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"Essentially, the subject is always between 2 points"

Weekly Political and Geopolitical Developments

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REGIONAL RISE OF AZERBAIJAN AND TURKEY THE CAUCASUS AFTER THE 44-DAY WAR:

Zangezur Corridor, Regional Rivalry and Azerbaijan-Russia Tension ¹

Introduction:

There is a significant tension in relations between Azerbaijan and Russia. In particular, in **late 2024 and early 2025**, a series of events occurred that led to diplomatic crises between the two countries. The downing of an Azerbaijani civilian plane over Chechnya in December 2024, possibly with a Russian missile, the killing of two Azerbaijani citizens by Russian security services in Yekaterinburg in June 2025 and allegations of torture, and the developments at the office of the Russian state agency Sputnik in Baku are visible aspects of this tension. In parallel with these developments, the Azerbaijani government stopped all high-level contacts with Russia, Russian propaganda media were blocked, while Moscow began to put pressure on Azerbaijani immigrants and businesspeople, and to carry out cyber attacks on Azerbaijani state sites. The official diplomatic language between the two countries has also hardened; For example, the Russian Foreign Ministry sent a note to Baku demanding the immediate release of the detained Russian press members, while the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry protested the torture and ill-treatment of Azerbaijani citizens by the Russian security forces with a note.



<https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz/3-soruda-zengezur-koridorunun-onemi/2767969>

In fact, behind the struggle between Baku and Moscow lies a deep geopolitical rivalry for dominance over critical transportation lines in the region and integration into global projects. At the center of this competition is the "Zangezur Corridor", which will connect Azerbaijan to Turkey via Nakhchivan and from there to Europe and Central Asia. Attempts to open the corridor between Turkey, Azerbaijan and Armenia are seen as the main cause of the Baku-Moscow crisis. As a matter of fact, many analyses state that the dispute over the Zangezur Corridor has pitted Azerbaijan and Russia against each other. In this week's analysis, we will focus on the developments after the 44-day Karabakh War and discuss the strategic importance of the Zangezur Corridor, changes in the geopolitical balance of power, the role of energy and transportation lines, military balances, integration of the Turkic world, and the positions of international actors in the region. In addition, we evaluate the leading statements made by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan during his contacts in Khankendi, Karabakh, and the messages regarding Afghanistan, and include inferences about the future of the region in the light of all these factors.

Strategic Importance of the Zangezur Corridor and Geopolitical Competition:

The Zangezur Corridor is a strategically important transportation line that aims to connect the mainland of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan exclave through the Sunik (Zangezur) region of Armenia. **Article 9 of the November 9 Ceasefire Declaration, signed at the end of the 2020 Karabakh War**, stipulates the opening of all economic and transport links in the region; He stated that Armenia would guarantee transportation between the western provinces

¹ This study has been prepared by making use of the resources provided by the Web-based analysis sites determined by AI.

of Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan, and that the border guards of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) would take control of this route. Although this article does not explicitly use the term "corridor", it paved the way for the Zangezur pass, which Baku insistently brought to the agenda. Azerbaijan **demands that this line should be a sovereign transit route connecting the two parts of its territory**, and that it should be an **"uninterrupted" connection free from all customs and border controls**. Armenia, on the other hand, emphasized its sovereign rights and proposed a model **in which it would exercise its own customs control over the line passing through its territory**; it even presented a technical plan for this concept, which it called the "Crossroads to Peace", after the Aliyev-Pashinyan meeting at the end of 2024. According to this plan, Armenia envisaged inspecting the loads that would pass through with an automatic system according to the degree of risk in the form of green-yellow-red lines. However, Baku stated that it finds the presence of Armenian security or customs elements in the corridor **unacceptable** and that either Russia should provide security or a neutral party should undertake security.

The importance of the Zangezur Corridor is not only that it strengthens Azerbaijan's **internal connection** within its territorial integrity. This line also **has geostrategic value as it will establish a direct land connection with Turkey**. The opening of the corridor is a step **that will deepen the physical integration of the Turkic world and strengthen the economic and political unity among the Turkic states**. President Erdoğan has also emphasized many times that this corridor is **"a new integration route that unites not only Nakhchivan, but also the entire Turkic world"**. According to Erdogan, with the imminent opening of the corridor, **the transport and energy infrastructure of the Caucasus will be strengthened**, and all countries in the region will benefit economically from this environment of peace and cooperation. Indeed, predictions are that the Zangezur Corridor **will be a critical part of the East-West transport route**, accelerating and facilitating Europe-Asia trade via the **Central Asia-Caspian-Caucasus-Turkey line**. Thanks to this corridor, existing routes for cargoes **from Central Asia, China and the Caspian basin to Europe** will be shortened, and in addition, connection projects such as **new energy pipelines and fiber optic communication lines** may be on the agenda. In short, the corridor **is of great importance due to its capacity to transform political influence as well as economic transit potential**. **If the Zangezur Corridor is implemented, it is highly likely that the political balances as well as the economic relations in the region will radically change**. Due to the rapid progress made on the project, the confrontation between Azerbaijan and Russia took place faster than expected. That is why we are not facing an accidental development.

