

<https://doi.org/10.30546/3134-5778.101.2026.0010>

## ZANGEZUR CORRIDOR AND STRATEGIC LEASING: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON 21ST CENTURY GEOPOLITICS

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the Zangezur Corridor agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia as a historical continuation of contemporary geopolitics. Rather than treating the Zangezur issue as an isolated event, the study offers a critical analysis through the lens of state institutional memory and the recurring nature of geopolitical dynamics. The analysis employs a multi-method design that combines findings derived from a qualitative assessment of current developments with a comparative historical approach based on John Stuart Mill's "most similar systems" method.

As a historical case, the article explores how 19th-century Britain acquired Cyprus (1878) and Hong Kong (1898) through strategic leasing from declining empires of the period, highlighting similarities and differences between these precedents and the dynamics of the Zangezur Corridor. The current trajectory of this emerging development is further examined through a qualitative analysis of information compiled from international press sources. Finally, all findings are synthesized to evaluate potential future scenarios for the Zangezur Corridor. The study argues that the Zangezur Corridor agreement is not merely a commercial project but a complex geostrategic move with the potential to reshape the global power structure.

**Keywords:** Zangezur Corridor, Strategic Leasing, Comparative Analysis, Geopolitics, Institutional Memory, Great Power Rivalry, Foreign Policy.

### Introduction

The Zangezur Corridor – a 42-kilometer transport link connecting Azerbaijan's mainland with the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic through Armenian territory—entered a new phase with the signing of a historic agreement in Washington on 8 August 2025. Initially

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known as the Zangezur Corridor, the project has since been renamed the “*Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity*.” Proposed by the United States in July 2025 and implemented the following month, this arrangement envisions the corridor being managed by a U.S.-led consortium. This development has transformed the infrastructure initiative from a bilateral issue between Azerbaijan and Armenia into a matter of global strategic significance. Hosted by U.S. President Donald Trump at the White House, the agreement signed by Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan brought an end to 35 years of conflict. The strategic significance of the *Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP)* extends well beyond its geographic value, forming a critical component of the Middle Corridor trade route that links China, Central Asia, and Europe via Türkiye. This positioning places the project at the intersection of U.S. – China strategic competition, the decline of Russia’s traditional influence in the region, Iran’s growing concerns over isolation, and Türkiye’s aspirations to serve as a bridge across Eurasia.

This study aims to provide a geopolitical analysis of the project initially conceived as the Zangezur Corridor and now implemented as TRIPP, examining the shifting strategic calculations of all key stakeholders and assessing the implications of this transformation for regional and global power structures.

### **Methodological Approach and Use of Sources**

This study adopts a multi-stage, multi-method research design. The primary analytical framework is comparative historical analysis, built upon John Stuart Mill’s contributions to the logic of causal inference and employing the “most similar systems” design. Within this framework, the cases of Cyprus (1878) and Hong Kong (1898) – which display a high degree of similarity in independent variables – are examined to isolate the critical factors that produced different outcomes for the strategic leasing model under comparable contextual conditions.

In the second stage, a qualitative content analysis was conducted to complement the historical analysis of the first section and connect it to contemporary developments. At this stage, publications and official statements from international media outlets concerning the Zangezur Corridor agreement were compiled and examined through a cross-referencing method. This approach enabled a deeper understanding of the dynamics extending from the historical context to the present and enriched the analysis with up-to-date empirical data.

In the final stage of the study, the findings from the first two sections were integrated and evaluated using the methodological triangulation technique. This approach synthesized the shared outcomes of the comparative historical analysis and the contemporary content analysis, allowing for a comprehensive assessment of the long-term geopolitical and strategic implications of the Zangezur Corridor agreement and the formulation of future scenarios. In this way, the article's arguments are firmly grounded in both historical and current empirical evidence.

### **Case Selection**

For the historical comparative analysis, the cases of Cyprus's lease to Britain in 1878 and Hong Kong's lease to Britain in 1898 were selected as the primary units of analysis. This sampling choice is grounded in the logic of John Stuart Mill's "most similar systems" design, which aims to compare cases that differ in the dependent variable (the outcome under investigation) while remaining as similar as possible in the independent variables (the potential causes). Although the selected cases exhibit certain differences, they demonstrate a high degree of consistency with respect to the key variables relevant to the central research question. In both instances, the leasing process took place between the global hegemonic power of the period – the United Kingdom – and empires weakened by internal crises and military-economic decline, namely the Ottoman Empire and the Qing Dynasty. Both strategic leases were legitimized as a form of temporary protection for weaker states against external threats. These contextual similarities allow for stronger causal inferences regarding the study's central research question. Other potential cases of strategic leasing were excluded from the sample due to significant deviations from the primary variables identified above. For instance, Guantanamo Bay arose not from economic crises or temporary protection between two sovereign states but as a consequence of war. Similarly, the Panama Canal Zone does not reflect the dynamic of leasing from an already weakened empire, while the Wei-hai-wei case occurred as part of a more complex balance-of-power strategy. This strategic case selection aims to maximize the validity of the findings and the strength of causal inferences.

### **1. Study Objectives and Scope**

This study aims to analyze the role of the strategic leasing model in contemporary geopolitics and its potential impact on 21st-century great power competition through the lens of the Zangezur Corridor agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Within this framework, the article is structured around three primary research questions:

How has the strategic leasing model functioned historically, and what have been its outcomes?

□ What are the current strategic calculations and interests of regional and global stakeholders in the context of the Zangezur Corridor?

□ When historical precedents are applied to contemporary dynamics, what potential future scenarios can be anticipated for the Zangezur Corridor?

Rather than treating the Zangezur issue as an isolated incident, this study positions it as a historical phenomenon resulting from the institutional memory of states and the tendency of geopolitical dynamics to produce similar responses in comparable situations. Accordingly, the selected cases are examined to highlight both the similarities and differences between these historical precedents and the contemporary dynamics of the Zangezur Corridor. This approach argues that the matter is not merely a commercial transport project but a move with profound geostrategic implications. The study does not aim to cast suspicion or judgment on any stakeholder, including the United States; rather, the analysis and evaluations presented are based entirely on an objective examination of current developments and available data. Given the recent nature of the agreement and the limited availability of official information, the qualitative analysis primarily relies on data compiled from international media sources. This multi-method analysis seeks to demonstrate that the Zangezur Corridor agreement is not solely a local issue but a complex event with the potential to influence global power structures, facilitating an understanding of both its short-term and long-term strategic effects.

