, security, and interests, with strategic and geopolitical competition considered the primary factor. While approaching the issues through a realist lens, other theoretical perspectives were also employed for practical analysis. Thus, from a theoretical standpoint, it can be said that an eclectic (selective) approach was primarily used to study the matter.

### **The Zangezur Knot: Historical Roots of the Issue**

As is known, the territory through which the currently debated Zangezur corridor would pass is, from a historical perspective, part of Azerbaijan, while within today's internationally recognized borders it lies within Armenia. When the first Armenian republic was established in the Caucasus in 1918, it did not have a direct border with the Qajar state, which at that time controlled the present territory of Iran. Dashnak Armenia made repeated attempts to seize the regions of Nakhchivan and Zangezur. Western Zangezur, the section bordering Iran, came under the political control of Soviet Armenia in December 1920 and effectively in 1921 (Декларация Азревкома в связи с устоевлением в Армении Советской Власти, 1921, pp. 6-7)

For a long time, the local Muslim population resisted the transfer of Western Zangezur to Armenia, yet a significant part of this population was massacred in April 1921 by Dashnak forces under the leadership of Garegin Nzhdeh, who had proclaimed the so-called “Republic of Mountainous Armenia.” Although Nzhdeh's puppet Dashnak government declared that it did not recognize the Bolshevik regime in Armenia, in reality it laid the groundwork for the full separation of Western Zangezur from Azerbaijan and its subsequent incorporation into the Armenian SSR (Краткий летучий обзор управления истории Зангезура с 14-го по 21-й год, 1921, pp. 11-15).

Even at the time of the establishment of Soviet power in Armenia, Armenian leaders considered maintaining ties with Iran as a matter of strategic importance. When Armenian officials sought to justify their claims over Nakhchivan and Zangezur, they often highlighted the prospective importance of relations with Iran. A bulletin of the diplomatic mission of the Azerbaijan SSR in Georgia dated 13 January 1921 reported on an article entitled “Soviet Russia and the Kemalists” published in issue no. 8 of the Armenian-language newspaper Mshak. The article noted the ongoing famine and economic crisis in Armenia and emphasized the necessity of establishing relations with Iran as a vital means of overcoming it. It stated: “*Despite the declarations of the Azerbaijani government, Zangezur and Nakhchivan have not been incorporated into Soviet Armenia. At least a road to Persia (Iran) should be opened*” (Армянская жизнь. Советская Россия и Кемалисты. Бюллетень Информационного Отдела при Дипломатическом Правительстве АССР в Грузии. 13 января., 1921, p. 67).

As a result of the developments of the 1920s, the western part of Zangezur became Armenian territory. Consequently, the Zangezur issue emerged as a critical point for the opening of the Middle Corridor, making it a key geopolitical question today.

### **Iran's Approach to the Issue**

The 44-day war in 2020 significantly altered the geopolitical landscape of the region, and Azerbaijan's rapid rise in power and influence caused serious concern not only in Armenia but also among certain political forces in Iran, particularly supporters of the conservative line. Iran was firmly opposed to the creation of the Zangezur corridor, a transport and communication route that Armenia had committed to open under the November 10 trilateral statement. At that time, the conservative factions in power argued that opening the corridor could deprive Iran of significant economic

revenues and diminish the importance of certain transit routes passing through its territory. These groups labeled the Zangezur corridor as an Israeli project, deliberately misrepresenting the initiative as a violation of Armenia's sovereignty and an attempt to seize strategically important Iranian-Armenian border areas.

Moreover, Iran argued that the foreign companies, particularly Israeli firms, engaged by Azerbaijan to restore the liberated territories could carry out intelligence or military activities, despite the fact that it had been publicly announced that Iranian companies could also participate in the reconstruction process. According to some Iranian scholars, should the Zangezur corridor be established under the post-Second Karabakh War agreements, it would create new opportunities for the transfer of Azerbaijani natural gas to the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and to Turkey (Kazemi, 1399). At the same time, this could halt the transport of Turkmen gas to Turkey and Armenia via Iran, thereby reducing the geopolitical potential of Iranian territory.