From Moscow's point of view, the Zangezur Corridor is known as a project that it has always wanted to be involved in in order to maintain its influence in the South Caucasus. As a matter of fact, in the first plans after the 2020 ceasefire, it was discussed to leave the control of the Armenian part of the corridor **under the control of Russia (FSB supervision)**. In this way, Russia would both hold the strings in the Azerbaijan-Armenia normalization, that is, design the regional game and prevent Turkey and Azerbaijan from establishing a line with full sovereignty. **However, the recent claim that the US has intervened in the process with a new proposal has the potential to exclude Moscow.** According to a claim made in 2023 and revived in 2024, the **Washington administration is ready to undertake the operation of the Zangezur Corridor** and even plans to do so through an American logistics company. Although this plan started to take shape during the Donald Trump era, it was shelved due to the deterioration of relations with Azerbaijan during the Joe Biden period. however, **it has gained importance again with Trump running again in the 2024 elections**. The most striking aspect is **that the proposed model completely excludes Russia from the process** and envisages giving the control of the route **to a Western company** instead of Russia . If this happens, **Moscow's position in the South Caucasus will be seriously weakened, the prevailing opinion among decision-makers**. As a matter of fact, **it is no coincidence that the Zangezur Corridor issue has flared up again at a time when Azerbaijan-Russia tensions are escalating**. Moreover, the two issues are not mutually exclusive. In this context, we must emphasize that the current high tension and diplomatic arm wrestling between Baku and Moscow **is more than a simple transportation project, it is part of a struggle for regional influence**.

New Balances After the 44-Day Karabakh War:

The 44-day Second Karabakh War, which lasted from September 27 to November 10, 2020, radically changed the 30-year status quo in the South Caucasus in favor of Azerbaijan and Turkey. As a result of this war, which resulted in the victory of Azerbaijan, the Azerbaijani army recaptured most of the territories occupied by Armenia since the 1990s, and the separatist forces in Karabakh were heavily defeated. In accordance with the ceasefire agreement signed with the mediation of Russia after the war, **Russian peacekeepers** were temporarily stationed in Karabakh (especially in Khankendi and its environs, that is, in the area where the remaining Armenian population is located). In this way, while Moscow froze the crisis and gave the opportunity to have a military presence in the region, Victory; **It laid the groundwork for new transport corridors and peace treaty talks**.

The first effect of the post-war period was that Azerbaijan began to build its foreign policy more independently and multifacetedly. Azerbaijan has begun to revise its line in line with the changing conditions, which it has been carrying out for many years as a balance between Russia and the West. Now, **while Russia's position in the region has weakened, the effectiveness of Turkey, the pivot and leading country of its wide and close circle, has increased, and Turkey-Azerbaijan relations have reached the level of "strategic alliance"** and went down in history as a declaration of alliance that deepened mutual military assistance between the two countries by making it multifaceted with the Shusha Declaration **signed by Erdoğan and Aliyev on June 15, 2021**. Ankara has declared to the whole world that it provides Azerbaijan with a security umbrella and **that it will have a permanent presence in the regional equation**. This is a 3rd Amendment that will try to have a say in all **parties and the region** against the possibility of a new conflict in Karabakh. **There is no doubt that it is a clear message to countries.**

On the other hand, one of the remarkable developments after the war was **the acceleration of the rapprochement between Azerbaijan, Turkey and Pakistan**. During the war, **Pakistan and Turkey unwaveringly supported Azerbaijan**, and Ankara also played a critical role in the victory with the supply of modern UAVs and military technology. This solidarity encouraged the three more countries to cooperate institutionally in the immediate aftermath of the war. At the beginning of 2021, the foreign ministers of Turkey, Azerbaijan and Pakistan started to hold regular trilateral meetings, and their parliaments started to draw a framework for strategic partnership with the "Baku Declaration". In September 2021, **the first joint military exercise, codenamed "Three Brothers"**, was held in Azerbaijan, signaling that the trilateral mechanism **is committed to supporting each other's territorial integrity and sensitive issues** on every platform. Moreover, while Turkey and Pakistan stand by Azerbaijan on the Karabakh issue, Baku has openly declared its support for Pakistan in the Kashmir conflict and Turkey for the Eastern Mediterranean and Cyprus issues. Although it is emphasized that this cooperation *is not officially against other countries*, it is clear that it creates **a new axis of power in the region due to its nature**. While Pakistan's **closeness to the Turkish-Azerbaijani alliance as a nuclear-powered country has attracted the attention of actors such as Moscow and Tehran**, Pakistan, the only country that does not recognize Armenia, has increased its military contacts with Baku after the war, and **it is obvious that the support of an ally with nuclear deterrence has strengthened Azerbaijan's security calculations.**