### **1.1. Historical Examples of U.S. Strategy**

As historians have long recognized, states possess a form of institutional memory. When a state successfully implements a strategy, it tends to reuse the same approach when encountering similar conditions. Moreover, when faced with comparable geographic and strategic circumstances, states often replicate methods that proved effective in the past. For instance, Russia's southern expansion strategy, initially employed in the 18th century to gain access to the Black Sea, was repeated in the 19th century in the Balkans, in the 20th century in the Caucasus, and most recently in Ukraine. Similarly, the United States transformed its understanding of hegemony in Latin America, first articulated in the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, into a policy of creating "spheres of influence" in the Pacific during the 20th century and, today, on a global scale. France's influence in Africa, established from the 19th century onward, continues to this day within the framework of the Françafrique system. As Robert Jervis emphasizes in his theories on perception and learning in international relations, states

systematically learn from past experiences and apply these lessons in comparable situations (Jervis, 1976). Similarly, as Richard Neustadt and Ernest May have shown, policymakers use historical comparisons not only to justify their policies but also to analyze the current situation and evaluate future options (Neustadt & May, 1986). This approach is by no means limited to academics; diplomats, statesmen, and political thinkers have frequently emphasized the strategic value of historical knowledge. Winston Churchill, offering advice to James Humes, famously stated: “Study history, study history. In history lie all the secrets of statecraft” (Humes, 2020). Likewise, the British historian John Robert Seeley described history as “the school of statesmanship” (Seeley, 1883). Mustafa Kemal Atatürk expressed a similar perspective, asserting that the most important lessons from history can be drawn by examining the causes and factors that shape the establishment, development, and dissolution of states. In this context, studying the rise and fall of the Ottoman Empire is vital for cultivating strategic foresight for the future (Atatürk, cited in İnân, 1959, p. 264).

Building on this, history clearly demonstrates that the strategy of entering a region as a “tenant” to expand a sphere of influence is by no means new. This method was pioneered by the British, and from the 20th century onward, the United States refined and applied similar tactics in line with its own geopolitical objectives. A comparative historical analysis reveals striking similarities between the U.S. initiative in Zangezur and past cases of strategic leasing. The British model of strategic leasing was a sophisticated approach that capitalized on the territorial vulnerabilities of weakened states. At its core, this strategy was rooted in a purely pragmatic understanding of foreign policy. The model relied on a simple yet effective logic: by offering “protection” to countries facing financial or security crises, strategically important territories could be controlled through long-term leases. The success of this method lay in the clever concealment of long-term objectives behind ostensibly “temporary” and “technical” arrangements. The British never explicitly declared, “We will annex this land.” Instead, they invoked legitimate-sounding reasons such as “ensuring security,” “protecting trade routes,” and “maintaining stability.” Over time, these “temporary” arrangements became permanent, the leased territories were integrated into the British system, and eventually acquired the status of formally recognized British territories. The contemporary reflection of this institutional memory is evident in the U.S. strategy of establishing a global “hub and spoke” system. This system aims to exert asymmetric influence over global trade flows by controlling critical transit points. The Zangezur Corridor represents the missing link in the Eurasian segment of this system.

## 1.2. The Cyprus Experience

It is, of course, impossible to claim a perfect overlap between the Cyprus case and the TRIPP agreement. Significant differences exist between the conditions of the 19th-century colonial era and the framework of 21st-century international law. However, the primary reason for examining this case lies in the potential replication of Britain's "strategic leasing under the pretext of temporary protection" model within TRIPP. In both instances, the hegemonic power gained control over strategically critical territories from states in a weakened position in exchange for security guarantees, with this control showing a tendency to become permanent over time. The Cyprus experience serves as a historical example of how arrangements initially presented as "temporary" can evolve into lasting dominion.

Following the 1877–78 Russo-Turkish War, the Ottoman Empire faced a severe financial crisis, creating a critical window of opportunity for Britain's long-planned Eastern Mediterranean strategy. Britain's policy underwent a significant shift, particularly after 1878. Citing the Treaty of San Stefano's disruption of the balance in the Balkans and Anatolia, Britain abandoned its traditional stance of supporting Ottoman territorial integrity and pursued a policy aimed at seizing strategic Ottoman territories to secure the colonial routes to India (Günay, 2007, p. 116). As the Ottoman government became financially incapable of paying the 300 million gold francs owed to Russia, Britain capitalized on this weakness. Research based on British Foreign Office documents indicates that London's plan regarding Cyprus predated the Ottoman-Russian crisis. Britain's objectives – to strengthen its position in the Eastern Mediterranean, monitor developments in Syria and Iraq, and secure the route to India – rendered Cyprus a strategically critical target (Sonyel, 1978, p. 738).

Lord Salisbury's strategic assessments clearly highlighted the geopolitical importance of Cyprus. He argued that the Ottoman Empire required a strong ally to maintain its territorial integrity in Asia, and that Britain was the only power capable of fulfilling this role. However, Salisbury identified two conditions for Britain to assume this responsibility: the implementation of administrative reforms in the Asian provinces and the establishment of a British base near Anatolia (Sonyel, 1978, p. 735). Within this strategic framework, Britain offered to take over the administration of Cyprus under the legitimate pretext of "protecting Ottoman territories from the Russian threat." The Cyprus Convention, signed on 4 June 1878, presents a structure comparable to that of the TRIPP agreement. British diplomatic pressure was intense: Ambassador Layard gave Sultan Abdülhamid only 48 hours to respond. Sultan Abdülhamid ultimately agreed to cede the administration of Cyprus to Britain in exchange for

security guarantees against Russia. The mechanism of the agreement comprised three key elements: Ottoman sovereignty would legally continue, Britain would exercise full administrative control, and the island's annual surplus revenue would be transferred to the Ottoman treasury. The text of the treaty stipulated that Cyprus would be placed under British occupation and administration to enable the Sultan to fulfill the obligations assumed by Britain (Sonyel, 1978, p. 725). This arrangement, much like TRIPP, allowed the hegemonic power to exercise de facto control while preserving formal sovereignty of the local state, thereby maintaining legitimacy under international law.

