

From Corridor to Route: A Neorealist Look at the Transformations in the Geopolitical Dynamics of the South Caucasus

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Abstract: This study offers a Neorealist analysis of the Zangezur Corridor and examines its role in geopolitical power dynamics of the South Caucasus. Rather than treating the corridor solely as an economic or transportation initiative, in line with Neorealist paradigm, the analysis situates it within the security-driven logic of an anarchic international system in which state actors prioritize national interests and survival. As a strategic link between East and West, the corridor affects the regional balance of power, particularly among Armenia and Azerbaijan, while also attracting the attention of broader regional and global actors. The study highlights the importance of military capabilities and territorial control in accounting for state behavior and patterns of interaction surrounding the corridor. From this perspective, the Zangezur Corridor functions not merely as a route of connectivity but as an instrument of power politics through which states seek to enhance security, secure strategic advantages, and limit potential vulnerabilities. The analysis demonstrates that tensions surrounding the corridor stem from competing national interests embedded in structural constraints rather than from isolated policy choices. Accordingly, the article argues that the Zangezur Corridor should be understood as a central site of regional competition with significant implications for future alignments, policies, and the evolving balance of power in the South Caucasus.

Keywords: Security, Zangezur Corridor, Neorealism, South Caucasus, The Trump Route

1. Introduction

Building transport corridors can generate significant economic benefits by lowering transportation costs, facilitating the faster movement of goods, and improving logistical efficiency. Economic corridors, comprising roads, railways, electrical and internet lines, and pipelines, are key drivers of regional integration, as they facilitate cooperation and growth among neighboring countries by reducing trade barriers and increasing trade volumes (Fernando & Jha, 2021, pp. 406-407). Yet transport infrastructure does not function as a purely economic good in every context. In conflict-prone and institutionally fragile settings, corridors may also generate vulnerabilities related to sovereignty, territorial control, and physical security, as illustrated by cases such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Kuszevska & Nitza-Makowska, 2021). In fragile geopolitical settings, such corridors are not only instruments of trade, but also potential sources of leverage, vulnerability, and interstate competition. These tensions are particularly visible in geographically constrained and politically contested regions such as the South Caucasus, where mountainous terrain and unresolved conflicts have historically made transport connectivity both economically desirable and strategically sensitive.

The idea of building the Zangezur Corridor has emerged as a critical transport route following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War. After the war Azerbaijan and Türkiye promoted it as a link between mainland Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan exclave, traversing through Armenia's Syunik province. This corridor has polarized international opinions since its proposal; some view it as a pan-Turkic expansion that threatens Armenian security, while others see it as an opportunity to end the blockade imposed by Türkiye and Azerbaijan on Armenia (Jabrailov, 2025, p. 534). This article argues that this corridor carries substantial geopolitical implications for regional powers and is reshaping strategic balances; it functions not only as a transport route but also as a strategic platform where the interests of various

actors in the South Caucasus converge and sometimes conflict. Moreover, the Zangezur Corridor's role in connecting major international transport routes, such as the West-East and North-South corridors, and potentially the Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route), positions it into a broader geopolitical landscape (Iskandarov et al., 2024; Biró & Vasa, 2024). This wider connectivity amplifies the security implications, as any disruption in the Zangezur Corridor could affect international trade, internet, and energy flows, making it a point of interest for various state and non-state actors. It is important to clarify, however, that the fact that the proposed corridor is expected to traverse Armenian territory means that Armenia approaches the initiative primarily through a security-centered lens.

In the Zangezur case, despite growing scholarly and policy interest in the issue, much of the existing literature remains predominantly descriptive, focusing on diplomatic positions, infrastructure potential, or the geopolitical interests of regional actors (Chedia, 2024; Gulahmadov & Hajiyeva, 2023). While these contributions are valuable, they often stop short of explaining why a transport initiative that could generate mutual economic benefits has instead become a site of persistent security competition. This article addresses that gap by asking: Why has a potentially mutually beneficial transport project become a site of security competition in the South Caucasus?

The article argues that the Zangezur case has become a security issue because, in a post-conflict and institutionally weak regional environment where anarchy is more pronounced, states evaluate transport connectivity primarily through survival, sovereignty, and relative gains rather than through absolute economic benefits. From a Neorealist perspective, this outcome is structurally intelligible. In the absence of robust regional institutions and a final peace settlement, infrastructure projects are interpreted as instruments that may alter the regional balance of power, expand a rival's strategic autonomy, or reduce one's own transit leverage. The analysis therefore proceeds from three core expectations: first, that post-conflict and institutionally weak settings lead states to prioritize security over economic efficiency; second, that states support or resist corridor projects according to their relative gains calculations; and third, that infrastructure becomes securitized when trust and an enforceable peace framework remain absent (Waltz, 1979; Schweller, 1996; Lobell, 2017).

This article contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it moves beyond descriptive geopolitical commentary by treating the Zangezur case as a test site for Neorealist expectations about security dilemmas, relative gains, and balancing. Second, it explains why connectivity projects in post-conflict regions become securitized rather than institutionalized. Third, it shows that the shift from the "corridor" framing to the broader "route" framing does not depoliticize connectivity; instead, it redistributes strategic leverage among regional and extra-regional actors (Gawliczek & Iskandarov, 2023; U.S. Department of State, 2026; Avdaliani, 2025). To develop this argument, the article first outlines the Neorealist framework and derives a set of analytical expectations concerning security prioritization, relative gains, and the securitization of infrastructure. It then situates the Zangezur case in its historical and geopolitical context before examining the strategic preferences of the principal regional and extra-regional actors. The final analytical section applies Neorealist concepts systematically to the empirical case and demonstrates how the politics of connectivity in the South Caucasus are shaped less by shared economic rationality than by structural insecurity and competitive power calculations.

