

## Opinion – Why Armenia and Azerbaijan Diverge on the Zangezur Corridor

Written by Mehmet Fatih Oztarsu

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MEHMET FATİH ÖZTARSU, FEB 7 2024

Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev has upped the pressure on Armenia, urging it to fulfill its commitment under the ceasefire agreement and open the Zangezur Corridor. Aliyev's statement has put into question the fate of the final peace agreement that was expected to be realized in the end of 2023. While Armenia is hesitant in this project, Azerbaijan continues to expect the corridor to open soon. On the other side, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan is busy mitigating the criticism directed at him by the opposition and reorienting Armenia's political course in the post-war political atmosphere.

The Second Karabakh War in 2020 and Azerbaijan's military operations in the region in September 2023 created new dynamics in the South Caucasus which shape Azerbaijan and Armenia's regional policy choices. Azerbaijan has called for the realization of new projects in the post-war region, and it expects responses of the Armenian side to give green light in this regard. Since the beginning of 2021, Azerbaijan's discourse on the region has mostly focused on regional reconstruction and security. The Azerbaijani media portrays a nation on the move, comparing war-torn landscapes with new cityscapes and showcasing inauguration ceremonies for newly built structures. Baku actively hosts national and international meetings, highlighting its commitment to regional development and attracting investment. However, Aliyev acknowledges the geopolitical challenge posed by closed borders which hinder their desired development trajectory. According to him, regional development cannot take place without the region's connectivity to neighboring regions.

In December 2023, Aliyev emphasized the Zangezur Corridor as a crucial step towards opening borders with Armenia. This proposed corridor is expected to connect the Azerbaijani mainland with the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic through Armenia's Syunik region, offering a direct land link between the two territories. In the agreement signed after the Second Karabakh War, Armenia made a commitment in regard of providing transport facilities. The relevant article in the agreement is as follows:

The Republic of Armenia shall guarantee the security of transport connections between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in order to arrange unobstructed movement of persons, vehicles and cargo in both directions.

While the agreement stipulates "unobstructed movement," interpretations of the parties diverge sharply. According to Armenia, this article aims to ensure free and safe passage in the relevant area and therefore no corridor should be considered. The Armenian side is hesitant to take part in a project in which Azerbaijan has the full initiative. In addition, the conditionalization of this project for a peace agreement is a separate source of concerns. On the other side, according to Azerbaijan, Armenia should be part of new regional projects that it has been bypassed for 30 years and regional integration can be achieved in this way. This is because the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway projects have already been successfully completed. Azerbaijan expects Armenia to join new partnerships in the new period and wants an end to its long-lasting regional isolation.

Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan's resistance to the corridor finds support in concerns about transport restrictions

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and the need for alternative options. Public anxieties in Armenia regarding potential Azerbaijani territorial ambitions further complicate matters. However, Turkey's vocal backing for the corridor adds another layer of complexity, injecting geopolitical considerations into the mix. Notably, Azerbaijani officials' recent softening in stance, suggesting alternatives, might signal an opportunity to de-escalate and build trust, paving the way for a potential peace agreement.

Azerbaijan seeks to maintain the regional sovereignty it has gradually consolidated since the war's end. However, this action remained tenuous. Russia's continued military presence, security threats in Karabakh, and unfulfilled ceasefire provisions constrained Baku's options, prompting occasional criticism against Armenia and demands for a clearer Russian position. After the latest withdrawal of Armenians from Karabakh has changed the situation. Now Baku wants to start a new era in which its control is predominant.

Several strategic motivations likely drive Aliyev's renewed focus on the Zangezur Corridor. Firstly, Azerbaijan recognizes the altered geopolitical landscape following the Second Karabakh War. After decades navigating the demands of shifting regional and global powers like the US, Russia, and Iran, Baku now seeks a more proactive role in shaping this new reality. Secondly, Russia's preoccupation with Ukraine presents an opportune moment for Azerbaijan. With Moscow's attention diverted and favoring regional cooperation, Baku sees a window to advance its interests. Thirdly, Aliyev likely views the corridor as a platform for state-sponsored regionalism, aiming to address outstanding issues with Armenia through collaborative projects. According to him, this approach could pave the way for broader regional integration and foster stability.

Armenia's path towards embracing post-war realities faces challenges. Recent political turmoil, marked by the Armenian opposition, has created a cautious atmosphere. The Mother Armenia bloc has voiced harsh accusations against Pashinyan, alleging he surrendered Karabakh and demanding a change in the current administration. Other opposition groups haven't held back either, sharing concerns and complaints that the perceived concessions in Karabakh could be a precursor to broader infringements on Armenian sovereignty. These developments require Pashinyan to deflect accusations on nationalism and territorial integrity.

Therefore, Pashinyan's reservations about the proposed Zangezur Corridor stem from both internal and external considerations. Domestically, a public wary of potential security risks and eager for economic rejuvenation puts pressure on Pashinyan to tread carefully. He aims to persuade public opinion by taking a slow and deliberate approach, seeking consensus before committing to any specific agreements. Externally, Pashinyan leverages Iran's recent objections to the project to strengthen his bargaining position and signal independence from Russia. His statements advocating for alternative models of connectivity seek support from diverse regional partners and avoid alienating Azerbaijan, as evidenced by his repeated calls for a peace agreement.

Furthermore, Pashinyan unveiled his "the Crossroads of Peace" project at the Silk Road International Forum in Tbilisi in October 2023. This plan envisions Armenia connected to the Black Sea, Caspian Sea, and Mediterranean Sea through its neighbors, requiring various corridors and transportation lines. While the project initially raised hopes for renewed corridor negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia, it has yet to yield progress.

The most important issue that Pashinyan draws attention is the problem of mutual distrust. Pashinyan, who has successfully managed to bring up issues on Nagorno-Karabakh that the Armenian public opinion would not even think about until 2020, believes that mutual trust must be established in the new period. In fact, this issue was neglected during the mediation process of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which included the Minsk Group and other different actors for three decades. The mechanism to build trust between Armenia and Azerbaijan was not established and the conflict was left to the initiative of third parties. This situation continues in the new post-war regional reality. The trust that was not built for conflict resolution now becomes an expectation for cooperation.

Azerbaijan will bring up the realization of this project through alternative routes, including Iranian territory. In addition to this, Baku officials may also bring the realization of the project through Armenian territory to the agenda by making more attractive offers to Armenia. Pashinyan, on the other hand, may approve this project when he feels more prepared in domestic politics after avoiding accusations towards him. Otherwise, to keep his position strong, he will

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maintain his current stance and focus only on the issue of opening the borders.

While both Azerbaijan and Armenia share long-term regional goals, their differing views on creating a transportation corridor impede progress towards a peace agreement. This ongoing disagreement hinders trust-building and prolongs the post-war limbo. To address these shared challenges and build trust, the two countries would be well-served by establishing a platform for constructive dialogue on common issues, including the corridor dispute. The intention of the two sides to realize their similar expectations through different means will be fruitless. Although Azerbaijan is expected to develop a common vision with Armenia, which is on the path of domestic and foreign policy renewal, the political dynamics in the region suggest that this project will not materialize in the short term.

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