Crucially, although the agreement was initially presented as a “temporary” arrangement, Britain implemented lasting structural changes on the island. Through this arrangement, Britain secured a strategically valuable base for the Suez Canal and the route to India, while also leveraging the Armenian issue to advance its interests and position itself as a key actor in international politics (Günay, 2007, p. 117). Over the course of thirty-six years, British administration became entrenched, the legal system was reformed, and the island was economically integrated into the Imperial system. When the Ottoman Empire entered World War I on Germany's side in 1914, Britain unilaterally annulled the agreement and formally annexed Cyprus on 5 November 1914, a natural culmination of this transformation. Britain issued a Royal Proclamation to formally incorporate the island into the Empire and administer it as a colony (Sonyel, 1978, p. 741). Over the thirty-six-year period, the Ottoman capacity to reclaim the island had been systematically eroded, and local structures were adapted to the British system. History, as demonstrated by the Cyprus experience, clearly illustrates how leasing agreements initiated under the pretext of “temporary protection” can evolve into permanent territorial control.

### **1.3. The Hong Kong Case**

The most notable difference between the Hong Kong case and TRIPP lies in the contrast between colonial-era practices and the frameworks of modern international agreements. However, the reason for analyzing this case is that the 99-year lease period in both agreements reflects a similar strategic calculation. The British negotiators' characterization of this duration as “sufficient” suggests that long-term leasing was consciously designed as a tool for gradual transformation. The Hong Kong experience demonstrates how a nearly century-long period of control can permanently alter regional structures, why a 99-year term was considered “adequate” for a generation to fully adapt to a different system, and how such long-term arrangements ultimately create dependencies that are difficult to reverse.

In 1898, following China's concessions to Germany, Russia, and France, Britain demanded additional territory under the pretext of Hong Kong's defense and security. Through the Hong Kong Convention on the Extension of Territory, signed on 9 June 1898, Britain leased the New Territories, along with 235 islands, for 99 years without payment. During this period, Britain implemented a comprehensive transformation program: the English legal system was established, English-language education became mandatory, the pound sterling was introduced as the currency, and British commercial regulations were enforced. British negotiator Sir Claude MacDonald noted that, although he initially sought a permanent transfer, he was persuaded that the 99-year lease "seemed sufficient" (Great Britain, 1898). By the time the lease expired in 1997, Hong Kong had developed legal, economic, and social structures entirely distinct from the rest of China. This divergence necessitated the implementation of the "One Country, Two Systems" formula and remains the basis for ongoing political tensions today.

## **2. Motivations Behind the U.S. Strategic Move**

### **2.1. The 99-Year Lease Framework**

In Cyprus, Britain established full administrative control to secure strategic maritime routes, while in Hong Kong it implemented systematic cultural and economic transformations over a 99-year period to exert influence against Chinese authority. In the TRIPP agreement, similar considerations regarding duration (99 years) and method (strategic leasing under the pretext of security) are evident. However, the potential gains for the United States differ significantly from those in historical examples. The Zangezur Corridor, unlike Hong Kong, is not a densely populated area where cultural hegemony could be established, nor is it an isolated island like Cyprus where full sovereignty could be exercised. Yet, in commercial terms, it holds far greater potential than either historical case: an annual trade flow capacity of \$50–100 billion and opportunities to reduce Europe's dependence on Russian energy. Strategically, the U.S. could gain control over a critical chokepoint in Eurasia, counter China's Belt and Road Initiative, encircle Iran from the north, and limit Russia's influence in the South Caucasus – achieving both regional and global strategic objectives.

The recent manifestation of this process unfolded as follows: in July 2025, U.S. Ambassador to Türkiye Tom Barrack announced that the United States proposed the operation of approximately 32 kilometers of the Zangezur Corridor for 99 years through a private American logistics firm (Forbes, 2025; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2025; Caspian News, 2025). On paper, this proposal aims to balance Azerbaijan's demand for

uninterrupted access to Nakhchivan with Armenia's sovereignty concerns through a neutral, technically managed operational model. According to analysts at *Forbes*, the initiative carries an annual trade flow potential of \$50–100 billion and could reduce Europe's dependence on Russian energy supplies by 10–15% (Forbes, 2025).



Map 1: The Zangezur Corridor (Source: CNN Türk)

Regarding regional reactions, international observers note that neither Baku nor Ankara initially issued an official response to the U.S. proposal, although both capitals reportedly expressed reservations about any external oversight mechanisms. It is emphasized that Azerbaijan, in particular, would not accept a role for Armenian forces in corridor security and remains cautious about third-party interventions (Middle East Eye, 2025; JAM News, 2025; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2025).

The period when the proposal became public coincided almost exactly with the Aliyev-Pashinyan summit held in Abu Dhabi on 10 July 2025, which marked the first direct bilateral meeting without the mediation of major powers (Al Jazeera, 2025; Jamestown Foundation, 2025). The Caucasus Strategic Studies Center assessed that the Trump administration's proposal redirected regional attention back to the South Caucasus and influenced the existing

negotiation dynamics (Oktay, 2025). This U.S. approach is viewed as a strategic initiative aimed at expanding its geopolitical influence in the South Caucasus while limiting Russian and Iranian influence (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2025).

Following these developments, on 8 August 2025, a comprehensive peace agreement was signed in Washington under the auspices of U.S. President Donald Trump between Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan (White House, 2025). The agreement grants the United States a 99-year concession to operate and secure the Zangezur Corridor, officially designating it as the “Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity” (TRIPP). Key principles include respect for the sovereignty of both parties and granting Armenia and Azerbaijan joint decision-making authority within the corridor. The rationale behind the U.S. initiative is based on enhancing the security of regional transportation and trade routes while reducing Europe’s dependence on Russian energy supplies. Turkey’s position generally views the corridor’s opening as a strategic gain, although concerns persist that granting operational control to the U.S. could limit its own regional influence.