2. Neorealism as Theoretical Framework

To explain the dynamics of the Zangezur case, this article employs a Neorealist framework. Neorealism is particularly useful here because it explains the systemic constraints and incentive structures shaping state behavior in the South Caucasus more effectively than approaches centered on micro-level decision-making. While domestic political dynamics (Schweller, 2004), leadership preferences (Byman & Pollack, 2001) and ideational factors (Kitchen, 2010; Mallett & Kitchen, 2025) may influence tactical choices, the

analysis intentionally prioritizes how the anarchic structure of the international system, security imperatives, and the distribution of power delimit the range of viable strategies available to states. Accordingly, the article does not seek to explain why specific policy options were chosen over others, but rather why certain strategic outcomes—such as the securitization of infrastructure, competitive balancing, and external power involvement—recur despite internal differences among actors. This theoretical choice reflects the article’s broader aim of explaining patterns of interaction and structural outcomes.

Neorealism is a structural branch of realist theory that explains international politics primarily through the organization of the international system rather than through unit-level characteristics. In “Man, the State, and War”, Waltz (1959) distinguished among explanations located in human nature, the internal structure of states, and the international system. In “Theory of International Politics”, he then argued that the most useful explanations of recurring patterns in international politics are systemic rather than reductionist (Waltz, 1979). For Waltz, international outcomes are best understood not by examining the particular attributes of individual decision-makers, but by analyzing the structural environment in which states operate.

First concept crucial to this article is anarchy. From the Neorealist perspective, in any given environment, actors are situated either within relations of authority—that is, under a structural hierarchy—or within a condition of anarchy in which no such authority exists. In the absence of a lawmaker and/or enforcer, and therefore in the absence of a ruler-ruled relationship, the international system is composed of formally equal units and is, by its very nature, anarchic. Because the international system lacks the security guarantees provided by a hierarchical order—one equipped with legislative, executive, and enforcement mechanisms—the only assurance states possess for preserving their existence is their own capacity for self-help, namely their national power. For Waltz, war and competition for power are unavoidable consequences of this anarchic structure; since no overarching authority exists to restrain or punish them, some states may at any moment resort to force to advance their interests at the expense of others (1979, p. 129). As a result, all states must remain prepared to employ force in similar ways. The absence of higher authority to which states can appeal in times of threat, combined with the Hobbesian condition in which each actor stands as the equal of all others, renders insecurity endemic and, consequently, makes conflict virtually inevitable.

Confronted with the complexity of international politics, characterized by multiple units interacting simultaneously, Waltz argued that any meaningful and generalizable analysis requires the construction of a theoretical framework that is deliberately simplified so that it can generate outcomes applicable to all relevant actors (1979, p. 17). Building on this premise, Waltz identified the most consequential actors in international politics, which, for him, are states, and analyzed the political environment in which these actors operate—namely the international system and its structural properties—to explain the fundamental motives driving state behavior. The core reasoning and simplification underlying his theoretical formulation consisted of stripping states and the international system of all contingent or idiosyncratic attributes until only those essential characteristics remained that could not be detached from either states as units or the system as a whole.

Although states are not the only actors in the international system, Waltz maintains that systems should be defined not by all units they contain, but by the most consequential ones (1979, p. 119). For this reason, states constitute the primary units of analysis in his theory. Seeking to understand what drives actors in international politics, the interconnected behavior of states, Waltz employs simplification to identify a purpose that can be meaningfully attributed to all states. When stripped of all other preferences, states appear as entities fundamentally concerned with their own survival. In this sense, ensuring security—understood as the preservation of existence—becomes a prerequisite for the pursuit of any other objective, so long as states do not will their own annihilation (Waltz, 1979, p. 116).

This security-oriented logic, shared by all states in the system, renders them units with same basic motivations. Consequently, the Neorealist approach assumes that states are similar units responding in broadly similar ways to systemic incentives and constraints, thereby downplaying cultural or political differences among them.

A second concept crucial to this article is relative gains. Neorealism underlines the importance of “relative gains” rather than “absolute gains”, in which benefits are shared among all actors who are involved in a particular situation. This means that states measure their success not only by how much they improve their position but also by how they fare relative to other states (Grieco, 1990, p. 29; Waltz, 1979, pp. 105-107). This focus heightens competition, as states fear that cooperation might disproportionately benefit their rivals, increasing the risk to their security. The relative power of states derives from inherent attributes, such as territorial size and geography, natural resources, and population, and is ultimately constrained by these attributes’ qualities and quantities. Consequently, inequality is embedded in the very nature of international politics. Because of this structural inequality, states must assess how other states are likely to respond when they pursue their interests. This necessity means that state behavior is constrained first by their own material capabilities and then by the anticipated reactions of others. In this way, the anarchic international system contains within it a measure of order and balance.

A third key concept is the balance of power. Neorealism posits that the “balance of power” is a natural occurrence in international relations (Levy, 2004, p. 33; Schweller, 2004, pp. 162-164). States strive to prevent any single state or bloc from attaining hegemonic dominance, as this would endanger their ability to act according to their national interests or their survival. Balancing can take two primary forms: internal balancing, which involves strengthening domestic capabilities such as military capacity and economic growth, and external balancing, which entails forming alliances to counter a rising power. In regions where institutionalized security guarantees are weak, balancing behavior may also extend to competition over infrastructure, transit routes, and access corridors, since these can affect broader distributions of regional influence.

Neorealist perspectives differ on whether states primarily pursue security or maximize power under anarchy. Defensive realism emphasizes security-seeking behavior and cautions against overexpansion, whereas offensive realism stresses the incentives for states to maximize power whenever opportunities arise (Lobell, 2017; Zhang, 2023). For the purposes of this article, this debate does not determine the analysis. Both variants share the core claim that anarchy and insecurity push states to treat strategically significant infrastructure not as neutral instruments of cooperation but as assets that may alter the balance of power. It is this shared premise — rather than the question of whether states seek sufficiency or dominance — that makes Neorealism applicable to the Zangezur case.

