

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36719/2706-6185/55/69-74>

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## **Strategic Significance of Karabakh-Based Transport Routes in Azerbaijan's Global Transport Integration**

### **Abstract**

This article examines the strategic role of the Karabakh transport corridors in strengthening Azerbaijan's position as a transit country. The large-scale infrastructure projects implemented following the liberation of Karabakh—the Zangezur Corridor, Fuzuli, Lachin, and Zangilan airports, new roads, and railways—have significantly increased the country's international transport and transit capacity. The article also provides a comprehensive analysis of the economic, social, and geopolitical impacts of these projects. The operation of the Karabakh corridors not only strengthens transit revenues and export opportunities, but also carries strategic importance in terms of regional cooperation, attracting investment, and enhancing Azerbaijan's international reputation.

The research considers both regional and international contexts, analysing the interests of actors such as the Organisation of Turkic States, the European Union, China, and Russia in the region. The article also highlights the role of Karabakh transport corridors in ensuring economic security, promoting socio-economic integration, and strengthening stability in the region.

The article offers practical recommendations for shaping state policy and preparing international cooperation and investment strategies. This research demonstrates that the Karabakh transport corridors are not merely a project of regional importance, but also a significant tool for realising Azerbaijan's long-term strategic interests.

**Keywords:** *Karabakh, Zangezur Corridor, transport corridors, infrastructure, regional development*

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## **Qarabağ nəqliyyat marşrutlarının Azərbaycanın qlobal nəqliyyat şəbəkəsinə inteqrasiyasında strateji rolu**

### **Xülasə**

Bu məqalədə Azərbaycanın beynəlxalq tranzit ölkə kimi mövqeyinin möhkəmləndirilməsində Qarabağ regionunda formalaşan nəqliyyat dəhlizlərinin strateji əhəmiyyəti araşdırılır. Qarabağın işğaldan azad edilməsindən sonra icra olunan irimiqyaslı infrastruktur layihələri — Zəngəzur nəqliyyat dəhlizi, Füzuli, Zəngilan və Laçın beynəlxalq hava limanlarının inşası, eləcə də yeni avtomobil və dəmir yolu xətlərinin yaradılması — ölkənin regional və qlobal nəqliyyat sistemlərinə inteqrasiyasını əhəmiyyətli dərəcədə genişləndirmişdir.

Tədqiqat çərçivəsində bu layihələrin iqtisadi səmərəliliyi, sosial təsirləri və geosiyasi nəticələri kompleks şəkildə təhlil olunur. Qarabağ nəqliyyat dəhlizlərinin fəaliyyəti təkcə tranzit gəlirlərinin və ixrac potensialının artmasına deyil, eyni zamanda regional əməkdaşlığın dərinləşməsinə, xarici investisiyaların cəlbinə və Azərbaycanın beynəlxalq mövqeyinin güclənməsinə xidmət edir.

Məqalədə regional və beynəlxalq müstəvidə Türk Dövlətləri Təşkilatı, Avropa İttifaqı, Çin və Rusiya kimi əsas aktorların maraqları nəzərə alınmışdır. Nəticə etibarilə, Qarabağ nəqliyyat dəhlizlərinin iqtisadi təhlükəsizliyin təmin olunmasında, sosial-iqtisadi inteqrasiyanın sürətlənməsində və regionda dayanıqlı sabitliyin formalaşmasında mühüm rol oynadığı əsaslandırılır.

*Açar sözlər: Qarabağ, Zəngəzur dəhlizi, nəqliyyat dəhlizləri, infrastruktur, regional inkişaf*

## Introduction

Azerbaijan's geopolitical position has made it an important transit hub in the Caucasus region for centuries. Located at the crossroads of major routes connecting Europe and Asia, Azerbaijan has historically been one of the main centers of the Silk Road. In modern times, this position has played a role not only economically but also geopolitically and strategically as one of the main factors determining the country's development trajectory. Particularly following the liberation of Karabakh from occupation in 2020, opportunities have arisen to open new transport corridors in the region, further strengthening Azerbaijan's status as a transit country.

Large-scale restoration and construction projects underway in the Karabakh economic zone are not limited to improving social welfare and facilitating the return of internally displaced persons. One of the main goals here is to make Azerbaijan a leading logistics hub in the region. In this context, the airports being built in Karabakh (Fuzuli, Zangilan, Lachin), new road and railway lines, and the strategically important Zangezur Corridor project are particularly significant. The Zangezur Corridor is considered one of the important segments of the Middle Corridor connecting Azerbaijan to Europe and Central Asia via Turkey. Therefore, Azerbaijan's role as a regional transit and transportation hub is expanding significantly.