## **2.2. U.S. Strategic Motivations**

TRIPP emerges as a strategy informed by lessons from historical examples, yet adapted to the demands of 21st-century geopolitical competition. The tendency of states to learn from past experiences and replicate successful strategies in their foreign policy behavior is well established. As Robert Jervis emphasizes in his theories of perception and misperception, states systematically draw lessons from past experiences and apply them when faced with similar circumstances (Jervis, 1976). In this context, the U.S.’s intense interest in the Zangezur Corridor can be interpreted as a 21st-century manifestation of Washington’s historical policy of strategic leasing and control over critical transit points. By securing 99-year operational rights over this 43-kilometer corridor through the August 2025 agreement, the United States is effectively implementing a “contemporary version” of the model the British applied in Cyprus and Hong Kong during the 19th century.

The renaming of the Zangezur Corridor as the “Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity” suggests that the project constitutes a central element of U.S. strategic vision not only regionally but also on a global scale. As Neustadt and May note in their work on the use of historical analogies, decision-makers systematically rely on historical comparisons when analyzing current circumstances and evaluating future options (Neustadt & May, 1986).

From this perspective, analyzing U.S. motivations regarding Zangezur along three principal axes provides a comprehensive picture of Washington's broader Eurasian strategy.

### **2.2.1. Limiting Russian Influence**

In the post – Cold War era, a core element of U.S. strategy toward the former Soviet space has been to prevent Russia from establishing regional hegemony. As Brzezinski emphasizes in *The Grand Chessboard*, control over Eurasia is key to global dominance, and preventing Russia's resurgence in this region is an indispensable aspect of American strategy (Brzezinski, 1997). The Zangezur Corridor represents a tangible implementation of this strategy in the South Caucasus.

The strategic gap created by Russia's military engagement in Ukraine has provided the U.S. with an opportunity to establish permanent alternatives within Russia's historical sphere of influence. Since the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, shifts in regional power dynamics have called into question Russia's traditional role as a mediator. The increase in trade volumes along the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, known as the Middle Corridor, between 2021 and 2024 reflects regional actors' pursuit of alternatives to transit routes under Russian control.

The U.S. plan to manage the corridor by specifically excluding Russia and instead placing control in the hands of American commercial logistics firms reflects a broader objective of creating a multipolar regional order. To understand the geopolitical foundations of this strategy, it is useful to revisit Mackinder's (1904) famous Heartland Theory. Mackinder identified the vast, well-protected landmass at the center of Eurasia as the most critical region for global dominance, arguing that control over this area would eventually allow a power to dominate the "World Island" (Eurasia–Africa) and, by extension, the world. In Mackinder's own words: "Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World Island; who rules the World Island commands the world." From this perspective, the Zangezur Corridor serves as a strategic chokepoint in the South Caucasus, with the potential to control access to the southwestern boundaries of the Heartland. The U.S. effort to secure this corridor can thus be interpreted as a strategy to weaken Russia's position in the Heartland, limiting its southern (Iran, Middle East) and western (Anatolia) land connections through alternative routes, and thereby constraining its land power. Russia's inability to deliver a lasting resolution to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and the erosion of its role as a regional security guarantor indicate that the U.S. strategy to gain influence over this critical transit point is beginning to yield tangible results.

Armenia's suspension of its membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and its pursuit of closer ties with the West, combined with Azerbaijan's tensions with Moscow and the diminishing Russian military presence in the region, indicate a reshaping of power balances in the South Caucasus. The TRIPP agreement's bypassing of the post-2020 Russian peacekeeping frameworks signals the end of Moscow's monopoly over regional mediation.

### **2.2.2. Iran Containment Strategy**

The Zangezur Corridor's proximity to the Iranian border presents a second strategic opportunity for the United States. Following the attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities in June 2025, Washington accelerated its "containment" policy toward Iran. The roots of this strategy trace back to the 1979 Iranian Revolution and have formed the core of U.S. strategic approaches toward Iran since the Carter administration.

The theoretical foundations of the containment strategy rest on two critical assumptions. First, that the U.S. is unwilling to bear the human and financial costs required to directly overthrow the Tehran regime through military force. Second, that Iran is not genuinely interested in establishing a peaceful relationship with Washington and, if left unchecked, will attempt to reshape the existing Middle Eastern order to America's disadvantage. This strategy aims to minimize Iran's capacity to project power beyond its borders while avoiding the substantial costs associated with regime change.

The Trump administration's 2025 Iran policy has concentrated this containment strategy along three main axes: enhanced deterrence, counterterrorism operations, and expanded economic and technological cooperation with key regional partners. Control over the Zangezur Corridor constitutes the strategic dimension of this approach and offers the United States four primary advantages. First, it allows for a significant amplification of the effectiveness of economic sanctions on Iran, with real-time monitoring and, if necessary, disruption of overland trade traffic. Second, the presence of direct U.S. military and intelligence assets along Iran's northern border fundamentally complicates Tehran's national security calculations. Third, it strengthens Washington's bargaining position in any future multilateral negotiations. Fourth, it provides an opportunity to control Iran's access to Central Asian energy resources and China's Belt and Road Initiative.

While this strategy is not fundamentally new, its implementation methods exhibit notable similarities to past practices. During the Cold War, the United States systematically



**Map 2:** Annotated map showing the Zangezur Corridor and surrounding region (Source: Anadolu Agency).

applied comparable tactics under the containment doctrine to encircle the Soviet Union. The core logic of this approach rested on establishing military, economic, and infrastructural assets at strategic points near the adversary's borders to limit its geopolitical influence. Particularly notable is Washington's preference for applying sustained pressure through proxy actors and strategic infrastructure, thereby avoiding direct confrontation.