Neorealism has been widely applied to the analysis of great power competition, security dilemmas in regional conflicts, and the formation and dissolution of alliances. From this perspective, contemporary rivalries, most notably the strategic competition between China and the United States (US), are understood as outcomes of shifting power distributions in an increasingly multipolar international system. China’s rise challenges established power balances, prompting the US and its allies to adopt balancing strategies aimed at preserving their strategic position (Zhang, 2023; Hutto, 2024; Sahakyan, 2023). Neorealism also offers valuable insights into enduring conflicts such as the Indian–Pakistani arms race and NATO–Russian antagonism over Ukraine, where mutual mistrust in an anarchic system causes defensive measures to be interpreted as offensive threats (Kapitonenko, 2024). Within this framework, the distribution of power plays a central role in shaping alliance behavior. NATO, for example, is frequently analyzed through a Neorealist lens as an external-balancing coalition formed in response to perceived threats, particularly from Russia (Lobell, 2017). While these cases involve great powers, the structural logic underlying them—*anarchy, relative gains, and balancing*—operates at

multiple scales and applies with equal force to smaller states and sub-regional settings. The South Caucasus is one such setting: the absence of a comprehensive regional security architecture, the legacy of unresolved conflicts and contested borders, and pervasive strategic mistrust compel states to treat infrastructure projects as strategic assets with direct implications for sovereignty, territorial control, and survival. The Zangezur Corridor thus illustrates core Neorealist dynamics: the prioritization of relative gains over absolute economic benefits, the securitization of connectivity in a militarized post-conflict setting, and the propensity for external powers to intervene when regional balancing mechanisms prove insufficient. From this perspective, Neorealism explains why a potentially mutually beneficial transport route has evolved into a focal point of power competition, external intervention, and strategic recalibration in the South Caucasus.

From this framework, the article derives four analytical expectations that guide the empirical analysis. These are not anticipated outcomes but testable propositions: if Neorealist structural logic applies to this case, then the following patterns should be observable.

1. **Security prioritization over economic efficiency:** Where borders remain contested, trust is limited, and no enforceable peace framework exists, states should interpret transport initiatives primarily through survival and sovereignty concerns rather than through economic logic. Infrastructure in such environments should be treated as a potential threat rather than a neutral mechanism of cooperation.
2. **Relative gains logic:** States should support or resist corridor projects depending on whether such projects increase a rival's autonomy, territorial leverage, or strategic access more than their own. Even where mutual economic benefits are available, cooperation should stall if one side believes the long-term political or strategic gains will be distributed asymmetrically.
3. **Balancing behavior:** When connectivity projects affect the regional distribution of influence, both regional and extra-regional actors should engage in balancing behavior to prevent strategic marginalization. This may take the form of diplomatic activism, strategic partnerships, support for alternative routes, or attempts to retain oversight over transit arrangements.
4. **Securitization of infrastructure:** As a structural consequence of the preceding three dynamics, control over routes should become tied to sovereignty, deterrence, and the balance of power rather than to efficiency alone — such that the infrastructure itself becomes a site of competition rather than a platform for cooperation.

These expectations make Neorealism particularly well suited to the Zangezur case. The South Caucasus lacks a comprehensive and trusted regional security architecture, and the legacy of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict continues to shape how regional actors interpret sovereignty, territorial access, and strategic connectivity (Ghahriyan et al., 2024; Iskandarov et al., 2024). Under such conditions, transport infrastructure cannot be understood merely as a technical or economic matter. Rather, it becomes embedded in an environment shaped by strategic mistrust, relative gains calculations, and recurring balancing behavior.

3. Historical Background of Zangezur Corridor

The Syunik region, historically known as Zangezur, has occupied a strategically sensitive position in the South Caucasus due to its role as both a territorial buffer and a connective space. Since the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1918, the region has remained a focal point of contention, shaped by overlapping claims, unresolved borders, and competing security perceptions. Although formally incorporated into the Russian imperial administrative structure in the late nineteenth century, Zangezur's geopolitical significance intensified in the early twentieth century as Armenian and Azerbaijani national projects increasingly collided in the aftermath of imperial withdrawal. During the Soviet period, Zangezur's strategic importance was institutionalized through deliberate territorial and infrastructural

arrangements (Gelir & Saygılı, 2024). Soviet authorities placed the region within the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, thereby severing direct land connectivity between Nakhchivan and mainland Azerbaijan. This configuration effectively isolated Nakhchivan while simultaneously limiting its proximity to Türkiye. While Soviet governance maintained a degree of stability, it embedded structural vulnerabilities into regional transportation networks by making cross-border connectivity contingent on centralized political control rather than organic regional interaction. These vulnerabilities became particularly evident following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The outbreak of the first Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the early 1990s rendered Soviet-era transport infrastructure inoperative, including railway lines that had previously connected Nakhchivan with Azerbaijan proper. The ensuing blockade imposed on Armenia, coupled with the isolation of Nakhchivan, produced severe economic and logistical constraints for all parties involved. As a result, connectivity ceased to function as a neutral economic tool and instead became increasingly intertwined with questions of sovereignty, security, and territorial control (Mustafayev & Sadıgova, 2022).

Armenia's control over Nagorno-Karabakh in the early post-Soviet period, accompanied by widespread displacement of Azerbaijani populations, further entrenched mutual mistrust and reinforced a security-driven regional order. Although Armenia relinquished control over the region following renewed military confrontation in 2023, the legacy of prolonged conflict continues to shape domestic and regional politics. Internal political debates in Armenia reflect the broader strategic dilemma created by these developments, as reform initiatives and peace efforts are frequently perceived by opposition actors as concessions that undermine national security and territorial integrity (Mustafayev & Sadıgova, 2022; Gelir & Saygılı, 2024). It was within this historically fragmented and securitized context that the idea of the Zangezur Corridor re-emerged following the Second Karabakh War in 2020. Promoted primarily by Azerbaijan and Türkiye as a means to restore direct connectivity between mainland Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, the corridor was framed as a project capable of revitalizing regional trade and transportation networks. From this perspective, the initiative promised economic integration, reduced transit costs, and enhanced regional cooperation.