Perhaps the most striking change of the post-war period **is the transformation in Armenia's geopolitical orientation**. After the Karabakh defeat, the Nikol Pashinyan government in Yerevan started to distance itself from Moscow with **the opinion that Russia did not fulfill its alliance commitments**, Russia's failure to adequately support Armenia during and after the war, and even its passive behavior in the border conflicts with Azerbaijan (around Kelbajar and Syunik) in 2022 caused disappointment in the Armenian public and security circles. On the one hand, the Pashinyan government sought a **permanent peace agreement with Azerbaijan**, on the other hand, it "necessarily" started the **normalization process with Turkey**. Yerevan, which engaged in direct negotiations with Ankara by appointing special representatives in 2022, gave important messages for the opening of border gates and the establishment of diplomatic relations in the same year. In fact, Pashinyan came to Ankara in 2023. **This conciliatory attitude of the Armenian leadership towards Turkey and its approach to comprehensive peace with Azerbaijan** was a development that set off alarm bells in Russia. For **decades, Moscow has used the Yerevan-Baku conflict as a means of consolidating its influence**. Now, Armenia is entering a Western-backed peace process despite Russia, even inviting the EU to send an observer mission to its country. As a matter of fact, at the beginning of 2023, the European Union **deployed a civilian observation mission on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border line**. This is **the first time the EU has taken an active role on the ground**, a move that has been criticized by Russia as "a new move for Western influence". On the other hand, Pashinyan reacted to Moscow by refusing to host the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) exercises and openly declaring that the CSTO could not protect them. All these have forced decision-makers on the Russian side to reassess the current situation, as steps **that have brought Armenia out of the Russian orbit and closer to the West**. If Azerbaijan and Armenia sign full peace soon, this will be a scenario that will improve both countries' relations with the West and increase Turkey's regional influence, and **there is no need to comment on this development that Moscow fears the most.**

On the Iranian front, the aftershocks of the 44-day war were also felt. During the war, **Iran gave covert support to Armenia, while Israel and Turkey's aid to Azerbaijan disturbed Tehran**. In addition, **Baku's emphasis on a united Turkic world and "Western Azerbaijan" in its post-Victory discourse** (such as Aliyev's bringing up the right of return of the Azerbaijani population who lived in Armenia in the past) was perceived as **a threat** by Iran. In 2021 and 2022, the Iranian army conducted major exercises on the border with Azerbaijan and **"the fate of the Caucasus cannot be determined without Iran"** He gave the message. In particular, Tehran openly opposed the idea of the Zangezur Corridor; It is certain that he sees the opening of this corridor as contrary to his national interest in terms of **changing his northern borders and establishing a land connection to Central Asia**. However, in the 2023-2024

period, the turmoil within Iran and external pressures have turned Tehran's attention inward. **Increased pressure and attacks by the United States and Israel on Iran** (sabotage of its nuclear program, drone strikes, blows against Iranian targets in Syria) have weakened Iran. On the other hand, the mass protests that erupted in 2022 also shook the regime. In this context, some changes have taken place in Iranian politics. While the demands of the **mother tongue of the approximately 30 million Turkish population** in the country were voiced more loudly, politicians of Turkish origin who came to senior positions in Iran also made statements in this direction. In particular, **Massoud Pezeshkiyan** made groundbreaking statements by saying that Turks living in the region known as South Azerbaijan **"have the natural right of everyone to receive education in their mother tongue"**. This statement was a clear criticism of the long-standing oppression of Turkish identity in Iran and had wide repercussions. Finally, in the elections held in Iran in 2024, **Pezeshkiyan took the presidency** (it is a historical first for an Azerbaijani Turk to take this position in Iran). In its first messages, the Pezeshkiyan administration adopted a discourse that was at peace with its neighbors and respectful of the rights of ethnic communities within the country. Tehran's **softer stance towards Azerbaijan** and **giving the green light to the cultural rights of the Turks of Southern Azerbaijan** were welcomed by Baku. These developments have the capacity **to create cracks in the Iran-Russia axis, albeit small**. Because Tehran, which worked very closely with Russia during the previous administration, is now signaling that it is acting a little more independently. Iran's **preoccupation with its own internal affairs and its refusal to be active in the Caucasus equation** may also **deprive Russia of its only reliable ally in the region**. From Moscow's point of view, **Turkey's rapprochement with Armenia, Azerbaijan's strengthening with its victory, the support of a nuclear actor such as Pakistan for this alliance, and the relatively new rhetoric that came with the change of administration in Iran** all stand in the way of being perceived as developments that weaken Russia in the Caucasus.

