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The Zangezur Corridor and Threats to the Interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the South Caucasus

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Abstract

After the massive attack by the military forces of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the recapturing of territories in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region in 2020, the issue of the construction of the 'Zangezur Corridor' has led to some concerns in the political and civil circles of Iran. Based on the plans announced by the Azerbaijan–Turkey alliance, the creation of this corridor through Armenian territory could change the regional balance of power to the detriment of Iran. The progress of this project presents multiple threats against the geopolitical and economic interests of Iran, the most important of which are: the possibility of changing borders through blocking the land connection between Iran and Armenia; the possibility of Armenia's rapprochement with the Western bloc and the intensification of the strategic isolation of Iran; reducing Iran's transit advantages in the North–South Corridor; increasing Turkey's influence in the region; jeopardising the territorial integrity of Iran through the incitement of pan-Turkic sentiments and the revival of Azerbaijani ethnocentrism; and strengthening the presence of NATO and its allies on Iran's northern borders.

Introduction

The policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the South Caucasus has always been based on maintaining a balance among regional forces. Within this framework, compliance with the internationally recognised borders and maintaining regional stability has been the priority of Iran's foreign policy. Accordingly, it has never recognised the Republic of Armenia's sovereignty over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. After the Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire agreement was signed in November 2020, Iran welcomed this agreement within the general framework of its foreign policy.

According to Clause 9 of this agreement, Armenia has committed to allow the construction of a crossing on its territory that will connect the mainland of the Republic of Azerbaijan to its exclave Nakhchivan along the current Armenian–Iranian border. The Republic of Azerbaijan considers this crossing, which it calls the 'Zangezur Corridor', a part of a larger transit project called the 'Middle Corridor', which stretches from east to west and passes through Turkmenistan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Nakhchivan, and Turkey to reach Europe. The plan to build the Zangezur Corridor has created concerns in the political and civil circles of Iran regarding the motivations and results of this action.

By focussing on these concerns, this paper answers the question of what threats the Zangezur Corridor construction plan poses to Iran's interests. The hypothesis of the authors is that the construction of the Zangezur

Corridor contains threats that will change the balance of power in the region to the detriment of Iran. The most significant areas of disruption and threats to the regional balance of power (as perceived in Tehran) will be described below.

Geopolitics of Regional Borders

The issue of changing borders, blocking the land border between Iran and Armenia, and the land exchange plan between Armenia and Azerbaijan are not unprecedented. Paul Goble¹ first proposed this idea in 1992 and then Turkey proposed the 'double corridor concept' at the same year. A few years later, Azerbaijani and Armenian authorities negotiated the 'land exchange' plan within the same framework, which did not come to fruition due to internal opposition in the two countries. According to this plan, Azerbaijan would recognise Armenia's sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh and, in return, Armenia would hand over sovereignty of a part of the province of Siunik (Syunik) bordering Iran to Azerbaijan in order to create a corridor, which would have meant cutting Iran's land border with Armenia (Fuller 2001; Winrow, 2000, p. 12).

The analysis of reactions from Iranian media and scholars regarding the Zangezur Corridor construction programme shows that the greatest concern or feeling of threat is caused by the possibility of changing national borders, specifically the possibility of cutting off the land border between Iran and Armenia. The origin of this

¹ Paul Goble is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency.

concern is the interpretation of the text of the ceasefire agreement and the announced plans of the Azerbaijani authorities to build this corridor. As Azerbaijan hands over the control of Lachin Corridor to Armenia, Armenia should also hand over the control of Zangezur Corridor to Azerbaijan (connecting Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh), and the ruling regime should be the same. This would mean that Armenia would cede its sovereignty over the Zangezur Corridor to Azerbaijan—a claim that, if implemented, would cut the land border between Iran and Armenia (Bakir, 2022). In response to this proposal, Iran sent a warning message about the geopolitical ramifications of such border changes by holding military exercises on the banks of the Aras River along its border with Azerbaijan (Elahi, 2022). Azerbaijan also held a military exercise with the participation of Pakistan and Turkey, and Armenia announced that it would not allow borders to change (Rashidi, 2023, p. 36).

