

Baku, Ankara's firm stand; Tehran's disagreeing hand Zangezur extends beyond a mere corridor



By Ebrahim
Beheshti
Staff writer

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan lent his support to the pursuit of peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia at a news conference with his Azerbaijani counterpart Jeyhun Bayramov Ankara on Monday. Hakan, however, noted that the opening of the Zangezur corridor would be "of great importance" in maintaining regional stability.

Despite the cessation of hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan on November 10, 2020, and the subsequent signing of a peace deal with Russian mediation, conflicting interpretations of the agreement's terms by Baku have exacerbated ongoing divisions between the two neighbors. Azerbaijan staunchly contends that the restoration of the Zangezur transportation corridor under its control is essential to facilitate access to the Nakhchivan Autonomous Region.

In term 9 of the peace agreement, it is explicitly stipulated that "All economic and transport connections in the region shall be unblocked. The Republic of Armenia shall guarantee the security of transport connections between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in order to arrange unobstructed movement of persons, vehicles and cargo in both directions. The Border Guard Service of the Russian Federal Security Service shall be responsible for overseeing the transport connections".

The focal point of this paragraph is unequivocally on the unblocking of transport routes between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan. It does not involve ceding ownership of these pathways, notably the Zangezur corridor, to the government in Baku.

During the trilateral talks in 2021, Armenia conveyed its willingness to participate in the

revitalization of the Soviet-era railways that historically linked Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan. However, Baku interpreted this as Yerevan's acquiescence to relinquish control over the Zangezur corridor, a proposition firmly contested by Armenian authorities. While Yerevan officials are amenable to discussions about opening transit routes and granting Azerbaijan access to Nakhchivan, they are steadfast in their assertion that these corridors will unequivocally remain under Armenia's jurisdiction and authority.

On May 30, Deputy Prime Minister of Armenia, Mher Grigoryan, issued a categorical response to Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev's remarks concerning the Zangezur corridor. Grigoryan definitively stated, "Engaging in talks with any nation regarding the construction of specific corridors is out of the question. We have reiterated numerous times that this is a non-negotiable boundary. This subject will not be entertained. The oversight of all road infrastructure will vest within the Republic of Armenia."

Baku seeks to change borders

The strategic pursuits championed by Azerbaijan, bolstered by Turkey's support, appear poised to usher in a consequential transformation of geographical boundaries within the South Caucasus region. This unfolding scenario has drawn the attention of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Turkey, both of which hold vested interests in the outcome.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, while returning from a trip to Baku on June 14, conveyed to reporters a sentiment shared by Azerbaijani authorities: Iran's stance concerning the opening of the contentious corridor "upsets" both Turkey and Azerbaijan. Erdogan maintained that Iran's position should ostensibly align with the interests of Azerbaijan and Turkey, as collaborative efforts between these nations to establish transit corridors would inherently serve Iran's own benefits. Strikingly, Erdogan pointed to Iran,

rather than Armenia, as the main obstacle impeding the resurgence of the Zangezur corridor.

Erdogan's assertion pivots on the notion that Tehran's reservations are not directed against the revival of the Zangezur corridor or Azerbaijan's access to Nakhchivan, but rather stem from opposition to border realignments. The mechanics of these border modifications are nuanced: currently, and in preceding years, commercial trucks traversing between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan or Turkey must cross Iranian territory. Additionally, owing to Turkey's historical tensions with Armenia, Turkey's passage to Azerbaijan is contingent on transit through Iran. The strategic Nakhchivan region lies to the southwest of Armenia, while the Syunik Province to Armenia's south, abutting Iran, serves as a demarcating buffer between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan.

Azerbaijan, in tandem with Turkish backing, seeks to assert control over the southern sectors of Armenia's Syunik Province, effectively molding the Zangezur corridor. The underlying consequence of this endeavor would entail the practical dissolution of the shared boundary between Iran and Armenia. Underpinning this proposed transformation, the present dynamic wherein Azerbaijan relies on Iranian thoroughfares to reach Nakhchivan or Turkey, would be inverted. Should the Zangezur corridor materialize according to Azerbaijan's envisaged parameters, Iran would find itself compelled to traverse Azerbaijani territory for passage to Armenia and, by extension, Europe. Tehran vehemently rejects this purported stratagem orchestrated by Baku, buttressed by Ankara, foreseeing it as a subversion of established borders by any means.

Iran's clear warning

Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, the Leader of Iran's Islamic Revolution, underscored a resolute stance during a meeting with Erdogan in Iran on July 19, 2022. He said that any endeavors aimed at obstructing the border linkage between Iran and Armenia would encounter Iran's vehement opposition. In discussions with Russia's president, Ayatol-

lah

Khamenei reiterated that the Islamic Republic would not tolerate any policies or initiatives that culminate in the closure of the Iran-Armenia border.