During that period, Iran publicly declared its support for regional cooperation in the 3+3 format proposed by Azerbaijan and Turkey and conducted a regional tour at the level of foreign ministers to promote it. At the same time, however, Iran sought to counter Turkey's growing influence in the region and opposed the opening of the Zangezur corridor through Armenian territory, which is a key element of regional cooperation. Several factors influenced this position. First, conservatives argued that opening the Zangezur corridor would allow the Middle Corridor—an important line for transporting goods from China to Europe—to operate without Iran's participation. Therefore, Iran, opposing the Zangezur corridor, expressed willingness to create an alternative route via Aghband–Iranian Julfa–Nakhchivan. Second, they claimed that the realization of the Zangezur corridor would place the Iran–Armenia border under the control of external powers. Consequently, Iran's stance hindered the achievement of full peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Nonetheless, the development of regional cooperation and the normalization process could have also benefited Iran. Even Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan acknowledged in September 2024 that peace between Baku and Yerevan would be advantageous for Iran

### **The Zangezur Corridor and the Balkan Countries**

It cannot be said that Balkan countries have issued explicit statements regarding the Zangezur corridor. Balkan states, which have sought to benefit from Azerbaijan's energy resources and thereby withstand energy pressures, joined general calls for peace in the post-war period, recognized Azerbaijan's role as an important partner, and at the same time tried to maintain normal-level relations with Armenia. However, since August 2025, there has been an increase in statements from Balkan countries concerning the opening of communications between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Undoubtedly, agreements reached between the parties with U.S. mediation played a significant role in this development.

For example, Greece, which for many years had unjustifiably supported Armenia's position while simultaneously benefiting from Azerbaijani energy supplies to Europe, issued a statement in August 2025. The statement welcomed the agreements announced between Armenia and Azerbaijan as an important step toward ending the decades-long conflict in the South Caucasus. It noted: *"We applaud both parties and the U.S. Administration for progress toward normalizing relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The signing and ratification of a final Peace Agreement between the two countries will be the necessary next step to ensure sustainable peace and prosperity, fully respecting the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity."* (Greece welcomes announced agreements between Armenia and Azerbaijan, 2025).

The Bulgarian media also views the agreement reached in Washington between Azerbaijan and Armenia primarily in the context of opening communications and the potential benefits this could bring. Articles in Bulgarian outlets have highlighted the international political significance of the Joint Declaration signed by the leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and the United States in Washington, as well as the text of the Peace and Bilateral Relations Agreement initialed by the foreign ministers

of the two countries (Bulgarian media highlights significance of Azerbaijan-Armenia peace agreement, 2025).

In particular, articles published in media outlets close to the government emphasized that the agreement ends a decades-long conflict and makes a significant contribution to regional and global security and development. These articles also highlighted that the document holds strategic importance for establishing international connectivity between Asia and Europe and for opening regional communication routes.

Albania, as one of the countries in recent years paying particular attention to relations with regional states, also closely followed the historic agreement reached. On August 12, Albanian President Bajram Begaj made a phone call Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev to congratulate him on the historic normalization of relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia (Albania applauds Azerbaijan's peace push with Armenia, 2025).

### **How Would the Opening of the Corridor Affect Azerbaijan–Balkan Relations?**

As analyses indicate, there are diverse perspectives in the Balkans and Iran regarding the opening of the Zangezur corridor. This diversity reflects the countries' interests and priorities, as well as foreign policy thinking shaped over many years by historical doctrines and past traumas. The potential impacts of the Zangezur corridor on Caucasus–Balkan relations are particularly relevant in several respects:

First, the Zangezur corridor will further strengthen Azerbaijan's role as a key transit hub between the Caspian region and Europe. This will reinforce the East–West transport axis, directly linking the South Caucasus with the Balkans via the Middle Corridor (China–Central Asia–Caucasus–Black Sea–Balkans). For countries such as Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Greece, and even Hungary, this means shorter and more reliable supply chains.

Second, energy security is a critical factor. Azerbaijan already supplies natural gas to some Balkan countries through the TANAP–TAP pipeline system. The operation of the Zangezur corridor will strengthen Azerbaijan's position as an energy partner and could facilitate the expansion of supply routes for Southeastern European countries seeking alternatives to Russian gas. Constructive Iranian participation could further increase the potential for Iranian energy resources to be delivered to Western, Eastern, and Southern Europe via Anatolia and the Balkans.