Energy and Transport Corridors: Middle Corridor and North-South Line:

An important dimension of the competition in the South Caucasus is **the issue of the intersection of energy and transport corridors**. The region hosts critical projects both in terms of **Europe's energy supply security and the diversification of Eurasian trade routes**. With the **Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, which has been operating since 2006, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum natural gas pipeline, which was opened in 2007**, Azerbaijan had already had the opportunity to transport its energy resources to the world market without being dependent on Russia. Southern Gas Corridor with TANAP since 2018 and TAP commissioned in 2020 With its completion, Caspian Gas began to flow directly to Europe (Italy) for the first time. Especially after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the European Union declared **Azerbaijan one of the key partners** in the search for alternatives to Russian gas. In July 2022, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen visited Baku and signed an energy memorandum with Azerbaijan; This agreement **includes a commitment to increase Azerbaijani gas exports from 8 billion cubic meters in 2021 to 20 billion cubic meters by 2027**. As a matter of fact, in 2022, Azerbaijan's gas deliveries to the EU quickly increased to 12 billion cubic meters. It **is known that this development is a step that weakens Moscow's energy card** and strengthens Baku's ties with Europe. At the same time, **Azerbaijan is developing new projects with Europe in the field of green energy: at the end of 2022, an agreement was signed between Azerbaijan, Georgia, Romania and Hungary** for an underwater cable project that will ensure the transmission of electricity from the Caspian Sea to Europe. Thanks to this pipeline, wind and solar energy in Azerbaijan will be transported to Europe. All these **are moves** that break Russia's monopoly in the energy geopolitics of the region.

In terms of transport corridors, the South Caucasus is located at the intersection of **the China-Turkey-Europe trade route**, called the **"Middle Corridor"**, and the **Russia-India trade route**, known as the **"North-South Corridor"**. **The Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route)** envisages freight trains from China crossing the Caspian Sea via Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan) and reaching Turkey and Europe via Azerbaijan and Georgia, which **has become more geopolitically important after 2022** due to the fact that it bypasses Russia and Iran. With the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War, Central Asian countries began to **strengthen their cooperation among themselves** and diversify their routes, seeing the risks of dependence on Russia in their trade routes. In this context, the capacity of the train-ferry lines extending through the Caspian to Azerbaijan was increased. Central Asian countries see the Middle Corridor as an opportunity to develop their own economies and get out of **Russia's economic domination**. **Turkey, Azerbaijan and Georgia** have been important links of this corridor for years; The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway was opened in 2017 and the line that will carry the cargo from the Caspian to Turkey without interruption was completed. Now the ports of Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan are being expanded, ferry services at sea are being increased, customs procedures are being accelerated. **The EU has also recently started to pay serious attention and investment in the Middle Corridor**.

Europe has included the investments to be made in this line in the **Global Gateway²** program and allocated various funds. **Although the US is a bit of a spectator for now, the Middle Corridor is likely to develop new strategies to balance the dominance of Russia and China in the region.** According to the discussions in Washington, it is stated that the US should support infrastructure initiatives in Central Asia against **the alternative trade blocs that the Russia-China-Iran trio is trying to establish among themselves.** At this point, the initiatives in the Middle Corridor are seen as a tool that can serve the strategies of **balancing both Russia and China and isolating Iran in the context of sanctions.** On the other hand, Turkey's central position in this corridor makes Ankara indispensable for the West.

In parallel with these developments, Russia and Iran have accelerated the **North-South Transport Corridor** project. This project is a multimodal trade route connecting **India to the Caspian Sea through Iran and from there to Russia.** The aim is to make trade between India-Middle East-Europe through the **Iran-Azerbaijan-Russia line** instead of the Suez Canal. **Thanks to this line, Russia plans to access the Indian Ocean through Iran** and hopes to increase its trade with India rather than China. The most critical pillar of the project is **the construction of the Astara-Rasht railway in the north of Iran.** While Iran was unable to complete this line due to financing shortages, Russia undertook the construction by opening **a loan of 1.3 billion euros in 2023.** This railway will run from the Azerbaijani border to the Caspian coast in Iran, so that trains departing from Russia will be able to land directly in Basra without going around the Caspian. **In fact, Azerbaijan is also involved in this corridor as a transit country (via Russia-Azerbaijan-Iran).** As a matter of fact, Baku is carrying out railway and highway improvements in the north-south direction on its territory. However, this does **not prevent Azerbaijan from developing a competitive east-west corridor at the same time.** On the contrary, Baku aims to gain from the north-south line and to operate the east-west line under its control through Zangezur. **This two-way game is fueling an indirect rivalry between Baku and Moscow:** Which one will be the **region's main trade center and transport route?** As can be seen, **the struggle for economic influence over transportation corridors has become one of the main fronts of geopolitical competition.** For this reason, the harsh diplomatic statements and crises around the Zangezur Corridor issue should be read not only as a transportation dispute, but also **as a reflection of a deep power competition.**

The Roles of International Actors and the Military Balance:

Russia: Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has tried to keep Azerbaijan in its orbit, and it has mostly **succeeded in doing so by using the Karabakh conflict card.** On the one hand, Moscow tried to attract Baku to alliances such as the **Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)** and the **Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO),** and on the other hand, it put pressure on Azerbaijan by supporting Armenia militarily. But the 44-Day Victory made it difficult for Russia to maintain this equation. When Azerbaijan largely restored its territorial integrity, **one of the most important trump cards in the hands of the Kremlin lost its influence.** Nevertheless, Russia thought that it could control the process in the short term thanks to the presence of peacekeepers in Karabakh. However, **the war in Ukraine has** reduced Russia's influence in the Caucasus, as it has channeled its attention and resources to that front. Moreover, **as Russia has been economically and diplomatically isolated by Western sanctions, the benefits that Moscow can provide for Baku have diminished.** In light of all this, Azerbaijan has **taken steps that clearly distance itself from Russia:** it has closed Russian cultural institutions (such as the Russian House), imposed restrictions on Russian media, and arrested a number of well-known pro-Russian figures. At the same time, Russia **still has some means of pressure against Azerbaijan:** for example, it has economic and social leverage such as deporting hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijani refugees working in the country or imposing an embargo on agricultural products exported to Russia. As a matter of fact, after the recent crises in the Russian media, **there were calls to "fire Azerbaijani workers and boycott their products".** Some hard-line Russian circles have even called **for military intervention in Azerbaijan and the introduction of a pro-Moscow regime.** There is a reality **on the ground that Russia will not be able to open a front against Turkey-backed Azerbaijan while the Ukraine war continues.** Such a step would lead to the **discontent of the United States and even China,** let alone **Turkey's direct opposition.** Because, despite its close relations with Russia, **China wants to use the Caucasus within the scope of the Belt-Road initiative without being dependent on Moscow.** Therefore, **what the Kremlin can actually do** is try to force Baku to make some concessions with limited economic pressure. Russia may try to create a perception of "you are obliged to me" by creating instability in the region and intimidating it. As a matter of fact, events such as the plane incident at the end of 2024 or the Yekaterinburg raid in 2025 **are also interpreted as an act of intimidation.** However, despite all this hard-line policy, **Russia's soft power and image have been seriously damaged in Azerbaijan.** The perception of Russia from the Soviet era was already damaged by its lack of open support for Armenia during and after the Karabakh war. Now, with steps that directly harm Azerbaijani

² It is the global infrastructure investment strategy launched by the European Union (EU) in 2021. This strategy aims to build partnerships around the world through the EU's infrastructure projects that are sustainable, inclusive and have high standards. Global Gateway is also seen as an alternative initiative of the EU to China's "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI).

citizens, Russia is reinforcing its image as an "occupier" in Azerbaijani society. In short, if Moscow adheres to a reasonable line, it can maintain a limited relationship with Baku based on common interests (such as energy exchange, north-south line). However, in terms of strategic influence, it seems difficult for it to regain a "lost area".

Turkey: Turkey, which has been Azerbaijan's closest ally since the 1990's, has made its weight felt in the region even more with the Karabakh victory. In the equation formed as a result of the 44-day war, **Ankara became the political guarantor of Baku's victory** and played an active role in shaping diplomatic outcomes. With the **Shusha Declaration (2021)**, a de facto defensive alliance was established between the two countries. The Turkish Armed Forces expanded its advisory role in the restructuring and modernization of the Azerbaijani army; Joint exercises have become more frequent. Turkey has also assumed important responsibilities in the reconstruction of the territories liberated by Azerbaijan – Turkish companies that undertook highway, airport and infrastructure projects turned the region into a construction site. This is also a gain for Turkey's soft power and economic influence. The Zangezur Corridor project has become a strategic goal for Turkey, because if this line is opened, it will provide an uninterrupted land connection with the Turkic world, and as the problems with Armenia are resolved, the key to peace in the Caucasus will pass to Ankara. As a matter of fact, President Erdoğan stated that "this corridor will serve peace, security and development, and everyone will win" and rightly asked the countries of the region to support peace. Turkey is also one of the actors that most actively invests in the revival of the Middle Corridor. The fact that it is both a geographical center in trans-Caspian transportation and the linguistic and cultural unity with the Central Asian republics in terms of diplomacy benefit the entire Central Asian Turkish depth.