Examining historical examples clarifies the enduring nature of this containment strategy. One of the earliest and most comprehensive implementations occurred with the Marshall Plan and the Truman Doctrine in 1947–1948. These initiatives exemplified the simultaneous economic and military dimensions of containment: the U.S. provided economic aid to sixteen European countries while supplying \$400 million in military assistance to

Greece and Turkey, thereby creating both economic dependency and military superiority. Similarly, the U.S.'s long-term base leasing model illustrates the practice of establishing enduring presence at strategic locations. Historical examples include the 99-year lease of Guantanamo Bay in Cuba in 1898 and the use of Okinawa as a base after World War II, demonstrating Washington's approach of achieving long-term military-economic control under the guise of international law rather than direct annexation.

The modern application of the same methodology is evident in NATO expansion and U.S. military deployments in Eastern Europe after the Cold War. Between 1999 and 2004, the United States reestablished its military presence in the Baltic states and Central Europe, equipping allied countries from Poland to Greece with American weapons systems and systematically creating a containment line against Russia. Another example is the NATO Partnership for Peace program in Central Asia. By integrating Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan into the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and fostering close ties with NATO, the U.S. demonstrates a contemporary practice of using multilateral diplomatic tools to contain both Russia and China while extending its influence over regional states.

As an extension of these historical experiences, the current network of U.S. military bases surrounding Iran represents a comprehensive modern implementation of the containment strategy. The strategy planned through the Zangezur Corridor should not be seen as novel; rather, it reflects a contemporary adaptation of a methodology that the United States has tested and refined across different regions for decades.

Iran's reactions to these developments clearly demonstrate Tehran's sensitivity to changes in its northern security environment. Ali Akbar Velayati, an advisor to the Iranian Foreign Ministry, emphasized that the corridor "aims to cut off Iran's connection with the Caucasus and impose a land blockade on Iran and Russia," directly framing the project as a security threat (Tasnim News Agency, 2025). Similarly, Yadollah Javani, Deputy Commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, stated that "Iran will never allow an American corridor on its border" (Iran International, 2025). These responses indicate that Iran regards its geographical position as an inseparable component of national security and is prepared to resist any changes in this area, including through military means if necessary.

The economic containment dimension arguably constitutes the most potent aspect of this strategy. Should the corridor materialize, Iran's historical trade links with the South Caucasus would be disrupted, severely constraining its access to European markets. This

scenario would exacerbate the country's existing economic embargoes and increase the likelihood of a more insular economic posture. Furthermore, U.S.-implemented customs and security controls along the corridor would impede Iran's integration into regional trade networks, accelerating its search for alternative routes. These developments would create a persistent pressure point along Iran's northern borders, significantly limiting Tehran's regional influence and economic maneuverability. By generating simultaneous pressures across diplomacy, defense, economics, and technology, the U.S. containment strategy aims to induce long-term behavioral adjustments in Iran. In this context, the Zangezur Corridor becomes the geopolitical linchpin of the broader strategy, with the potential to shape Iran's regional mobility for decades to come.

### **2.2.3. Strategy Against China's Belt and Road Initiative**

The 21st-century U.S.-China rivalry has become a defining dynamic of the international system. As Graham Allison illustrates through the "Thucydides Trap," structural tension between a rising power and an established power drives both states to seek strategic primacy on a global scale (Allison, 2017). In this context, the Zangezur Corridor emerges as a critical theater of contestation within Eurasia, offering a strategic foothold to influence trade routes, energy flows, and regional connectivity—key arenas in which U.S.-China competition is being waged.

The Belt and Road Initiative represents the cornerstone of Beijing's vision for global economic integration. This initiative is not merely an economic project but also serves as a tool for China's soft power projection and long-term geopolitical objectives. As Khanna notes in his analysis *The New Silk Roads*, the reconnection of Asia has the potential to fundamentally alter global power dynamics (Khanna, 2016). The Zangezur Corridor occupies a critical juncture along one of the shortest overland routes connecting China to Europe.

When evaluated in the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Zangezur Corridor assumes a distinct strategic significance. China seeks to transport its goods to Europe via overland routes under the BRI framework, and the Zangezur Corridor constitutes a critical link in this "Middle Corridor" network (Iskandarov et al., 2023). The corridor could enable China to reduce its reliance on maritime routes controlled by the U.S. Navy. Currently, approximately 60% of China's trade flows and 70–80% of its oil imports traverse narrow maritime chokepoints such as the South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca, which are under U.S. naval oversight (Warsaw Institute, 2021; Newsweek, 2024). Consequently, the Zangezur



**Map 3:** China's Belt and Road Initiative (Source: tuicakademi.org).

Corridor represents a crucial bottleneck for the transit of Chinese goods to Europe, offering a 343 km reduction in distance and eliminating the need to cross two additional national borders. While the existing route passes through 250 km of Georgian territory, the Zangezur Corridor provides a direct 43 km passage (Caspian Policy Center, 2024).

These developments are likely to have raised strategic concerns for the United States, as control over maritime routes constitutes a cornerstone of U.S. global hegemony. China's efforts to bypass this control via overland corridors have the potential to undermine America's geopolitical advantages. In this context, securing control over the Zangezur Corridor holds significant geostrategic importance for the U.S. The development of the route as an alternative to Russian transit networks presents both opportunities and risks for China. On one hand, it opens a new route independent of Russian oversight; on the other hand, the possibility that this corridor could come under U.S. control constitutes a legitimate strategic concern for Beijing. While the corridor offers a reduction of 343 kilometers and a one-day shorter transit time compared to existing routes – making it highly attractive economically – its potential utilization under U.S. management poses a risk of disadvantaging China.

China's growing economic presence in the South Caucasus – particularly its strategic partnership with Azerbaijan and large-scale investment projects in Armenia – underscores the region's increasing importance to Beijing. However, U.S. control over the Zangezur Corridor

could significantly undermine China's regional plans and pose a serious challenge to the long-term objectives of the Belt and Road Initiative.

### **3. Readings on Regional Actors**

The agreement signed by Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has reshaped the geopolitical calculations of regional actors. The TRIPP arrangement is assessed differently by each actor, based on their historical memory, strategic objectives, and security concerns. In this section, the approaches of Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Armenia to the corridor issue will be analyzed, considering both their national interests and the broader context of great power competition. Each state's position is evaluated not only through the lens of current geopolitical realities but also in light of historical experiences and future projections.