However, for Armenia, the proposed corridor has been closely associated with security risks rather than economic opportunity. The absence of a comprehensive peace treaty, unresolved border delimitation, and Azerbaijan's demand for constitutional amendments perceived as renouncing claims related to Nagorno-Karabakh have transformed the corridor into a highly contentious issue. Rather than functioning as a purely technical infrastructure project, the Zangezur Corridor has come to symbolize deeper concerns regarding sovereignty, territorial control, and strategic vulnerability (Ghahriyan et al., 2024; Gökbel & Aghaddinli, 2022). Consequently, the corridor occupies a central position within the Turkish–Azerbaijani strategic agenda while simultaneously intensifying Armenian threat perceptions. In a region already characterized by enduring insecurity and weak institutionalized cooperation, the Zangezur Corridor risks reinforcing existing fault lines if not carefully managed. The prolonged erosion of trust resulting from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has generated a security vacuum in the South Caucasus, within which infrastructure projects are routinely interpreted through the lens of power competition rather than mutual benefit.

4. Strategic Stances of Regional Shareholders

4.1 Current situation

While the Zangezur Corridor is a prominent proposal to enhance East-West transport connectivity in the South Caucasus, several alternative routes and initiatives also aim to achieve similar objectives across Eurasia. These alternatives often utilize existing infrastructure or propose new linkages to connect Asia and Europe, thereby diversifying trade routes and strengthening regional resilience (Biró & Vasa, 2024). One significant alternative is the Middle Corridor, also known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR). This corridor plays a key role in efforts to diversify global trade

routes and enhance economic resilience, particularly for cargo transportation between Asia and Europe. The Middle Corridor typically involves multimodal transport, utilizing railways and maritime shipping across the Caspian Sea. Goods originating from China and Central Asia can be transported by rail to Caspian Sea ports in Kazakhstan or Turkmenistan, then shipped across the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan (Kumukov & Luzyanin, 2024; Ismayilova, 2025). From Azerbaijan, cargo can proceed by rail through Georgia and Türkiye to reach European markets. The Middle Corridor has gained greater significance due to geopolitical tensions and the search for alternatives to traditional northern routes.

Another critical framework is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which encompasses numerous infrastructure projects aimed at creating new Eurasian economic cooperation through connectivity (Aydın & Berdaş, 2023; Ismayilova, 2025; Edeh & Zhao, 2022). The South Caucasus region is positioned strategically within the BRI, and while the Zangezur Corridor could integrate into this larger initiative, other existing and planned routes within the BRI also serve East-West connectivity. These include overland routes through Central Asia that bypass the South Caucasus altogether, as well as alternative routes that traverse other countries in the region without relying on the Zangezur link. Among these, within the South Caucasus, several existing transport routes contribute to East-West connectivity, including Rail and Road Networks through Georgia, Black Sea Ports, North-South transport routes, and the Middle Corridor (Dadparvar & Kaleji, 2023).

Georgia plays a crucial role as a transit country in the South Caucasus, with established railway and road connections linking Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea to Türkiye and the Black Sea ports (Gawliczek & Iskandarov, 2023; Erdei & Erdei-Gally, 2023). These routes are already operational and facilitate significant trade volumes between East and West. The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway line, for instance, provides a direct rail link from Azerbaijan through Georgia to Türkiye, offering a continuous rail corridor between Asia and Europe. The ports on Georgia's Black Sea coast serve as essential gateways for cargo transshipment between the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and Europe. Goods can be transported by rail and road from Azerbaijan to these ports, then shipped across the Black Sea. The North-South transport routes also constitute distinct corridors, primarily intended to connect Russia and Northern Europe with Iran, India, and the Persian Gulf (Malikova, 2024; Alkaramov, 2023). While the Zangezur Corridor's primary focus is East-West, its development inherently strengthens the South Caucasus as a transit region that can also interface with North-South routes. However, independent North-South corridors exist, leveraging existing infrastructure in Russia, Azerbaijan, and Iran, particularly along the western coast of the Caspian Sea, to facilitate trade without necessarily involving the Zangezur link.

Economically, these alternative corridors offer supply chain diversification and redundancy, which is crucial for mitigating risks associated with geopolitical instability or disruptions along any single route (Biró & Vasa, 2024). From a geopolitical perspective, the existence of multiple viable transport options reduces the leverage of any single state or region, potentially fostering a more balanced landscape. Countries like Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye, which are invested in the Middle Corridor, benefit from these diversified routes by strengthening their economic and strategic interests independently of the Zangezur Corridor's progression.

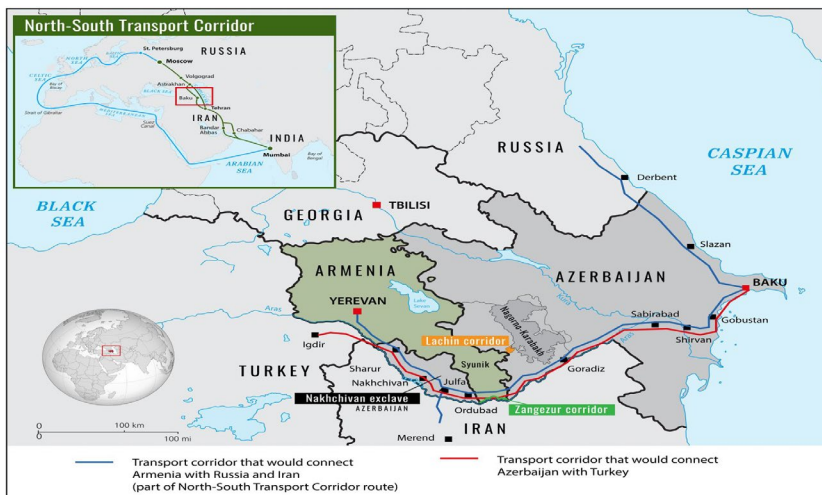
The primary economic significance of the Zangezur Corridor lies in its potential to establish a long-term haulage hub for integration and cooperation in the South Caucasus, boosting regional economic growth (Gulahmadov & Huseyn, 2023). It is envisioned to facilitate trade by reducing transportation times and costs, which is crucial for landlocked countries like Armenia and the geographically isolated Nakhchivan (Shahin, 2024). The Zangezur Corridor is poised to significantly enhance both East-West and North-South transport connectivity in Eurasia by serving as a pivotal link within broader international logistics networks. For East-West connectivity, the Zangezur Corridor is expected to become an integral component of the Middle Corridor, or the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) (Biró &

Vasa, 2024; Aydın & Berdaş, 2023). By linking Azerbaijan directly with Türkiye, the Zangezur Corridor would provide an unobstructed, potentially faster route for goods traveling from Central Asia and China via the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye, ultimately reaching European markets (Kumukov & Luzyanin, 2024; Dadaşlı & Valiyev, 2024; German, 2022). This direct connection would bypass more northerly routes, offering an alternative that could reduce transit times and costs (Alkaramov, 2023).