As a result, it emerges that neither Armenia nor Iran stands in objection to the resuscitation of conduits to facilitate Azerbaijan's access to Nakhchivan. Their collective stance pivots on the precondition that these routes remain under the aegis of Yerevan's control, rather than Baku's. The rationale underlying this viewpoint resides in the trajectory of these routes traversing Armenian territory. In essence, the thrust is for facilitating access without necessitating alterations to existing borders.

What is Turkey after?

The question naturally arises: What impels Turkey's steadfast commitment to this particular course of action? The implementation of this blueprint would bestow upon Turkey an unfettered access to Nakhchivan and Azerbaijan, obviating the need to go through Iran and Armenia. A comprehensive analysis by Iran's national broadcaster offers insight into Turkey's multifaceted motives. Among these objectives are "the augmentation of arms sales to Azerbaijan, securing access to cheaper energy from Azerbaijan, containment and neutralization of regional rivals, actualizing Pan-Turkic aspirations, and the orchestration of cohesion within the so-called Turkic world".

Turkey envisages itself as a vanguard of the so-designated Turkic-speaking nations, driven by neo-Ottoman ideals. Crucially, the Syunik Province looms as an impediment obstructing the geographical continuum of this Turkic realm. The proposed implementation of the Zangezur initiative effectively bridges the Turkic-speaking nations.

In 2009, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), formerly called the Turkic Council or the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States, was established during a summit in Nakhchivan. The OTS, encompassing permanent members Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan, with Turkmenistan as a potential addition, is founded upon the principles of bolstering friendship, security, and mutual trust among the

Turkic nations.

In an analytical piece, the Institute for East Strategic Studies casts a skeptical eye on Erdogan's endeavors to assume the mantle of an elder brother within the fraternity of Turkic-speaking nations.

"The aspirations of pan-Turkic ideology have fallen short. Despite the emergence of distinct identities, political autonomy, and economic pursuits among the Central Asian Turkic nations, a sense of kinship with Turkey has not materialized. Rather than a revered older brother, Turkey is predominantly viewed as an indispensable economic partner. Solely Baku engages in concerted cooperation with Ankara, owing to shared economic and political interests. However, this common ground remains elusive when it comes to the Central Asian countries."

Ali-Akbar Velayati, a prominent figure in Iran's diplomatic echelons and an advisor to Ayatollah Khamenei, has recently penned an op-ed that probes beneath the surface of Turkey's insistence on the Zangezur corridor's establishment, discerning motivations that transcend the contours of pan-Turkism discourse.

Velayati contends that this pursuit serves as more than a mere symbol of Pan-Turkic aspirations, extending from Istanbul to China's Xinjiang Province, thereby sketching an "imaginary world" of Pan-Turkism. He takes into account the expansive purview of Turkey's entanglements within NATO and posits that the realization of the Zangezur corridor could potentially culminate in the emergence of a corridor, figuratively encircling Iran from the north and enveloping Russia from the south.

Velayati argues that the establishment of this corridor, rather than primarily nurturing trade and collaborative ventures, could inadvertently set the stage for an augmented and purposeful NATO presence in northern Iran and southern Russia.

Iran's legitimate concerns

Ali Bigdeli, an expert Caucasus affairs, shared his insights in an interview with Iran Daily, offering a perspective that underscores skepticism toward NATO's potential presence in the Caucasus region. "NATO will never become an

Asian entity," he asserts.

Bigdeli further contends that the Zangezur corridor, a crucial component of the Turkey-Azerbaijan collaboration, contradicts Iran's national interests, characterizing its execution as a blow to the "prestige" of the Islamic Republic. He says the corridor would effectively curtail Iran's land route connectivity to Europe and Russia. Turning to Turkey's insistence on forging the corridor, Bigdeli perceives it as Erdogan's last recourse, subsequent to the failure of alternative strategies in preceding years. At Erdogan's ascent to power, Turkey aspired to European Union accession. However, former French president Francois Hollande killed the aspirations, opining that the EU was not hospitable to Muslims.

"After facing this setback, Erdogan embarked on a mission to Arab nations, aiming to rejuvenate the concept of Ottomanism. However, his efforts fell short due to resistance stemming from his alignment with the ideologies of the Muslim Brotherhood. As a result, Erdogan's focus has now shifted toward an alternative path, namely, the "Trans-Caspian" project. This endeavor aligns with his ambitions for seamless access to Central Asia and Turkic-speaking nations."

Bigdeli underscores that the project's fruition is intrinsically linked to the establishment of the Zangezur corridor.

The Zangezur corridor, as championed by Baku and Ankara, extends beyond the scope of a mere conduit between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan. Tehran and Yerevan, exercising their sovereign prerogatives, challenge its establishment and the associated border alterations, as these imperil their respective national interests. This perspective is echoed by Mohammad Pakpour, commander of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guard Corps' Ground Forces during the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict, who reinforced Iran's commitment to respecting neighboring countries' territorial integrity, emphasizing that any changes in border geopolitics transgress the Islamic Republic's red lines.