Turkey also conducts active diplomacy through regional organizations. The **Organization of Turkic States (OTS)** was established with the expansion of the Turkic Council, which signed the Nakhchivan Agreement in 2021, and Azerbaijan played a critical role in this structure. At the 2022 Samarkand Summit, the TRNC was made an observer member, while countries such as Hungary and Uzbekistan emphasized the identity of the Turkic world. The idea of economic, cultural and political integration among the Turkic World gained momentum after the Karabakh victory. Because now the possibility of a "Turkish corridor" has appeared on the map. Azerbaijani President Aliyev often speaks of "reuniting the geographical map of the Turkic world," referring to the importance of Zangezur. This rhetoric, of course, is perceived as a threat to the future in Russia and Iran. Central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan now find this vision, which they previously kept away from, in line with their interests. Because Russia's influence in Central Asia has decreased relatively after the Ukraine war, these states have started to attract Turkey as a balanced partner. In the last OTS meetings, concrete steps such as a common alphabet, youth exchange, and economic integration were brought to the agenda. All these trends show that Turkey is capable of multidimensional power projection in the region: Turkey uses both hard power, soft power and smart power (economic and diplomatic initiatives) together.

Iran: Although the Islamic Republic of Iran is a country with historical claims to influence in the Caucasus, it has always felt limited by the rise of Azerbaijan and the presence of Turkey. Immediately after the war, Iran openly demonstrated its traditional alliance with Armenia: Tehran warned Azerbaijan that "we will not allow the borders to change in the region," and there were claims of military supplies to Yerevan through Iranian territory. Iran's main fear is that its own Azerbaijani Turks, emboldened by Azerbaijan's victory, will indulge in separatist sentiments and that Israel will use Azerbaijan to establish an intelligence/operational base against Iran. Iran also categorically opposed the Zangezur Corridor; because such a corridor would reduce the importance of the only border line connecting Armenia to Iran (Mehri region), and perhaps even isolate Iran from Armenia. Instead, Iran offered Azerbaijan an alternative corridor to Nakhchivan through its own route (a proposal for a road and railway permit from northwestern Iran to Nakhchivan), which Baku kept in the background. However, developments similar to the regime change in Iran have the potential to change this whole equation. During the reign of President Pezeshkiyan, Iran for the first time gave warm messages to the Azerbaijani Turkish identity and also increased diplomatic dialogue with Azerbaijan. Pezeshkian visited Baku in 2025 and called for a "new chapter" between the two countries, during which he recited Turkish poetry and sent greetings to South Azerbaijan, which made headlines both in his home country and in Azerbaijan. Iran's more conciliatory stance was also reflected in its support for the peace process between Azerbaijan and Armenia: Tehran made statements encouraging the parties to peace, emphasizing respect for territorial integrity. But this relative change in Iran is still met with resistance at home. Radical conservatives claim that Pezeshkian "stands close to Turkish nationalism" and that this could divide Iran. On the contrary, Pezeshkian responded by saying, "Giving rights to minorities does not divide the country, it strengthens it." As for Iranian-Russian relations, Moscow has established a multidimensional rapport with Tehran in recent years (partnership in Syria, Iran's supply of drones to Russia in Ukraine, etc.). This partnership also manifested itself in the Caucasus, and both countries kept their distance from the Zangezur Corridor and supported Armenia. However, Pezeshkiyan's Iran may shift to a more balanced line, even if it does not completely break off relations with Russia. For example, Tehran seeks not to sabotage peace between Yerevan and Baku

and to develop economic cooperation with both sides. In this case, Russia's last remaining instrument of influence on Armenia (Iran-Armenia solidarity) may also decrease. In summary, Iran seems to have lost its claim to be the decisive actor in the big game in the Caucasus while struggling with its own problems. This is **noted as a factor** that increases Russia's isolation in the region.

West (US and EU): After the 2020 war, the **US and the European Union** started to take the initiative again in the South Caucasus. **Although the U.S.** kept its distance from the Azerbaijani government on issues such as human rights during the Biden administration, it did not refrain from contributing to the peace process in terms of strategic interests. In particular, Russia's preoccupation with the Ukraine war **gave Washington the opportunity to act as a mediator in the Karabakh issue**. In 2023, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken hosted talks that brought together the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan. In these negotiations held in Washington, the draft articles of the permanent peace agreement were discussed. **The United States is well aware that an agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia would end Russian influence in the region**. Therefore, it is challenging diplomacy. However, since there is a strong Armenian lobby within the United States, attempts to impose sanctions or cut off military aid to Azerbaijan are also seen from time to time in Congress. Despite this, in the geopolitical big picture, **the interests of the United States coincide with the liberation of the Caucasus from dependence on Russia**. As a matter of fact, American analysts predict that once **Trump comes to power again, he will focus on breaking Russian and Iranian influence in the South Caucasus, see the region as a transit base to Central Asia and cooperate with Turkey and Azerbaijan in this direction**.