Rapprochement of Armenia with the West and the Intensification of Iran's Strategic Loneliness

Among Iran's neighbours, only its relationship with Armenia has been stable and has featured to some extent a strategic aspect. This relationship is due to the geopolitical requirements governing Armenia, which is bordered by two hostile countries, Azerbaijan and Turkey, without access to open waters. To get out of this blockade, Armenia must ensure good relations with its remaining neighbours, Iran and Georgia. The implementation of the ceasefire agreement and the construction of the Zangezur Corridor in such a way that is accompanied by the normalisation of Armenia's relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey could turn Armenia into a key link in the Middle Corridor. In such a situation, Armenia's strategic and geopolitical need for Iran would decrease and, additionally, could be accompanied by alliance with Western governments in opposition to Iran, thus completing Iran's strategic isolation. Also, considering the need of the Western countries for the energy resources of the Caspian Sea to support their attempt to reduce their strategic dependence on Russia in the field of energy and transit, Europe and the United States also support the establishment of the Zangezur Corridor as part of a larger corridor plan with the aim of normalising relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Reducing Iran's Transit Advantages

Iran's primary transit advantage is its location on the international transit route from north to south (Koolae and Norouzi, 2021, p. 792). Iran has implemented programmes to make full use of this transit advantage, such

as the development of Chabahar Port with the cooperation of India and the development of transit lines with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus (Soltani and Khosravi, 2022, p. 15). The activation of the Middle Corridor, which requires the construction of the Zangezur segment, would greatly reduce the competitive advantage of international transit through Iran. Because the Middle Corridor is shorter, Western countries also support it (Veliyev, 2022). Western sanctions against Iran and opposing geopolitical interests would reduce the likelihood of Western support for a transit route through Iran.

Turkey's Increasing Regional Influence

The Caucasus region has for centuries been a place of competition for influence between Russia, Iran, and Turkey. Today, considering Russia's conflict in Ukraine, Turkey seems to see an opportunity to consolidate its power in the region, aiming to secure access to the oil and gas resources of the Caspian Sea in particular. Now, with the co-operation of Baku and the initiative to build the Zangezur Corridor, this longstanding dream has a path to coming true (Mostafavi, 2021). Iran feels threatened by Turkey's growing influence in the region. Therefore, Iran's opposition to the Zangezur Corridor construction plan can be seen as a measure to counter Turkey's aspirations of regional hegemony.

Pan-Turkism and the Revitalisation of Azerbaijani Ethnocentrism

One of the important aspects of the Zangezur Corridor is the connection of geographically dispersed Turkic-speaking countries through the implementation of the Middle Corridor (Ketanci, 2022). It seems that the authorities of Azerbaijan and Turkey are looking to advance through this project the 'unification of the Turkish world'. The increasing discussion of the union of Turkic countries has been accompanied by statements about the union of all Azerbaijani people (including those living in Iran). For instance, at the meeting of the heads of the Organisation of Turkic States in Samarkand in 2022, President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan stressed the strengthening of relations between 'North Azerbaijan and South Azerbaijan', implicitly defending 'the idea of a single Azerbaijan' (Mammadli, 2023).

In defence of this idea, President Erdoğan of Turkey read a poem during his trip to Baku in December 2020. In this poem, he lamented how the Aras River on the border of Iran and Azerbaijan separated the Azerbaijani speakers of the two countries.² The construction of Zangezur Corridor could increase the influence of Azerbaijan and Turkey on Iran's northern border, and subsequently revive the separatist sentiments among Iranian Azerbaijanis.

2 'Şerh خوانی جنجالی اردوغان از ارس / سفیر ترکیه به وزارت خارجه' [Erdogan's controversial poetry reading from Aras], Kabna News, 12 December 2020, <https://www.kebna.news.ir/report/428431> (accessed 31 January 2023).