Greater dependence of Balkan countries on Azerbaijani transit and energy resources will enhance Baku's political leverage in regional capitals. This, in turn, will create new opportunities for Caucasus–Balkan cooperation, particularly in the areas of infrastructure, trade, and security frameworks supported by the European Union.

### **How Would the Opening of the Corridor Affect Iran–Balkan Relations?**

Analyses indicate that the opening of the Zangezur corridor could create alternative opportunities for Iran. For example, a portion of the cargo transported to Nakhchivan via both the Middle Corridor and the North–South transport route could be transferred to Persian Gulf ports through the coordination of Azerbaijan's Nakhchivan railway network with Iranian railways.

Regarding Iran–Balkan relations, the corridor's opening could reduce tensions in the South Caucasus, while the establishment of new communication routes would minimize the risk of conflict. A more stable South Caucasus would provide Iran with a safer environment to develop economic and trade relations with Balkan countries.

The skeptical stance of conservative political groups in Iran is not entirely rational. The Zangezur corridor does not serve as a complete alternative to Iran. On the contrary, the opening of new regional corridors could allow Iran to integrate its own network with the North–South Corridor or the Iran–Turkey–Balkan routes, thereby enabling Iran to benefit from regional integration processes.

Azerbaijan's increasing energy exports to the Balkans are not entirely negative for Iran. On the contrary, rising energy demand in the region could expand Iran's opportunities to export alternative

gas, oil products, and electricity to Balkan markets. Since Balkan countries aim to diversify their energy sources, Iran could participate in this process as an additional player.

The opening of the corridor would also allow the European Union, Turkey, and South Caucasus countries to establish new platforms for cooperation toward the Balkans. Iran could participate in these platforms as an observer or partner, thereby increasing diplomatic contacts with Balkan states.

The expansion of transit routes would positively affect tourism and cultural exchanges as well. Iran's existing religious and cultural ties in the Balkans—particularly with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Greece—could deepen under this new communication framework.

Thus, while the Zangezur corridor might initially appear to weaken Iran's transit role, in reality it could create additional opportunities for expanding Iran–Balkan relations. These opportunities primarily relate to strengthening regional stability, diversifying transit routes, expanding energy markets, participating in new diplomatic platforms, and revitalizing cultural and humanitarian exchanges.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, as the analyses clearly indicate, the opening of the Zangezur Corridor is not merely a matter of restoring regional transport links between Azerbaijan and Armenia, but a multifaceted geopolitical event with broader regional and global implications. The Zangezur Corridor could pave the way for the full activation of the Middle Trade Route and transform the Balkans into one of the main hubs for Asia–Europe transit and trade, alongside Central Asia and the Caucasus regions. This would mean significant economic gains for the Balkan countries, shorter and more reliable supply chains, and enhanced energy security, particularly through reduced dependence on Russian gas.

At first glance, the Zangezur Corridor might appear to weaken Iran's role as a transit country. However, analyses demonstrate that the opposite is also possible. A stable and integrated region could create new opportunities and prospects for Iran. These include access to alternative transit routes (e.g., the North–South corridor), energy exports to the Balkan market, participation in new diplomatic platforms, and the deepening of cultural ties. Iran's benefit will depend on its pragmatic approach, which in turn requires the strengthening and preservation of the current reformist wing in power.

The analyses suggest that the opening of the Zangezur Corridor is not a zero-sum game but rather a potential win-win scenario for the South Caucasus and the Balkans. It could promote economic development, energy diversification, and regional cooperation.