#### **3.1. Turkey**

Turkey appears to regard the Zangezur Corridor as a strategic step toward closer integration within the Turkic world. However, the TRIPP agreement's U.S. control complicates Ankara's regional hegemony calculations. According to Russian media, the proposal for the corridor to be operated by a private company was initially raised by Turkey (Pravda Turkey, 2025). This claim can be interpreted as reflective of Turkey's pragmatic foreign policy approach. Analysts cited by *Foreign Policy* suggest that such a system could strengthen Turkey's trade connections with Central Asia and China and potentially pave the way for reopening the Armenian border, which has been closed since 1993 (Foreign Policy, 2025). Nevertheless, Ankara's primary concern is that "Turkey and Azerbaijan have no interest in the Zangezur Corridor being controlled by anyone other than themselves" (Pravda Turkey, 2025).

Official Response of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The official response from the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the TRIPP agreement indicates that Ankara views the deal as "an extremely important development for ensuring regional peace and stability" (Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025). In its statement, while expressing satisfaction with the U.S. administration's contribution to the process, the Ministry emphasized that a "historic opportunity has been seized" to achieve peace and prosperity in the South Caucasus (Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025).

Turkey's strategic motivations in relation to the TRIPP agreement are particularly notable. According to Yetkin Report (2025), TRIPP could "restore uninterrupted land access

from Turkey to Azerbaijan via Nakhchivan and further to Central Asia,” thereby reinforcing Ankara’s Middle Corridor strategy. This strategy aims to establish “an alternative trade and transit route bypassing Russian and Iranian chokepoints” while also “closely integrating the South Caucasus under the umbrella of Turkic states with the Turkic republics of Central Asia” (Yetkin Report, 2025). Energy security constitutes another critical element in Turkey’s perspective on TRIPP. Turkish Minister of Energy Alparslan Bayraktar emphasized that “oil, gas, and electricity flows should reach Turkey and beyond via this key Turkic corridor, bypassing Georgia.” Bayraktar further noted that Turkey envisions “the Zengezur Corridor extending beyond Azerbaijan to directly connect Central Asia’s extensive energy resources to Turkey and onward to Europe” (Pravda Turkey, 2025).

Analyses from think tanks underscore the multi-faceted nature of Turkey’s perspective on TRIPP. Chatham House (2025) argues that TRIPP functions “both as a trade channel and a geopolitical lever, binding the region’s two main states more tightly to U.S. and EU economic and policy trajectories.” Similarly, The Soufan Center (2025) notes that “TRIPP is not only a strategic success for Turkish regional interests but also consolidates Ankara’s growing role as a regional hegemon by effectively replacing Russia, which held this position for a long period.” Insights from Turkey’s logistics sector further highlight the project’s significance. Bilgehan Engin, President of the Turkish Logistics Association (UTİKAD), stated that “Turkey has the opportunity to establish itself as a central actor in global supply chains by creating a logistical bridge between the East and the West” (Daily Sabah, 2025). Engin emphasized that the Zengezur Corridor “provides an alternative and complementary route to the Middle Corridor stretching from China through the Caspian Sea via Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, and onward to Europe” (Daily Sabah, 2025). TRIPP’s potential impact on Turkey-Armenia normalization is also noted. Armenian Deputy Prime Minister Vahan Kostanyan told Anadolu Agency that “this connectivity project could become much more feasible and regionally and globally significant if communication between Armenia and Turkey is re-established” (Anadolu Ajansı, 2025). Kostanyan expressed hope that Ankara would “respond in good faith by opening the Turkish-Armenian border and establishing diplomatic relations with the Armenian government” (Anadolu Ajansı, 2025).

Developments from Turkey’s perspective have been compiled, and three key strategic motivations merit attention in the context of analysis. First, although Turkey does not explicitly articulate it, a clear tendency toward closer engagement with Turkic states and the Turkistan region has been observed in recent years. The potential for TRIPP to establish an

uninterrupted connection from Turkey through Nakhchivan to Azerbaijan and onward to Central Asia represents the realization of Ankara's "Turkic world" vision through geopolitical means. Indirectly, this may contribute to Turkey's goal of becoming a regional power in a geography with which it shares historical and cultural ties, moving beyond its identity as merely a Western ally within NATO. Second, Turkey's desire to enhance its regional influence amid the weakening of Russia's regional dominance and energy hegemony emerges as a significant factor. Since the onset of the Ukraine war, the decline of Russia's influence in the South Caucasus has created a strategically favorable opportunity for Ankara. Through TRIPP, Turkey's pursuit of the role of a regional hegemon – replacing Russia, which has long held this position – is understandable. The emphasis by Minister of Energy Bayraktar on channeling "oil, gas, and electricity flows to Turkey via this key Turkic connection, bypassing Georgia" demonstrates Ankara's intention to strengthen its position as an energy hub and, in turn, neutralize Russia's energy leverage. Third and finally, Turkey's inclination to assert control over trade routes to augment its economic and geopolitical power is noteworthy. The objective of establishing a "logistical bridge between East and West" reflects Turkey's strategy of transcending its role as a transit country to become a "central actor" in global supply chains. The Zangezur Corridor, offering an "alternative and complementary route" to the Middle Corridor extending from China through the Caspian Sea to Europe, provides Ankara with the opportunity to position itself as a critical partner in China's Belt and Road Initiative, as well as an indispensable transit point for trade between Europe and Asia.

When these three strategic motivations are considered together, it becomes evident that Turkey perceives TRIPP not merely as a transportation project but also as an instrument of geopolitical transformation. While Turkey does not appear to adopt an "extraordinarily eager or enthusiastic" stance toward the project, it is assessed as being willing to capitalize on the opportunities arising from it.

### **3.2. Azerbaijan**

President Aliyev of Azerbaijan stated, "This is a great opportunity, but it is also a great responsibility" (Foreign Policy, 2025), highlighting Baku's political stance toward the TRIPP agreement. This position is understandable, as Azerbaijan maintains both a hopeful and cautious approach regarding the resolution of a strategic issue that has persisted for thirty-six years.