The European Union, on the other hand, has become the most visible global actor in the region in recent years. In 2021 and 2022, European Council President Charles Michel repeatedly brought Aliyev and Pashinyan together in Brussels and *conducted peace talks under the EU umbrella*. On the one hand, the EU **encourages Armenia's rapprochement with Europe** (Association Agreement, visa facilitation, civil mission, etc.), and on the other hand, **it strengthens energy and trade ties with Azerbaijan**. While Brussels is trying to distance Yerevan from Russia by supporting it economically and politically, it is also careful not to put too much pressure on Baku. The reason behind this is to **win Azerbaijan without offending it** and ultimately to remove it from Russia's sphere of influence. One reason for the EU's growing interest in the region is **its energy and transport projects**. As mentioned above, the EU has signed a gas agreement with Azerbaijan and has also planned investments in the countries along the Middle Corridor route. **Within the scope of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy**, security cooperation opportunities with Azerbaijan are also discussed in the future (if peace is achieved). In fact, **the vision of Europe's access to Central Asia through Turkey-Armenia-Azerbaijan** after peace began to be reflected in EU documents. In summary, the EU **sees the South Caucasus as a geoeconomic and geopolitical opening area** and follows a medium-term strategy to increase its effectiveness.

Military Balance: When it comes to military balance in the region, **the military presence of the great powers** should be understood **as well as** the power comparison of Azerbaijan and Armenia. With the victory of 2020, the Azerbaijani army has become the most experienced and modernized army in the region. High-tech systems such as **the Turkish Bayraktar TB2 UAVs** used in the war gave Azerbaijan the upper hand. After the war, Baku continued to purchase more advanced systems, keeping defense spending at a high level. Rockets capable of deceiving the S-300s and new UCAV models were procured from Turkey. In addition, projects such as the establishment **of UAV production facilities together** with Turkey were announced. The Azerbaijani army is also closely integrated with the Turkish army in terms of personnel training. All this suggests that in a possible re-conflict with Armenia, **Azerbaijan will have the clear advantage**.

The Armenian army, on the other hand, is in the process of recovering from a heavy defeat in 2020. Yerevan, which did not find the help it expected from Russia, has turned to new suppliers such as India in recent years. In 2022 and 2023, it purchased artillery rocket systems, anti-tank missiles and drones from India. There are also allegations that it bought air defense radars from France and UAVs from Iran. Armenia announced a reform plan in 2021 to restructure the army and sought to increase the number of professional soldiers. However, **these efforts are moving slowly because the country's material resources and population** are limited. Moreover, Russia's **102nd Military Offensive in Armenia for the Ukraine war**. It is reported that **he has withdrawn some troops and equipment from the base**. This further undermined Armenia's perception of security. Yerevan, which could not get the support it needed from Russia even as a CSTO ally, officially called on the CSTO for help in the border conflicts with Azerbaijan in September 2022; However, the organization did not go beyond a statement of condemnation. This incident **destroyed the credibility of the CSTO (and therefore Russia) in the eyes of Armenia**.

The Russian military presence in the region continues in 3 ways: **the Russian base in Armenia (about 3 thousand soldiers)**, the Russian border guards stationed on the Armenian-Iranian-Turkish border, and the **1960-strong Russian peacekeeping force in Karabakh**. However, in light of recent developments, the future of these military

assets is uncertain. Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan **made statements implying that the stay of the Russian base** in his country in 2023 no longer provides security. In fact, the Minister of Defense of Armenia said that they do not intend to extend the duration of the base agreement with Russia. If Armenia turns completely towards the West, **it may be on the agenda for Russia to evacuate its base in the medium term**. The peacekeeping force in Karabakh completes its mandate in November 2025 (according to the ceasefire agreement, it will be automatically extended if one of the parties does not object). If the Azerbaijani government resolves the Karabakh conflict with a peace treaty and the Armenian population in the region either integrates or migrates, **it may declare that there is no need for Russian peacekeepers**. In fact, Aliyev closed the status issue in 2023 **by saying, "Armenians living in Karabakh either accept Azerbaijani citizenship or go wherever they want."** Entering 2024, the status of Karabakh Armenians was unclear, but Azerbaijan intended to fully integrate the region. As a matter of fact, the fact that the ECO Summit can be held in Khankendi in 2025 indicates **that Azerbaijani sovereignty has been de facto established in Karabakh**. In this case, the Russian peacekeepers will probably also be withdrawn. **From the point of view of military balance, Turkey's support for Azerbaijan** is a balancing factor. With Turkey's deployment of F-16 jets to Azerbaijan in 2020, there is now a possibility **that the Turkish military presence in the region will become more visible**. For example, if the Nakhichevan or Zangezur corridor is opened, Turkish security units may take part in this route. In summary, **the mechanics of military deterrence in the region** have changed: **Previously, Russia bordered Azerbaijan through Armenia, but now Turkey has become a counterweight to Armenia and even Russia through Azerbaijan**. While this new balance strengthens Azerbaijan's hand, it reduces the possibility of Russia's deterrence.