On the other hand, in the modern global economic environment, transit opportunities are considered important for the economic security and international cooperation of states. In particular, it is necessary to establish reliable, secure, and sustainable transportation networks for the efficient transport of energy resources and goods. The infrastructure projects implemented in Karabakh form the basis not only for Azerbaijan's internal economic development but also for the expansion of regional and international trade volumes and the creation of new cooperation platforms. The aim of this study is to demonstrate the economic and strategic opportunities created by the Zangezur Corridor for Azerbaijan and the Turkic world in general. Due to the nature of the subject, the study was conducted primarily on the basis of an analytical and descriptive approach. During the research process, existing scientific sources, official state documents, expert opinions, and reports from international organizations were used. Based on this information, the economic, political, and logistical importance of the Zangezur Corridor has been explained in stages. The comparative analysis method was also used in the study. That is, the capacity of the Zangezur Corridor was compared with other international transport routes, such as the North-South Corridor and the Middle Corridor. A systematic approach was also applied in the study. Thus, the subject has been evaluated not only from an economic perspective, but also from social, geopolitical, and security aspects. This has made it possible to analyze the subject in a broader context. As a result, it has been determined that the Zangezur Corridor not only increases economic cooperation between Azerbaijan and Turkey, but also acts as an important factor in strengthening the overall integration of the Turkic world.

## Research

The position of states as transit countries is one of the important factors determining their roles in the international economic system. The concept of a transit country generally refers to states through whose territory goods, energy resources, and passengers are transported. The advantage of such countries depends not only on their geographical location but also on their existing infrastructure and institutional foundations. The establishment of relations between individual countries is directly dependent on the transport network and the operational and safe implementation of cargo transportation (Abbasov, 2023). In this context, the existence of transport corridors is of great importance not only for economic development but also for the formation of geopolitical balance.

Transport corridors expand states' foreign trade relations, accelerate export and import processes, increase transit revenues, and deepen integration within the region. Azerbaijan has long played an important role in both the export of energy resources and the transportation of international trade cargo.

The liberation of Karabakh from occupation has further expanded Azerbaijan's transit capacity and created conditions for the formation of new transport corridors. The new infrastructure projects that emerged after the liberation of Karabakh are particularly important in strengthening Azerbaijan's capacity as a transit country. One of the main objectives here is to connect the country's logistics and transportation network with other countries in the region. First and foremost, attention should be paid to the Zangezur Corridor. This corridor connects the main part of Azerbaijan with the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, as well as providing access to Turkey and, from there, to Europe (“Türk dünyası yenidən Zəngəzur dəhlizi vasitəsilə birləşəcək”, 2021). This route is an extension of both the East-West and North-South transport corridors. In fact, the Zangezur Corridor further strengthens Azerbaijan's role in the Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route). As a result of the use of the Zangezur Corridor, Azerbaijan will establish a direct railway connection with the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, which will create long-term stability in transportation (Alakbarov, 2022).

The airports opened in Karabakh in recent years are also important factors strengthening Azerbaijan's transit position. Fuzuli International Airport is already operational, connecting the region to the international air network along with Baku. The airports being built in Zangilan and Lachin serve to increase both economic and tourism potential. The importance of these airports is not limited to passenger transportation; they also form a strategic base for cargo transportation.

In addition, projects being carried out on railways and highways are making the country's transportation system more flexible and competitive. New roads are being built in the directions of Baku–Fuzuli, Horadiz–Agband, Zangilan, and Kelbecer. These roads connect the region with the country's main economic centers while also creating alternative routes for international cargo transportation. The rapid implementation of infrastructure projects is also creating conditions for attracting foreign investment to Azerbaijan's transit and logistics sector.

The opening of new transport corridors in Karabakh is of great importance not only for Azerbaijan's internal economic development but also for the interests of regional and global powers. The development of Karabakh's infrastructure has special value in terms of regional cooperation, economic competition, and geopolitical balance. First and foremost, it is necessary to focus on the interests of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). The opening of the Zangezur Corridor provides a direct land connection between the Turkic republics of Central Asia and Azerbaijan and Turkey (Eurasian Research Institute, n.d.). This allows for an increase in trade volume and strengthens mutual dependence in the energy and logistics sectors. Diversifying access routes to Europe is important for countries such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, and the route passing through Karabakh is of strategic importance in this regard. On the other hand, these corridors are also of great importance to the European Union (EU). Azerbaijan's status as both an energy exporter and a transit country is attracting even more attention from Europe. In this sense, the transportation infrastructure being built in Karabakh provides the EU with access to Central Asian markets and the opportunity to establish relations with China.

For Russia, the management of transport routes in the South Caucasus is of particular strategic importance. Moscow aims to maintain its influence in the region and is therefore closely monitoring the process of opening the Karabakh corridors. One of the most important issues for Russia is that the region does not slip completely out of its control and that alternative routes do not conflict with the country's interests.

China is also a relevant party in this process. Beijing is working on alternative routes connecting Europe and Asia within the framework of the “One Belt, One Road” initiative. The new corridors created in Karabakh are creating new opportunities for China in both freight transport and the diversification of strategic trade routes.

