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## THE ARAS CORRIDOR: AZERBAIJAN'S RATIONALE BEHIND THE DEAL WITH IRAN

RAHIM RAHIMOV

# 217

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
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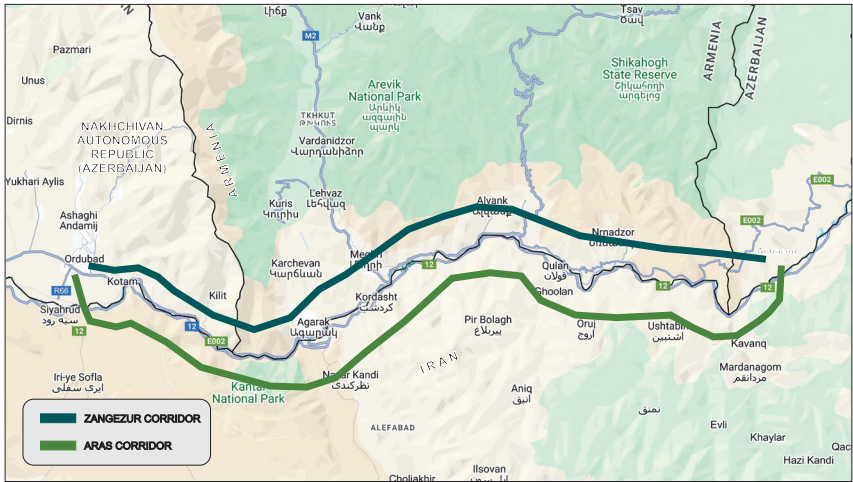
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Since the 2020 Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan's victory over Armenia and its subsequent push for the Zangezur Corridor, Baku, and Tehran have been embroiled in fierce waves of escalation. With the launch of construction works for the Aras Corridor as the purported replacement to the Zangezur Corridor, the two nations appear to have made a breakthrough, and a thaw can be seen in current bilateral relations. In lieu of Baku's strong push for the Zangezur Corridor over the last three years, the change in direction triggers the immediate question as to why Azerbaijan agreed to the Aras Corridor deal with Tehran. In order to properly address this question, it is essential to distinguish Azerbaijan's Zangezur Corridor project from its Zangezur discourse, which can otherwise lead to misunderstandings.

The main reason for Baku's concession to the Aras Corridor deal with Tehran and backtracking from the Zangezur Corridor is that Baku has achieved its objectives in the Zangezur discourse. Having achieved those objectives, the Zangezur Corridor alone, without the discourse, is of mere local importance to Azerbaijan. Yet the hype around it still persists, with the subsequent international reactions having made the topic somewhat toxic for Azerbaijan.

## **The Aras Corridor**

Baku and Tehran have agreed to build a highway, railway, and other communication connections between Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan exclave, which is wedged between Armenia, Iran, and Turkey. A relevant Azerbaijani-Iranian Memorandum of Understanding was signed on March 11, 2023. The Iranian Foreign Minister dubbed the transport connections the "Aras Corridor" (Tehran Times, 2023). It is also sometimes referred to as the Southern Aras Corridor, Iran Road, or Southern Zangezur Corridor. The Aras Corridor derives its name from the Aras River, the natural border between the two nations, and starts in the Aghband area at the nexus of the Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Iranian borders. This area was reclaimed by Azerbaijan during the 2020 Second Karabakh War with Armenia.



*Approximate routes of Zangezur and Aras corridors  
Generated by Google MyMaps*

The Aras Corridor is to be made up of two bridges – one railway and one automobile – over the river near Aghband, and two more bridges on the Iranian border with Nakhchivan. Old bridges exist there, and it is as yet unclear whether new bridges will be constructed or the existing bridges will be employed. Further details of the construction of the railway and motorway roads, including financing and the start-dates of the related works, have yet to be revealed. What we do know is that construction works have kicked off on the first motorway bridge, and related facilities in the Aghband area on Azerbaijan’s border with Iran are being installed. Ministers from both nations attended the ground-breaking ceremony on October 23 (Tasnim News Agency, 2023). Preparatory works, including designing and drafting the railway bridge, are underway, while the Azerbaijani president has issued an executive order to fund the construction of the Aghband automobile bridge.