Regarding North-South connectivity, the development of the Zangezur Corridor would augment existing and planned infrastructure projects aimed at facilitating trade among Russia, Iran, India, and the South Caucasus (Shah, 2025; Chedia, 2024; Gawliczek & Iskandarov, 2023). Improved infrastructure in Azerbaijan, including railway and road networks that would form part of the Zangezur Corridor, would enhance the efficiency of goods movement along North-South routes (Gulahmadov & Huseyn, 2023; Dadaşlı & Valiyev, 2024). For instance, it could streamline the transport of goods from Russia and Central Asia to Iran and onward to the Persian Gulf, and vice versa, by improving regional logistical capabilities. The corridor's operation is anticipated to increase trade volumes and foster economic development across adjacent nations (Malikova, 2024; Alkaramov, 2023). The Zangezur Corridor, the Lachin Corridor, and the North-South transport corridor are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

The Zangezur Corridor, the Lachin Corridor, and the North-South transport corridor



Note: *Civildaily. (2025). Places in news: Zangezur Corridor. <https://www.civildaily.com/news/places-in-news-zangezur-corridor/>*

Despite possible political complexities, the strategic objective for states in the modern era is the restoration of historical transport routes and the creation of new ones, particularly in regions like the South Caucasus, which has historically been a crossroads of civilizations and a geo-economic hub. The region has historically been a crossroads for civilizations and a geo-economic hub, making the development of new transportation routes a strategic objective for many states (Chedia, 2024; Iskandarov & Gawliczek, 2020; Iskandarov et al., 2024). The Zangezur Corridor, therefore, represents a critical infrastructure project with the potential to enhance East-West and North-South transport connectivity across Eurasia, provided that the underlying political disputes are resolved through diplomacy and mutual agreement (Gulahmadov & Huseyn, 2023).

For Nakhchivan, the corridor means to end its economic blockade, connecting it directly with mainland Azerbaijan and significantly increasing its economic potential. Similarly, Armenia could leverage this corridor to establish new trade relations with Türkiye and Europe via rail, thereby enhancing its economic prospects. Azerbaijan's participation in these corridors, including the Zangezur link, is expected to improve its access to international markets and deepen its integration into global supply chains (Dadaşlı & Valiyev, 2024).

While Russia has traditionally been a key mediator in the South Caucasus, its influence in the negotiation process between Armenia and Azerbaijan has weakened since the second half of 2022 (Malikova, 2024). However, Russia's strategic interests in maintaining its military presence and influence in the region, particularly its border guard presence along parts of the Armenian-Turkish border and its peacekeeping mission, mean that any significant alteration of regional transport routes would concern Moscow. A fully operational Zangezur Corridor could reduce Armenia's reliance on Russia for trade and security, potentially not aligning with Russia's long-term strategic objectives.

From the Turkish point of view, the Zangezur Corridor is critical, focusing on its geopolitical, geoeconomic, and strategic benefits, particularly in the context of regional connectivity, economic development, and diplomatic relations in the South Caucasus (Kaya et al., 2024; Chedia, 2024). The corridor linking Azerbaijan's mainland to its Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic is considered crucial to Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and is actively supported by Türkiye. Türkiye highlights the Zangezur Corridor's potential to transform the region into a significant transport hub, and views it not merely as a transportation route but as a strategic platform where the neo-imperial interests of various global powers intersect, and regional power balances are reshaped. For Türkiye and Azerbaijan, the corridor offers a shorter and safer trade route between Asia and Europe, complementing the existing Baku-Tbilisi-Kars route and the broader Middle Corridor initiative (Biró & Vasa, 2024; Erdei & Erdei-Gally, 2023). This enhanced connectivity is expected to significantly boost trade, economic cooperation, and tourism across the region (Gulahmadov & Hajiyeva, 2023). When analyzing Turkish foreign policy, the analysis should include Türkiye's role in diversifying Europe's energy supplies through southern energy corridors and its engagement with international financial institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, for connectivity projects in Eurasia (Oztarsu & Ibrahimov, 2025). These foreign policy considerations provide a context for understanding Türkiye's strong advocacy for the Zangezur Corridor.

Iran is concerned about the shifting balance of power in the South Caucasus. In Iran, the corridor is perceived as a project supported primarily by Türkiye and Azerbaijan, aimed at establishing a direct land bridge between Türkiye and the Turkic states of Central Asia (Golmohammadi & Markedonov, 2024; Guliyev, 2024; Miarka, 2021). This could strengthen the Turkic axis, potentially altering the regional geopolitical landscape to Iran's disadvantage. This stance is driven by an apprehension of losing Armenia, which serves as a crucial buffer state and a conduit for Iran's trade with Russia and Europe. Iran's apprehension is also linked to the potential for increased Turkish and Azerbaijani influence near its northern borders (Ullah & Xinlei, 2025). A direct corridor passing close to its frontier could be seen as a security risk, particularly given existing ethnic ties between Azerbaijan and Iranian Azeris. Iran prefers to maintain direct border access with Armenia. As a result, Iran's geopolitical concerns regarding the Zangezur Corridor are multifaceted, encompassing the preservation of its economic transit advantages, the maintenance of regional power balances, and the countering of possible expansion by rival geopolitical axes.