Furthermore, Armenia's position in this context is also noteworthy. The Zangezur Corridor is important for Armenia and Azerbaijan in terms of reestablishing relations and achieving peace (Aloğlu, 2024). Armenia, which has severed its ties with the region for years, is currently hesitant about the Zangezur Corridor. However, from an economic perspective, Armenia can also benefit from this project. The new roads that will be opened can attract the country to regional economic projects, increase trade volume, and improve the socio-economic situation.

Thus, the territories that were previously under occupation and excluded from economic circulation for many years are rapidly contributing to Azerbaijan's national economic system. This process creates conditions for the creation of new job opportunities, the development of local entrepreneurship, and the improvement of social security in the region (Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2021).

From this perspective, the importance of regional and international relations, which form the basis of the corridor's future operation, should be particularly emphasized (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, 2022). If this corridor is opened, Azerbaijan will have a direct land connection with Turkey and will also become one of the shortest and safest routes connecting Central Asian countries to Europe. The opening of this route will add value to both the “Central Corridor” project and the “One Belt, One Road” initiative.

The new transport corridors established in Karabakh significantly strengthen Azerbaijan's economic development and economic security. First and foremost, from an economic perspective, the new corridors not only increase transit revenues for the country but also reduce export and import costs. For example, new roads connecting Baku with Nakhchivan, Zangezur, and Central Asia shorten trade routes, minimize logistics costs, and enable faster access to international markets for Azerbaijani products. This, in turn, allows for more efficient use of Azerbaijan's economic resources in the long term (Dadaşlı & Valiyev, 2024).

Furthermore, the new transport corridors are strengthening Azerbaijan's regional stability and geopolitical position. The Zangezur Corridor, which passes through Karabakh, not only serves as a transit route but also creates a platform for cooperation among the countries of the region. Trade and energy exchange between Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Central Asian countries is carried out more effectively through this corridor. This leads not only to economic but also to political strengthening of relations (Kuchins & Mankoff, 2016). It should be noted that the opening of the corridors plays an important role in securing Azerbaijan's national interests in terms of strategic security. The corridors serve to protect the country's sovereignty and contribute to the stabilization of the military-political balance in the region. Attracting foreign investment and integrating into international transportation projects further strengthens Azerbaijan's position and increases its geopolitical weight (World Bank, 2021). At the same time, the Karabakh corridors create new opportunities for international cooperation. These projects increase the speed and security of freight transport between Europe and Asia while promoting regional economic integration. Thus, Azerbaijan not only ensures its own economic security but also contributes to strengthening regional integration, cooperation, and stability.

In conclusion, the opening of the corridors creates various important advantages for Azerbaijan. First, economic advantage: increased transit cargo transportation and export opportunities strengthen the country's economic income. Second, geopolitical advantage: Azerbaijan strengthens its position as the strategic center of the region and increases its influence in international cooperation platforms. Third, social and regional development: the restoration of infrastructure in the Karabakh territories serves to revitalize the local economy, create new job opportunities, and improve social welfare (Kashiyeva, 2021). In addition, the Karabakh corridors serve as a platform for regional cooperation. International actors such as the Organization of Turkic States, the European Union, and China use these routes to increase trade volume, ensure the efficient transport of energy resources, and strengthen economic interdependence. This allows Azerbaijan to both protect its national interests and promote stability and integration in the region.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the infrastructure projects implemented in Karabakh not only serve transit and economic purposes but also strengthen Azerbaijan's strategic and geopolitical position and contribute significantly to the region's development and stability. These projects not only protect the country's national interests but also enhance Azerbaijan's prestige in international cooperation platforms and lay the foundation for establishing more sustainable economic and political relations in the future. The study highlights that a coordinated policy at both the regional and international levels is essential for the Zangezur Corridor to begin operating at full capacity.

*To this end, the following recommendations are presented:*

1. Infrastructure modernization: It is important to improve the quality of existing transportation projects in Karabakh and bring railways and highways up to international standards. This will ensure transit speed and safety.
2. Regional and international cooperation: Azerbaijan should further develop cooperation with neighboring countries and international organizations through the Zangezur Corridor and other transportation routes. This will increase economic returns and strengthen our geopolitical position.
3. Implementation of digital transportation and logistics technologies: The implementation of intelligent transportation systems and cargo management technologies in new infrastructure projects will increase the efficiency of transit processes.
4. Economic security: Since the Karabakh corridors are of strategic importance to Azerbaijan, comprehensive security and risk assessment systems should be established. This will help reduce both internal and regional risks.
5. Socio-economic integration: New corridors and infrastructure projects should create job opportunities for the local population and support the development of the agriculture and tourism sectors. This will both strengthen social stability and ensure the region's sustainable development (Yıldırım, 2025).

Thus, the development of Karabakh transport corridors strengthens Azerbaijan's position as a transit country, enhances its economic security, and serves to deepen regional integration. These projects are of strategic importance both in terms of protecting national interests and international cooperation. The development of Karabakh's infrastructure will further strengthen Azerbaijan's role as one of the leading states in the region, both economically and geopolitically.

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Received: 05.08.2025

Accepted: 14.12.2025