There are already automobile transportation routes available to connect mainland Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan via Iran, but the Aras Corridor via the Aghband Bridge will significantly shorten the distance and travel time, and will add a railway connection. For Tehran, its significance is that Iran’s role as the transport connection between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan will remain intact, yet reinforced with the addition of the railway dimension.

## **Distinction between the Zangezur Corridor and the Zangezur discourse**

The breakthrough deal between Tehran and Baku is astonishing in lieu of long waves of escalation over Azerbaijan's Zangezur Corridor project. A delicate nuance to distinguish between Baku's Zangezur Corridor project and the related Zangezur discourse is key to grasping the essence of the matter. The Zangezur discourse was shaped around the idea of the Zangezur Corridor. Due to the failure to distinguish between the two, the Zangezur Corridor's importance was much overstated, but now Baku has achieved its objectives to shape and promote the Zangezur discourse, if completed, Iran's Aras Corridor will replace the Zangezur Corridor (but not the Zangezur discourse) (Rahimov, 2021).

The Zangezur discourse emerged as a response to four developments on the ground following the Second Karabakh War and the signing of the Armenian-Azerbaijani-Russian Trilateral Statement of November 19, 2020. Its goals were to address four issues: Establishment of the Lachin Corridor between the Republic of Armenia and Karabakh Armenians, Yerevan's demand to grant a special status for Karabakh, deployment of Russian peacekeepers, and related Azerbaijani public discontent over the preceding three issues.

First, the Zangezur discourse was a response to the Lachin Corridor between Karabakh and Armenia that was established immediately in accordance with the Trilateral Statement's Clause 6. But the transport connection under Clause 9 of the Trilateral Statement, which later became referred to as the Zangezur Corridor, between mainland Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan exclave, was never established. Baku was thus confronting the Lachin Corridor with the Zangezur Corridor;

Second, the Zangezur discourse sought to link Azerbaijan's territorial integrity with Armenia's territorial integrity. After the 2020 war, the Karabakh region remained mostly under Armenian control, protected by the Russian peacekeepers. Armenia demanded a special status for Karabakh Armenians. Baku reciprocated such demands through the Zangezur discourse that portrayed Zangezur – the Syunik region of the present-day Republic of Armenia - as ancestral Azerbaijani land;

Third, the Zangezur discourse entailed extending the conflict zone from Azerbaijani into Armenian territory. Within the Trilateral Statement, the Russian Federal Security Service's border troops had agreed to be

deployed along the Zangezur Corridor on the territory of Armenia. This clause ensures that Russian troops are deployed in Azerbaijan too and not only in Armenia, as part of the Trilateral Statement;

Fourth, the Zangezur discourse was to address opponents of the government and segments of domestic audiences that were either critical of or dissatisfied with the previous three specific consequences of the Second Karabakh War.

### **Zangezur discourse objectives achieved**

Baku achieved the first two objectives of the Zangezur discourse in full, and therefore, resolved the third and fourth issues by larger degree:

First, establishing a border checkpoint at the start of the Lachin Corridor at the Armenian-Azerbaijan border over the Hakari River on April 23, 2023. With that, the Lachin Corridor issue was effectively resolved by Baku, hence leaving no need for Azerbaijan to demand Yerevan provide seamless access for the Zangezur Corridor reciprocally. Namely, Azerbaijan ensured the reciprocity principle between the Lachin and Zangezur Corridors and pushed for a single legal regime – either seamless movement or sovereign checkpoints for both – as it had demanded. President Aliyev stated that Azerbaijan didn't mind if Armenia established its own checkpoint at the Zangezur Corridor (President.az, 2021);

Second, Azerbaijani armed forces having carried out a lightning operation on September 19, 2023, in the Armenian-controlled areas of Karabakh, including the capital of the former self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) also known as *Artsakh*. The leadership of the former NKR had to dissolve itself. Thus, Azerbaijan stamped its full authority over Karabakh and, therefore, the entirety of Azerbaijani territories. In the wake of the September 19 operation, Baku holds that the issue of the status for Karabakh Armenians is off the table;

Third, extending the conflict zone from the Azerbaijani to the Armenian territory and thus ensuring that the related sensitivities over the Russian peacekeeping contingent become less relevant due to Baku's restoration of sovereignty over Karabakh. A major Armenian concern about the Zangezur Corridor was related to the deployment of Russian border troops to protect it. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan refused such a deployment and issued an executive order to create a special unit to protect transport

lines in Armenia. His Crossroads of Peace project has also ruled out the deployment of foreign, i.e. Russian, troops for that purpose (JAMnews, 2023).