Strengthening NATO's Presence in the Region

Within the framework of development policies, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) pursues various co-operation agreements with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus (Koolae et al., 2021, pp. 83, 123–137). These co-operation agreements have led to wild speculations. Regarding Turkey's membership in NATO, some analysts and political elites frame the Middle Corridor as a Western plan to expand NATO along this path to the east, with the ultimate aim of harming the interests of Iran, China, and Russia (Kazemi, 2022). Kamal Kharazi, head of the Strategic Council on Foreign Relations of Iran, went as far as to characterise this project as the 'Turan Corridor of NATO', which would be pursued by Turkey and Israel to expand NATO's presence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia (Shokri, 2022).

Expansion of Relations between Azerbaijan and Israel

Israel and Azerbaijan have very strong relations, their strategic and economic partnership developing substantially in recent years. Aliyev compared his country's relations with Israel to an iceberg, only a small part of which being visible (Koolae et al., 2016, p. 3). According to Iranian decision-makers,³ the implementation of the Zangezur Corridor in the framework of the Middle Corridor project will allow one branch—including any desired form of infrastructure, from roads to rails to pipelines—to continue through Turkey to Haifa and Tel Aviv, facilitating Israel's presence on the borders of Azerbaijan and Iran. Tehran accuses Baku of hosting Israeli agents engaged in intelligence surveillance and sabotage operations against Iran's nuclear programme.

The Presence of Russian Troops on the Border of Iran

According to the ceasefire agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Russian forces are stationed in the Nagorno-Karabakh region to maintain peace in the contact lines between the military forces of the two countries, as well as to monitor traffic in the Lachin and Zangezur corridors, a presence that can be extended indefinitely for five-year periods. According to the analysis of Iranian experts, this concession allows Russia to maintain its presence in the border region under the pretext of maintaining peace and security, and thus advance interventionist policies in Iran (Osouli, 2022, p. 232).

A broader discussion on this point is beyond the scope of this brief analysis (see Koolae, 2006).

Conclusion

The findings of the research show that the creation of the Zangezur Corridor in Armenia, based on the plans announced by the Azerbaijan–Turkey alliance, would change the regional balance of power to the detriment of Iran. Therefore, the progress of this project includes threats against core Iranian interests.

Among these perceived threats, according to our analysis, the possibility of changing the geopolitical situation and blocking the land border between Iran and Armenia has received the most emphasis in Iranian circles. Based on this possibility, Iran has reacted and warned against the implementation of this plan, going so far as to hold military exercises at border points and activate diplomatic co-operation channels with Armenia and Russia to encourage these countries to oppose this project.

Although these responses may prevent the existing borders from changing, this does not completely negate the broader geopolitical threats posed by the Zangezur Corridor construction programme, because the construction of this corridor and its operation as a part of the Middle Corridor is also theoretically possible without blocking the land border of Iran and Armenia. In this case, it seems that the real threat is the loss of Iran's transit advantages in current supply routes, especially regarding its economically so important energy exports, which would have long-term negative effects on Iran's interests (Koolae, 2008, pp. 47–70). The exploitation of the Zangezur Corridor as part of the Middle Corridor for the transfer of energy resources of the Caspian Sea will affect the geo-energy map of the world: within this framework, European countries could ensure long-term access to the energy resources of the Caspian Sea by circumventing Iran and Russia.

The success of the implementation of the Zangezur Corridor project thus requires attention to Iran's geopolitical concerns and considerations. Iran is an important player in world energy market and wants to play an active role in the South Caucasus as well. Energy security and security of transit of energy along Iran's northern border has an influential role on Iran's broader interests. The participation of all regional actors in the implementation of transit projects can bring many benefits to all countries in the area by harnessing the power of geopolitics to drive economic processes, while at the same time strengthening regional integration. However, political differences and mistrust make such an outcome unlikely.

Please see overleaf for Information about the Author and References.

3 'امیرعبداللهیان: در خصوص زنگه زور، اکنون کریدوری توسط ایران تعریف شده است' [Amir Abdollahian: Regarding Zangezur, a corridor has now been defined by Iran], Iranian Diplomacy, 23 October 2023, <http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/2022618/> (accessed 13 December 2023).

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