For Azerbaijan, the TRIPP project primarily signifies the establishment of uninterrupted access to the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, which has been under an Armenian

blockade since 1989. This blockade has restricted the 459,600-strong autonomous republic to establishing air and land connections only via Iran and Turkey, severely limiting the region's economic development. According to an analysis by the U.S.-based security research center The Soufan Center, the project enables Azerbaijan to achieve its long-standing strategic objective of establishing a direct land connection to the Nakhchivan autonomous region and, through it, access to Turkey (The Soufan Center, 2025).

From a geopolitical perspective, the corridor is viewed as part of Azerbaijan's broader strategic framework. First, the project establishes a direct land connection with Turkey, serving the integration of the "Turkic world" and strengthening Baku's regional position. Second, it aims to limit Azerbaijan's dependence on Iran and Russia by reducing their traditional transit control in the region. Third, as part of the Middle Corridor project, the corridor positions Azerbaijan in a critical role within global trade networks extending from China to Europe. However, President Aliyev's approach to the agreement also reflects an awareness that Azerbaijan will not have full control. The United States' 99-year exclusive development rights indicate that Baku will not possess complete sovereignty over the corridor in the long term. This suggests that Azerbaijan regards the agreement as a temporary measure toward achieving its ultimate objectives.

Shortly after the signing ceremony, President Aliyev emphasized that the agreement does not constitute a peace treaty and reiterated Armenia's need to implement the necessary constitutional changes before a final peace agreement can be concluded (The Soufan Center, 2025). These statements reflect Azerbaijan's provisional approach. Baku's calculation appears to be that, within the current geopolitical conjuncture, U.S. guarantorship will ensure the corridor's opening, while long-term control could be renegotiated as regional power balances shift. Simultaneously, this approach represents an extension of Azerbaijan's efforts to consolidate its regional position following its 2020 Karabakh victory. Baku systematically pursues a policy of converting military success into diplomatic and economic gains, positioning the TRIPP agreement as part of this broader strategic agenda. However, it is clear that a corridor system under U.S. control is not fully compatible with Azerbaijan's expectations of sovereignty. Consequently, the Aliyev administration signals that, while using the agreement as a pragmatic instrument to achieve short-term gains, it does not compromise on its long-term objectives.

### 3.3. Armenia

Despite criticism from Yadollah Javani, the political aide of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, who stated that “Aliyev and Pashinyan have fallen into the trap of the gambler Trump” (Iran International, 2025), Armenia’s acceptance of the TRIPP agreement is regarded as an inevitable geopolitical maneuver. This reflects Armenia’s ongoing effort to emerge from isolation.

To understand Armenia’s strategic position, it is necessary to consider the effects of the economic blockade that has persisted since 1989. The joint blockade imposed by Azerbaijan and Turkey has imposed severe economic difficulties on landlocked Armenia, with a population of three million. This blockade caused the country’s GDP to decline by approximately 60% during 1992–93 and compelled energy-scarce Armenia to reopen the Metsamor Nuclear Power Plant. Although alternative trade routes via Iran and Georgia have been developed, these routes entail additional costs and have prevented the full realization of the country’s trade potential.

The most critical aspect of TRIPP for Armenia is its simultaneous occurrence with the country’s process of disengagement from Russia. Following Prime Minister Pashinyan’s inability to secure sufficient support from Moscow during the 2020 Second Karabakh War and the 2023 Karabakh operation, Armenia initiated a withdrawal process from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). As of December 2024, Pashinyan declared that Armenia had “passed the point of no return” regarding CSTO membership, suspended contributions to the organization’s budget, and requested the withdrawal of Russian border forces. However, Armenia’s westward orientation has faced significant domestic political tensions. The “Holy Struggle” movement, led by Galstanyan, denounces Pashinyan’s decisions to return territories to Azerbaijan as “betrayal” and calls for the government’s resignation. Protests that began in May 2024, involving tens of thousands of participants, staged marches from the Tavush region to Yerevan, employing tactics reminiscent of Pashinyan’s rise to power in 2018. The arrest of Galstanyan in June 2025 on charges of “attempted coup” indicates that the confrontation between the government and opposition has reached a critical peak. Despite these domestic pressures, Pashinyan’s approach to TRIPP is based on pragmatic calculations. His statement that “the corridor will attract investments and strengthen the U.S.’s position as a key mediator in the region” (Pravda, 2025) indicates that Armenia views U.S. patronage as a security guarantee. Expectations that TRIPP will “open strategic economic opportunities, provide long-term benefits, encourage infrastructure

investments, and strengthen regional connectivity” reflect Armenia’s hope of overcoming economic isolation.

However, it is evident that the agreement is not in Armenia’s favor. According to U.S. statements, while the route will operate under Armenian law (The Soufan Center, 2025), the 99-year U.S. control limits Armenia’s full sovereignty. Analysis by The Soufan Center indicates that TRIPP serves the interests of Turkey and Azerbaijan more than those of Armenia. This situation occurs at a time when Armenia, having severed its ties with Russia, has not secured a strong regional ally..

Armenia’s strategic calculation is based on a “least-bad option” approach under current circumstances. In an interview with CNN, Prime Minister Pashinyan described the agreement as the “least-bad option,” summarizing Yerevan’s position in the face of limited alternatives. The government’s calculation is that the economic benefits of TRIPP and the U.S. security guarantees will offset the limitations on territorial sovereignty. Additionally, the agreement is expected to prevent a new conflict with Azerbaijan and improve Armenia’s international investment climate.

A departure from Armenia’s historical foreign policy tradition is observable. The attempt to establish a U.S.-centered system, replacing the traditionally Russia-dependent security architecture, carries both significant opportunities and serious risks. In the event of success, Armenia could overcome economic isolation and participate in regional integration; in the event of failure, the country may face further isolation and heightened security vulnerabilities.