Turkic World Integration and Future Predictions:

The 44-day victory was a turning point **in the geopolitical imagination of the Turkic world**. Azerbaijan's liberation of Karabakh opened up a future horizon **in which Turkic states could be connected to each other by road**. In this direction, economic integration plans within the Organization of Turkic States gained momentum. **The Zangezur Corridor is thought of as a "Silk Road" vein that will connect not only Azerbaijan and Turkey, but also all Turkic Republics**. In fact, this corridor is called the **"Iron Silk Road of the 21st century" by some circles**. Since countries such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan in Central Asia are also interested in **alternative export routes**, they are making plans to cooperate with Turkey and Azerbaijan in the field of transportation. In 2022, **Turkey-Azerbaijan-Kazakhstan** transport ministers met in Baku and signed a memorandum to remove obstacles on the Middle Corridor. Likewise, there are **coordination studies for the railway connection and Caspian crossings between Turkey and Uzbekistan**. **Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey** have been working in harmony for a long time. In this context, **the concept of integration of the Turkic world** is supported by concrete projects: steps such as common telecommunication infrastructure, visa facilitations, free trade agreements have begun to be taken.

In the predictions for the future, **it is stated that the Organization of Turkic States may turn into an EU-like economic and cultural integration platform**. If the Zangezur Corridor is opened and Armenia is included in this equation with peace, **a new Caucasus-centered cooperation model** may emerge. The **Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) Summit held in Khankendi** is a symbolic milestone in this sense. The summit was attended by the President of Turkey, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Central Asian republics and even Iran. For the first time, the territory of Karabakh **hosted an international diplomatic event**. The issues discussed at this summit (increasing the volume of trade, green energy, transportation networks) show that the countries of the region **are trying to create a common vision** of the future. In his speech at the summit, President Erdoğan touched upon many issues from climate change to the Palestinian issue and the situation in Syria, saying **that "solidarity in Syria and Afghanistan is a must" and** emphasized that the region should be handled with an understanding that is not only limited to the Caucasus but also includes the Middle East and South Asia. **Drawing attention to the security and development needs of Afghanistan and emphasizing brotherhood and solidarity by mentioning the terrorist attacks in Pakistan** actually show **that Turkey reads the region through a broad geopolitical lens**. Platforms such as ECO also serve as a bridge between the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Middle East (Iran) and South Asia (Pakistan, Afghanistan). Turkey and Azerbaijan are the pioneers of projects **that can be an alternative to China's Belt Road and serve as a bridge between the West and the East** in this vast geography. With the support of the US and the EU, if this vision is realized, **Russia's monopolistic position in Eurasia will be shaken**.

As a prediction for the future, we can say that in the next few years, **depending on the terms of the peace agreement to be signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia and the fate of the Russian peacekeepers**, a new era may begin in the South Caucasus. If a peace agreement is signed and Armenia is persuaded to deal with the Zangezur Corridor, **a comprehensive economic development and cooperation move may come in the region**. In this scenario, **Armenia can also get out of its isolation position and integrate into the projects**, normalize its relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan and get rid of the embargoes. Thus, **decades of hostility can be replaced by a welfare-based order**. This will come at the expense of **further Russian exclusion from the region**, because if

peace comes, there will be no need for Russian peacekeepers and Yerevan will not depend on Moscow for security. **In the alternative scenario**, if peace is not achieved or there is no agreement on Zangezur, there may be **a risk of a new conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia**. But the trajectory so far suggests that the path to peace is more predominant.

As a result, **the geopolitical landscape that took shape after the 44-day Karabakh War has revealed a picture** in which regional actors follow a more independent and multifaceted policy, **the** Turkic world unites around the goal of integration, the West returns to the region **and** Russia's influence declines. **Energy and transportation lines** have been at the center of this struggle and have become levers that have not only economic but also geopolitical consequences. The recent tensions between Azerbaijan and Russia are small parts of this bigger picture – **the struggle for influence and dominance in the Caucasus** is sometimes manifested in a corridor dispute, sometimes in the cancellation of a cultural event, sometimes in conflicts in cyberspace. Whether this silent but deep rivalry **will result in a peaceful order of cooperation for the peoples of the region or whether it will lead to new tensions** will depend on the diplomacy and leadership vision of the coming period. However, at the point reached today, the **balance of power in the South Caucasus** is changing in favor of Azerbaijan and its allies, **and Moscow's traditional dominance is being shaken**. Managing this change requires attention and care for both the countries of the region and the international community. **The establishment of lasting peace in the region** will only be possible with an inclusive approach that takes into account the mutual interests and sensitivities of all parties. To this end, it is most reasonable for **Turkey, Azerbaijan and other partners to continue their efforts for dialogue and cooperation**, while **for Russia to push for reconciliation instead of confrontational methods**. As a result, if the vision of common gain can prevail in the big picture, **projects such as the Zangezur Corridor have the potential to become not only an economic corridor but also a peace corridor**. The realization of this vision **could enable the Caucasus to become a basin of stability that serves the prosperity and peace of the peoples of the region rather than foreign power competition for the first time in decades**.

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