Western actors, including the US, NATO, and the EU, have stepped up their mediation efforts in the South Caucasus to promote peace and stability. However, their engagement, while aimed at de-escalating tensions, also adds to the complex web of interests, with each actor pursuing distinct strategic goals that may not always align. The involvement of Western actors has increased in the South Caucasus, especially as Russia's influence wanes (Malikova, 2024). These actors have sought to strengthen their positions in mediation and arbitration between Armenia and Azerbaijan, thereby affecting Armenia's foreign policy. The Zangezur Corridor, as part of global transport routes like the West-East and North-South corridors, is of interest to these powers due to its implications for international trade and energy flows (Iskandarov & Gawliczek, 2020; Chedia, 2024).

In conclusion, while the Zangezur Corridor holds significant potential for boosting regional trade and connectivity, its realization is intertwined with security issues in the South Caucasus (Shahin, 2024; Chedia, 2024). In essence, the Zangezur Corridor transcends a mere infrastructural project, emerging as a critical nexus for regional power dynamics, economic competition, and security concerns. Its implementation necessitates complex negotiations and a delicate balancing act among the diverse interests of regional and global powers, significantly influencing the future stability and geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus. The absence of a comprehensive peace agreement, ongoing border disputes, and differing strategic interests of regional and global powers mean that the corridor remains a significant security concern for Armenia and a complex geopolitical challenge for all parties involved (Hovyan, 2023). Addressing these security concerns through diplomatic efforts, peace agreements, and legal frameworks is essential for the corridor to contribute to regional stability and economic development.

4.2. From corridor to route

The ceasefire agreement signed on November 9, 2020, which formally concluded the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, highlighted the critical need to restore and enhance transport connections in the region. Article 9 of the agreement mandates the unblocking of all economic and transport routes, placing Armenia in charge of ensuring the security of connections between Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. The oversight of these routes falls under the jurisdiction of the Russian Federal Security Service, reflecting Moscow's continued involvement in the regional dynamics (Avdaliani, 2025; Vartanyan, 2025). Following this agreement, several plans were unveiled in December 2020 to establish a railway link connecting the Nakhchivan territory to Azerbaijan. This initiative prompted the creation of a trilateral working group to unblock and enhance the communications infrastructure. Concurrently, Azerbaijan commenced efforts to construct a railway of about 85 km from Horadiz to Zangilan, both within its territory, to facilitate the transportation of goods to Nakhchivan and beyond to Türkiye.

On January 14, 2022, Armenia responded to these developments by forming a working group tasked with the reconstruction and modernization of its critical railway systems, particularly in the Meghri region, which is key for transit logistics. The momentum around these transport initiatives culminated in August 2025, when the US hosted a signing ceremony for a transit corridor agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The event, which garnered considerable international attention, featured President Donald Trump, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, and President Ilham Aliyev. This agreement, designated the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP), grants the US 99-year lease rights to develop a transit corridor connecting Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan via Armenia. The corridor is intended to facilitate rail, oil, gas, and fiber-optic communications, forming part of the broader Crossroads of Peace initiative proposed by Armenia in 2023. This approach not only aims to foster economic growth and trade but also emphasizes Armenian sovereignty, as the Project would operate under Armenian law (Avdaliani, 2025; Vartanyan, 2025).

While the Trump Route has the potential to catalyze economic growth and stability in the South Caucasus, it also raises questions about Armenia's sovereignty over the corridor and the risk of domestic political and social unrest arising from its implementation. Furthermore, the geopolitical ramifications of the TRIPP are profound; it could significantly reshape the regional balance of power and provoke varied responses from neighboring states, especially Iran (Ordukhanyan et al., 2025). The Trump Route exemplifies the complex interplay between economic ambitions and strategic competition across Eurasia. To properly understand its potential and ensure the corridor's efficacy, enhanced collaboration among regional stakeholders and external powers will be essential. The establishment of transport links connecting Armenia and Azerbaijan presents new geo-economic opportunities for major international players, including the US, the EU, and China, as they increasingly engage with the South Caucasus.

The agreements delineate a 99-year oversight commitment by the US over the establishment and operation of the transit corridor. They also mark the dissolution of the OSCE Minsk Group, which previously mediated the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, and the repeal of Section 907 of the 1992 Freedom Support Act, which had historically restricted the US military aid to Azerbaijan. Importantly, the TRIPP project will use a 43 km-long Armenian territory, which will be leased to a consortium selected by the US government to develop and manage the corridor. According to the agreement, the ultimate goal is to create an efficient route connecting Türkiye in the west with the Caspian Sea in the east, providing a more reliable, expedited alternative to traditional trade routes that pass-through Georgia.

5. A Neorealist Look at the Zangezur Case

Given that various terms, such as the Zangezur Corridor and the Trump Route (TRIPP), have been referenced in the article to this point, the naming will henceforth be the Zangezur case and/or the Project for consistency.

Viewed through a Neorealist lens, the Zangezur case gains analytical clarity as a strategic contest rather than a purely infrastructural dispute. The South Caucasus remains marked by unresolved conflicts, weak institutional guarantees, and persistent strategic mistrust. Under such conditions, it is both theoretically expected and empirically observable that states interpret connectivity projects primarily through concerns of security, sovereignty, and survival rather than through market efficiency alone. This helps explain why Azerbaijan sees the Project as a way to reduce vulnerability and strengthen territorial continuity, whereas Armenia approaches it as a potential challenge to sovereignty and territorial control. It also explains why external actors such as Russia, Türkiye, Iran, the EU, and the United States are deeply engaged in the issue: control over routes in the South Caucasus affects not only transport access, but also regional influence and the broader balance of power. In this sense, the Zangezur case illustrates how, in an anarchic and post-conflict regional setting, infrastructure becomes embedded in security dilemmas, relative gains calculations, and balancing behavior.

5.1. Security prioritization under anarchy

When the Zangezur case is examined through a Neorealist framework, the first point that becomes analytically significant is the persistence of anarchy in the South Caucasus. In a regional environment where unresolved conflicts remain salient, institutional guarantees are weak, and no trusted security architecture exists, states are expected to approach major connectivity initiatives through the lens of security rather than economic efficiency alone. The Zangezur case confirms this expectation. For Azerbaijan, the Project is closely linked to the reduction of strategic vulnerability: it promises direct access to Nakhchivan, strengthens territorial continuity, and provides a critical overland connection to Türkiye. In this sense, the route is not simply a transportation corridor, but a means of enhancing strategic depth and national cohesion.