### **Conclusion and Assessment**

In the current era of transformation, the acceleration of technological developments has increased states’ destructive capacities and driven the costs of conventional warfare to astronomical levels. The proliferation of nuclear weapons, the advancement of cyber warfare capabilities, and the emergence of autonomous weapon systems have rendered the risks of direct military conflict largely unacceptable. This shift has steered major powers away from conventional wars and toward strategic maneuvers, economic pressures, and geopolitical initiatives. Today, victory is measured not by the number of tanks or artillery pieces but by the ability to control critical infrastructure, dominate trade routes, and constrain the economic lifelines of adversaries.

The increase in globalization and the rising world population have further amplified the significance of economic factors in geopolitics. Energy flows, trade corridors, and logistics networks have become fundamental components of national security. Controlling a port, a strait, or a transit route has transformed into a more effective instrument of power than thousands of tanks. In this context, the Zangezur Corridor issue emerges not merely as a regional concern but as a strategic example of power competition in the new era.

As examined in this study, the geopolitical contest surrounding the Zangezur Corridor can be considered a contemporary example of great power competition in the twenty-first century. With the agreement signed on 8 August 2025, the project – named the “Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity” – has become not merely a regional transportation issue but a critical component of the global struggle for hegemony. Comparative analyses suggest that the U.S. strategy in Zangezur bears striking similarities to the nineteenth-century British strategic lease model. History demonstrates that states often draw lessons from past experiences and apply them when confronted with analogous geographic and strategic situations; this constitutes a familiar pattern in foreign policy behavior. This finding, which emerges from comparative historical analysis, allows us to interpret the resemblance between the U.S. Zangezur strategy and the nineteenth-century British strategic lease model not as a mere coincidence, but as an illustration of the role of institutional memory in shaping states’ foreign policy choices.

The analysis indicates that the United States’ strategic motivations are shaped around three main axes: limiting Russian influence, implementing a containment strategy toward Iran, and positioning against China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Regional actors, however, exhibit differing priorities in their approaches to the agreement. For Azerbaijan, the termination of the blockade on Nakhchivan is of critical importance; Armenia views U.S. patronage as a security guarantee amid its withdrawal from the Collective Security Treaty Organization; and Turkey, while aligning with its vision of closer ties with the Turkic world, is concerned that its aspirations for regional hegemony may be constrained by U.S. oversight.

From a methodological perspective, given that current developments have not yet been extensively addressed in the academic literature, the frequent use of reliable international media sources, the application of a multi-stakeholder perspective analysis, and the deliberate avoidance of normatively evaluating any actor’s policies are considered to enhance the objectivity of this study. However, it must be noted that the topic remains very recent, and certain methodological limitations should be acknowledged. Since only one week has passed

since the signing of the TRIPP agreement, it is challenging to fully assess the project's long-term effects and the definitive positions of all stakeholders. Moreover, due to the dynamic nature of geopolitical developments, the evaluations presented in this study may need to be revised in light of future events. Consequently, the current analysis represents a "snapshot" and underscores the need for a longer temporal perspective to evaluate the issue historically.

The TRIPP project can be seen as symbolizing a profound restructuring of regional power balances established in the post-Cold War period. Although the 99-year U.S. control is presented as a temporary arrangement, historical precedents suggest that such "lease" agreements have the potential to become permanent. This development is considered likely to have long-term implications for both the strategic calculations of regional actors and the dynamics of global power competition.

### **Future Perspectives**

The potential geopolitical effects of the TRIPP project over the next decade are considered within the framework of five key scenarios. The likelihood of these scenarios materializing is expected to depend on changes in the current global balance of power, the adaptive capacities of regional actors, and the impact of unforeseen external shocks.

The first scenario can be conceptualized as the United States successfully implementing the project and establishing strategic dominance in Eurasia. In this scenario, TRIPP could become a critical component of the Middle Corridor, potentially controlling 15–20% of China–Europe trade flows. The systematic erosion of Russia's regional influence, sustained pressure on Iran's northern borders, and Turkey's closer integration into the U.S. geopolitical system are anticipated as key outcomes. However, it should be noted that this scenario assumes Moscow and Tehran either remain passive or fail to develop effective counter-strategies. The second scenario involves Russia and Iran developing a joint counter-strategy. This could include Moscow's attempt to reassert its traditional influence over Armenia, Iran generating security threats along the corridor route, and both countries strengthening alternative transit routes, such as the North–South Corridor. In particular, the threat of a "corridor blockade" by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards could seriously challenge the operational sustainability of the project. In this scenario, TRIPP could transform into a geopolitical arena, potentially undermining regional stability. The third scenario can be defined as China attempting to exert influence over the project through economic means. Investment partnerships developed by Beijing with both Azerbaijan and Armenia are expected to increase the presence of Chinese firms in the corridor's economy. This could create a

contradictory dynamic between U.S. political control and Chinese economic authority. In the event of integration of the Belt and Road Initiative with the corridor, it is anticipated that Washington's strategic objectives could be partially undermined. The fourth scenario envisions regional actors expressing long-term dissatisfaction with the agreement and seeking renegotiation. In particular, Azerbaijan's demands for full sovereignty and Turkey's aspirations for regional hegemony are expected to remain in constant tension with the 99-year U.S. control. Should global power balances shift in the 2030s, these countries may exert diplomatic pressure to amend or terminate the agreement. The fifth scenario considers the partial failure of the project. Security challenges, insufficient investment, bureaucratic obstacles, or changes in global trade routes could prevent the corridor from generating the anticipated economic impact. In this case, the United States might experience a loss of prestige, regional actors' confidence could be undermined, and interest in alternative projects may increase.

From the perspective of developing research priorities, future studies are considered necessary in three key areas. First, there is a need to analyze the legitimacy issues of strategic lease models under international law and their aspects that conflict with the principle of sovereignty. Second, it is necessary to develop theoretical frameworks for understanding the "weaponization" of infrastructure projects in the context of great power competition. Third, the capacity of small states to generate "strategic advantages" within great power rivalry requires systematic examination. In terms of policy recommendations, it is deemed critical for regional actors to develop diversified strategies to safeguard their long-term interests. Excessive dependence on a single major power, based on historical experience, cannot be considered a sustainable policy. Moreover, the development of legal regulations by the international community regarding exclusive control over strategic transit points is regarded as important for preventing legitimacy issues in similar projects in the future.

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