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## XÜLASƏ

### ZƏNGƏZUR DƏHLİZİNİN YARDILMASININ CƏNUBİ QAFQAZ–BALKAN VƏ BALKAN–İRAN ƏLAQƏLƏRİ KONTEKSTİNDƏ STRATEJİ NƏTİCƏLƏRİ

**Elnur Kəlbizadə**

2020-ci il müharibəsindən sonra Cənubi Qafqazda formalaşan yeni geosiyasi reallıqlar kontekstində Zəngəzur dəhlizinin açılması regionlararası münasibətlərə, xüsusən Qafqaz–Balkan və İran–Balkan əlaqələrinə əhəmiyyətli təsir göstərə bilər. Realist və neorealist yanaşmalar çərçivəsində aparılan təhlil göstərir ki, bu Orta Dəhlizin fəaliyyətini aktivləşdirərək Balkanları da Avrasiya tranziti və ticarəti üçün əsas qovşağa çevirəcək, enerji təchizatının diversifikasiyasını və təhlükəsizliyini gücləndirəcək. Bu, Balkan ölkələri üçün mühüm iqtisadi qazanc, daha qısa və etibarlı təchizat zəncirləri, həmçinin Rusiya qazından asılılığın azalması ilə enerji təhlükəsizliyinin güclənməsi demək olacaq.

İrənin ilkin etirazlarına baxmayaraq, dəhlizin regional sabitlik və inteqrasiyanı təşviq etmək potensialı bu ölkəyə alternativ tranzit marşrutları, enerji ixracı imkanları və yeni diplomatik platformalarda iştirak fürsətləri yarada bilər. Zəngəzur dəhlizi ilk baxışda İrənin tranzit ölkə kimi rolunu zəiflədə bilər. Lakin aparılan təhlillər bunun əksini də göstərir: sabit və inteqrə olunmuş region İran üçün yeni imkanlar açə bilər. Bunlara alternativ tranzit yollarına çıxış (məsələn, Şimal–Cənub dəhlizi), Balkan bazarına enerji ixracı, yeni diplomatik platformalarda iştirak və mədəni əlaqələrin dərinləşməsi daxildir. İrənin bu prosesdən fayda əldə etməsi onun praqmatik yanaşmasından asılı olacaq, bu isə öz növbəsində hakimiyyətdəki islahatçı qanadın gücləndirilməsini və qorunmasını tələb edir. Beləliklə, Zəngəzur dəhlizi regional inkişaf və əməkdaşlıq üçün “qazan-qazan” (win-win) ssenarisi yarada bilər.

**Açar sözlər:** *Zəngəzur dəhlizi, münasibətlər, Azərbaycan, Qafqaz, Balkan, İran, ticarət*

## АННОТАЦИЯ

### СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКИЕ ПОСЛЕДСТВИЯ ЗАНГЕЗУРСКОГО КОРИДОРА ДЛЯ СВЯЗИ ЮЖНОГО КАВКАЗА–БАЛКАН И БАЛКАН–ИРАНА

**Эльнур Кялбизаде**

Открытие Зангезурского коридора в контексте новых геополитических реалий Южного Кавказа после войны 2020 года может существенно повлиять на межрегиональные отношения, особенно на связи Кавказ–Балканы и Иран–Балканы. В рамках реалистического и неореалистического подходов утверждается, что коридор активизирует Срединный коридор, превратив Балканы в ключевой узел евразийского транзита и торговли, усилив диверсификацию и безопасность энергоснабжения. Это принесёт странам Балканского региона значительные экономические выгоды, более короткие и надёжные цепочки поставок, а также усиление энергетической безопасности за счёт снижения зависимости от российского газа.

Несмотря на первоначальные возражения Ирана, потенциал коридора в укреплении региональной стабильности и интеграции может предоставить Ирану альтернативные транзитные маршруты, возможности экспорта энергии и участие в новых дипломатических платформах. На первый взгляд, Зангезурский коридор может ослабить роль Ирана как транзитного государства. Однако анализ показывает, что возможно и обратное: стабильный и интегрированный регион способен открыть для Ирана новые возможности, включая доступ к альтернативным транспортным маршрутам (например, коридору Север–Юг), экспорт энергии на балканский рынок, участие в новых дипломатических форматах и углубление культурных связей.

Выгоды Ирана будут зависеть от его прагматического подхода, который, в свою очередь, требует укрепления и сохранения реформаторского крыла у власти. Таким образом, Зангезурский коридор может создать взаимовыгодный сценарий для регионального развития и сотрудничества.

**Ключевые слова:** Зангезурский коридор, отношения, Азербайджан, Кавказ, Балканы, Иран, торговля