Armenia interprets the same initiative in fundamentally different terms. Because the proposed route is expected to pass through Syunik, a region central to Armenian sovereignty and territorial integrity, the Project is seen less as an economic opportunity than as a possible source of strategic exposure. What Azerbaijan understands as the removal of a vulnerability is therefore perceived by Armenia as the creation of a new one. This produces a classic security dilemma: measures designed by one actor to enhance its own security are interpreted by another actor as threatening. In the absence of a final peace settlement, a corridor with potential economic utility becomes politically contentious because it is assessed primarily in terms of control, sovereignty, and survival.

Azerbaijan's push for the corridor aligns with its strategy to enhance territorial cohesiveness and secure uninterrupted access to its exclave, which, in turn, strengthens its geopolitical influence. Conversely, Armenia perceives a corridor over which it has no control as a threat to its sovereignty and territorial

integrity. A similar condition is also valid for Türkiye and Iran. The Project has therefore attracted the attention of external actors. Türkiye has backed the corridor not only because of ethnic and cultural ties, but also because it strengthens its connectivity with Central Asia and its position in the Turkic world. Russia's stake in the corridor reflects its waning yet still significant influence in the region; while it ostensibly supports negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, it also seeks to avoid marginalization as Western actors become more active. Iran, meanwhile, opposes the Project because it fears the potential isolation of its northern borders and the strengthening of Turkish-led regional blocs. In this sense, the Project shows how states in an anarchic environment respond to perceived threats to their security and regional position.

5.2. Relative gains and asymmetric strategic utility

The Zangezur case also becomes more intelligible when viewed through the Neorealist logic of relative gains. The central issue is not whether the Project could produce aggregate economic benefits for both Armenia and Azerbaijan, but whether its political and strategic benefits would be distributed asymmetrically.

Through this initiative, Azerbaijan would gain direct territorial connectivity, logistical autonomy, enhanced influence in the South Caucasus, and improved access to Türkiye, thereby reducing its dependence on alternative transit arrangements. Armenia, by contrast, risks losing leverage as a gatekeeping territory and transit chokepoint while bearing the sovereignty costs associated with hosting the route. From this perspective, the controversy surrounding the Project stems not from the absence of utility, but from disagreement over who benefits more and at what strategic cost.

This same logic extends beyond the Armenia–Azerbaijan dyad. Türkiye supports the Project not only because of its close relationship with Azerbaijan, but also because the route promises to deepen Turkish connectivity with the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and the wider Turkic world. Iran, however, is far more likely to interpret the same development as a source of relative loss. The wars of 2020 and 2023 disrupted the fragile status quo that Tehran had long preferred in the South Caucasus and left Iran increasingly marginalized in the region's evolving balance of power (Pourahmadi Meibodi & Feizollahi, 2024, p. 96). The strengthening of the Turkish-Azeri axis has intensified Iran's sense of both physical and ontological insecurity, turning the South Caucasus into an increasingly significant arena of geopolitical rivalry between Tehran and Ankara (Golmohammadi & Markedonov, 2024, p. 171). In practical terms, the operationalization of a Turkey–Nakhchivan–Baku corridor could render Türkiye a more desirable and influential transit actor in the Caucasus and Central Asia, while further marginalizing Iran in the region's changing connectivity architecture (Dorj, 2023, p. 59). From a Neorealist perspective, Iran's opposition to the Project is therefore not simply rhetorical or ideological; it reflects a structural concern that new route arrangements may consolidate rival influence while diminishing Iran's own geopolitical and geoeconomic leverage.

5.3. Balancing behavior and regional realignment

A third Neorealist dynamic visible in the Zangezur case is balancing behavior. When major infrastructure projects are expected to alter regional influence or redistribute strategic leverage, both regional and extra-regional actors tend to position themselves in ways designed to prevent marginalization. In this sense, the Zangezur case is emblematic of efforts to recalibrate the balance of power in the South Caucasus.

Azerbaijan and Türkiye have converged around support for the Project because it promises to reinforce their strategic partnership and reshape regional connectivity in their favor. Armenia, meanwhile, has sought to offset its vulnerability by broadening its diplomatic engagement with external actors. Its outreach to Western powers, such as the EU and NATO, signals a shift toward a more multipolar

balancing strategy, as smaller states in institutionally weak regions seek to preserve autonomy by maneuvering among competing power centers.

Iran's reaction can likewise be read as a balancing response to a perceived deterioration of its regional position. The overlapping interests of Russia and Türkiye have significantly narrowed Tehran's room for maneuver in the South Caucasus, pushing Iran into an increasingly subordinate position after the Karabakh war (Heiran-Nia & Monshipouri, 2023, p. 138). The post-war environment has also reduced Iran's relative influence vis-à-vis its long-time regional rival Türkiye (Azizi & Isachenko, 2023, p. 3). In this sense, Iran's opposition to the Project reflects an effort to resist further strategic marginalization in a regional order increasingly shaped by rival alignments. Even if Türkiye does not pursue an explicitly anti-Iranian strategy, the redistribution of power in favor of the Turkish-Azeri axis may still trigger Iranian countermeasures because states respond not only to declared intentions, but also to changes in relative position and perceived vulnerability.

Russia's stake in the Zangezur case reflects a similar concern with avoiding exclusion from regional order-building processes. Although Moscow has long sought to preserve a central mediating and security role in the South Caucasus, its influence has become less decisive since the post-2020 period. As Western actors have expanded their diplomatic engagement and alternative formats have emerged, Russia has faced the risk of strategic marginalization in a region it has historically sought to shape. The corridor's implications therefore extend beyond the immediate region, influencing broader competition over transit, mediation, and access corridors. The Project is thus a locus of regional realignment in which local and external actors seek to secure influence over connectivity governance and the wider regional order.