*A map released by the Armenian Government as part of the Crossroads of Peace initiative.*

Due to dissolution of the former NKR and the exodus of around 100,000 ethnic Armenians from Karabakh following the September 19 operation, there has been no need for the presence of Russian peacekeepers. Indeed, the Russian defense ministry has been issuing regular press releases that confirm the closure of Russian peacekeeping posts in Karabakh. As of September 19, 2023, the Russian peacekeeping contingent had a total of 30 posts (Russian Ministry of Defense, 2023). As of January 9, 2024, the Russian peacekeeping contingent has a total of 18 posts left (Russian Ministry of Defense, 2024). Their presence and operation have been significantly limited. But the final fate of the Russian peacekeeping contingent is to be decided by 2025, as their term of operation is valid until then. Thus, Baku has resolved the third issue to a larger degree;

Fourth, promoting the Zangezur discourse, with which, the Azerbaijani leadership aimed to soothe the public discontent. The Lachin Corridor and deployment of Russian peacekeepers were unwelcome in Azerbaijan. Moreover, the public, in particular the opponents of the government, lashed



out at the Azerbaijan leadership for halting the war short of taking full control of Karabakh. Commenting on the September 19 operation to take over Karabakh fully, President Ilham Aliyev stated that he also considered the work “incomplete,” since the Khankendi, Khojali, Khojavend and other areas remained beyond Azerbaijan’s control (President.az, 2023). Yet, with the full takeover of Karabakh and the president’s participation at the military parade in Khankendi – the capital of the former NKR, referred to by Armenians as Stepanakert, the public has been satisfied.

### **Hype around the Zangezur Corridor and related international pressure**

Much hype has surrounded the Zangezur Corridor. This is due to two reasons – overstatement of the importance of the Zangezur Corridor, and the alleged Azerbaijani intent to use force to establish the Zangezur Corridor by invading Armenia. The hype and related international pressure have made the topic toxic for Azerbaijan, and that is another consideration for Baku’s backtracking from the Zangezur Corridor in favor of the Aras Corridor.

Indeed, the importance of the Zangezur Corridor has been exaggerated due to Baku’s framing it as connecting the broader Turkic world from Turkiye to Central Asia, and/or part of the Middle Corridor or East-West Corridor, and as the return of Azerbaijanis to their ancestral land, as well as Tehran’s explicit hostility to it. In fact, Turkiye is already connected to Azerbaijan and Central Asia via Georgia, in particular through the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway line as part of the Middle Corridor. Currently, the governments of Azerbaijan and Georgia are implementing a project to increase the throughput capacity of the BTK. The Zangezur Corridor would represent a more symbolic rather than substantial alternative to the Georgian route, as such an alternative is also possible via the Aras Corridor. The Zangezur Corridor’s immediate practical importance is of a more local character, as a transport connection between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan. This issue is also settled through the Aras Corridor (MRUD News, 2023).

Other than that, the Zangezur Corridor is important as a peace-building or confidence-building measure between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and is, therefore, significant to Armenian-Azerbaijani normalization. But the hype around its broader geopolitical significance has been a major distraction from its peace potential. Furthermore, this hype, combined

with Azerbaijan's euphoria and Armenia's frustration over the 2020 Second Karabakh War and the 19 September lightning operation, have made the Zangezur Corridor's potential for peacebuilding unnoticeable or even irrelevant. Segments of the Azerbaijani and Armenian public are either indifferent to or unaware of that potential. That is a major reason why Washington became infuriated over the Aras Corridor deal (RFE/RL's Armenian Service, 2023), as the US regarded the Zangezur Corridor as an incentive to push through peace between the two nations.

The other reason for the hype around the Zangezur Corridor was the alleged Azerbaijani intent to invade Armenia. The Azerbaijani president had said that if Armenia didn't agree to open the Zangezur Corridor, Baku might decide the issue by force. That episodic and perhaps accidental statement exacerbated international concerns related to the Zangezur Corridor and eventually led to accusations against Azerbaijan of alleged preparation to invade Armenia. Negative reactions came from Washington, Brussels, and Paris. But Baku categorically refuted all those accusations and allegations (Bazail-Eimil & Gavin, 2023).