5.4. From corridor to route: The securitization of infrastructure

Taken together, these dynamics explain why the Zangezur case has become securitized. In a setting characterized by incomplete peace-building, unresolved borders, and strategic mistrust, infrastructure does not remain a neutral economic instrument. Instead, it becomes a strategic asset whose governance is tied to questions of legal authority, sovereignty, territorial control, and regional influence. While economic benefits are often cited as a rationale for such projects, the Zangezur case primarily embodies strategic calculus. Its potential to shift the South Caucasus' balance of power underscores the idea that infrastructure is a geopolitical tool. The significance of the route lies not only in its promise to facilitate the movement of goods, energy, and communications, but also in the political power associated with who controls, regulates, and benefits from it.

The Zangezur project is not only a significant regional initiative but also a link in wider East–West and North–South transport networks. From a Neorealist perspective, this makes the route an instrument through which states can expand influence, reduce dependence, and maximize strategic position. At the same time, the realization of the Project could reduce Iran's leverage over Azerbaijan, reshape the regional configuration, and weaken Russian and Iranian positions as traditional gatekeepers of regional transit corridors. In this way, infrastructure projects serve as tools of state power and security maximization.

This also helps explain why the issue has evolved from debates over a “corridor” to broader route-based formulations such as TRIPP. At one level, such reformulations appear to soften the controversy by emphasizing legal sovereignty, reciprocity, and regulated transit. The repeated emphasis on Armenian sovereignty in the agreement text can itself be interpreted as evidence that Armenia has consistently viewed the Project not merely as a connectivity initiative, but as a security-sensitive issue requiring explicit legal and political safeguards (U.S. Department of State, 2026). Yet from a Neorealist perspective, this does not indicate the depoliticization of connectivity; rather, it signals the reconfiguration of competition around a new institutional form. The route becomes not less strategic, but differently

strategic. Questions of who oversees transit, under what legal framework, and with what external guarantees remain central precisely because the route is embedded in a wider struggle over the future regional order. In this sense, the Zangezur case shows that the politics of connectivity in the South Caucasus are driven less by the promise of mutual economic gain than by the structural conditions of insecurity under which regional actors operate. What is at stake is not merely the opening of a transport link, but the redistribution of strategic leverage in a conflict-prone region. The Project therefore exemplifies how infrastructure in post-conflict environments can become a focal point where sovereignty, relative gains, balancing behavior, and geopolitical competition intersect.

6. Conclusions

This article has asked why a transport initiative with potential mutual economic benefits has become a site of security competition in the South Caucasus. Examining the Zangezur case through a Neorealist lens suggests that the answer lies not in the inherent economic character of the Project, but in the structural conditions under which it is being negotiated. In a post-conflict regional environment marked by unresolved borders, weak institutional guarantees, and persistent strategic mistrust, connectivity is not interpreted as a neutral instrument of cooperation. Rather, it is evaluated in terms of security, sovereignty, and relative gains. From this perspective, the Zangezur case demonstrates that infrastructure projects in anarchic settings are likely to become politicized and securitized when they have the potential to redistribute strategic leverage among competing actors.

The analysis has shown that the main parties do not approach the Project from a shared economic logic. Azerbaijan views the route as a means of reducing strategic vulnerability, strengthening territorial continuity, and consolidating access to Nakhchivan and Türkiye. Armenia, by contrast, interprets the same initiative primarily through concerns over sovereignty, territorial control, and strategic exposure. This asymmetry helps explain why a potentially beneficial transport project has remained politically contentious. The Zangezur case therefore supports the Neorealist expectation that, under conditions of insecurity, states prioritize survival and control over efficiency and absolute gains.

The case also reveals that the politics of connectivity in the South Caucasus cannot be understood solely through the bilateral Armenia–Azerbaijan relationship. One of the article’s central findings is that the Project has become embedded in a broader regional competition in which Türkiye and Iran occupy increasingly important positions. For Türkiye, the route promises more than improved transit: it offers an opportunity to reinforce its strategic partnership with Azerbaijan, deepen its access to the South Caucasus and Central Asia, and strengthen its position within a wider Turkic geopolitical space. For Iran, however, the same development implies the possibility of relative decline. The post-2020 and post-2023 regional order has already narrowed Tehran’s room for maneuver and weakened its standing in the South Caucasus. In this context, the operationalization of a Türkiye–Nakhchivan–Baku route is perceived not simply as a transport adjustment, but as part of a wider redistribution of influence in favor of the Turkish-Azeri axis.

This Türkiye–Iran dimension is analytically important because it demonstrates how the Zangezur case extends beyond corridor politics narrowly defined and becomes part of a larger contest over regional order. From a Neorealist standpoint, Iran’s reactions are intelligible not only as policy objections, but as responses to strategic marginalization, shifting transit hierarchies, and the erosion of relative influence vis-à-vis a rival regional actor. Likewise, Türkiye’s strong support for the Project is best understood not simply as solidarity with Azerbaijan, but as an effort to convert connectivity into strategic depth and geopolitical reach. The South Caucasus is therefore becoming an increasingly significant arena of Turkish-Iranian rivalry, and the future of the Project will likely be shaped as much by this competition as by Armenian-Azerbaijani negotiations themselves.

A further conclusion of the article is that the shift from the language of a “corridor” to broader route-based formulations does not depoliticize connectivity. On the contrary, this shift reorganizes the terms of competition by placing greater emphasis on governance, legal authority, oversight, and external involvement. In this sense, the transformation from corridor to route does not indicate a move beyond power politics, but rather a rearticulation of them through a different institutional vocabulary. The route remains strategically significant precisely because it may alter transit dependence, redistribute influence, and reshape the regional balance of power.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the Zangezur case is best understood not as a technical transport dispute, but as a strategic site where sovereignty, balancing behavior, relative gains, and geopolitical rivalry converge. Neorealism does not explain every tactical choice made by the actors involved, nor does it fully capture the role of domestic politics, leadership perceptions, or ideational framing. Nevertheless, it offers a strong account of why the politics of connectivity in the South Caucasus repeatedly become subordinated to questions of power and insecurity. The case therefore illustrates a broader proposition: in post-conflict and institutionally weak environments, infrastructure is rarely just infrastructure. It becomes part of the struggle over who shapes regional order, who gains strategic autonomy, and who risks marginalization within an evolving balance of power.

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