Tehran's reaction from the very onset of the Zangezur Corridor idea has been more hostile than others', even more, uncompromising than Armenia itself, as it viewed the Zangezur Corridor project as seeking to change the internationally-recognized border between Iran and Armenia. Top Iranian officials and generals explicitly threatened Azerbaijan, and Baku reciprocated properly and resolutely. This led to a series of fierce rhetorical escalations and historically the first ever military drills along the shared border between the two nations.

## **Risks and implications**

In spite of the breakthrough deal between Azerbaijan and Iran, risks persist regarding the future of the Aras Corridor, as Baku and Tehran hold differing visions of the Corridor. Tehran unequivocally regards it as part of the North-South Transport Corridor. In this framing, Tehran means the Armenian leg of the NSTC from the Gulf, to Georgia and the Black Sea specifically (Rahimov, 2023). But Azerbaijan regards the Aras Corridor rather as part of the East-West or Middle Corridor, running from Europe to Central Asia via Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea. This is a fundamental fault line between Tehran and Baku.

To understand that fault line, one must look at the dysfunctional, soviet-era Iranian-Nakhchivan-Armenian railway connection. The railway line coming from Iran was bifurcated north-westwards and eastwards at the Julfa station in Nakhchivan. The north-western leg led to Yerevan, Armenia, and then on to Georgia and Russia. The eastward leg stretched to Azerbaijan and then further to Russia via Meghri station on the southern Armenian line, which is the prototype of the Zangezur Corridor. The Julfa railway station is part of the Aras Corridor. It is unclear whether the railway line to come from Iran through the Aras Corridor would continue moving north-westwards, or eastwards, or both. Whose vision – Tehran’s or Baku’s – prevails is crucial. For now, the Aras Corridor deal gives Baku and Tehran leeway to figure out further ways to proceed, and steps to be taken, until/ if the railway leg of the Aras Corridor reaches Nakhchivan.

In the meantime, Baku might also be betting on Tbilisi. It doesn’t make a big difference to Tbilisi in principle whether the transport routes to Georgia and the Black Sea run through Azerbaijan or Armenia. In fact, having both would diversify the transit opportunities for Georgia. But the Armenian leg of the NSTC would require Moscow’s consent, as Russia owns and operates the Armenian railways network. Vladimir Putin has recently stated that Iran and the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union are to sign an agreement to create a free trade zone. This is an important consideration in favor of both legs of the NSTC – the Azerbaijani and the Armenian routes.

The Kremlin will certainly seek Tbilisi’s consent to open the long-discussed connection via the Russian-occupied Georgian region of Abkhazia. This connection would allow Russia to connect to Armenia by rail via Georgia. To date, the issue has been much debated and almost always results in massive public objection from Georgia. Moscow’s plan to build a permanent naval base on the Abkhazian coast of the Black Sea reshapes the context and further exacerbates Georgia’s sensitivities. It is hard to predict that Tbilisi might issue such consent. If it refuses to concede to opening the Abkhazian railway connection, pressure from Tehran would also mount on Tbilisi.

## **Conclusion**

In such an international context, and in line with Azerbaijan's achievements of the objectives pursued through the Zangezur discourse, Baku agreed with Tehran to commence construction works on the Aras Corridor. The Aras Corridor deal is simply a breakthrough, though; neither a climax nor denouement in the Azerbaijani-Iranian saga over the Zangezur Corridor. Therefore, risks lie ahead, and it is too premature to maintain that the breakthrough deal on the Aras Corridor has resolved all the related problems between Azerbaijan and Iran.

The issue concerning the Iran-Nakhchivan-Armenia railway connection remains ambiguous. This lack of clarity means that Baku has not fully abandoned the Zangezur Corridor, but has merely backtracked from it, perhaps just for now. Nor has Tehran abandoned its hostility to it.

Armenian-Azerbaijani normalization would entail opening all transport links between the two nations, including what Baku has dubbed the Zangezur Corridor. Until/if that happens, the Aras Corridor represents a much-needed leeway for Baku in its dealings with Tehran on the one hand, and other actors, including Washington, Brussels, Moscow, Paris, and Yerevan, on the other.

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