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## The Connectivity Debate in the South Caucasus Reconsidered

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### Abstract

This article considers the connectivity debate in the South Caucasus, which was catalysed by the prospective opening of borders and transit routes after Azerbaijan's victory in 2020's Second Karabakh War and further foregrounded by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The article discusses how this debate has to date been flawed by simplistic, securitised and conservative thinking about connectivity. Rather than generating new interdependencies conducive to peace, securitised connectivity risks the exclusion of actors and spaces beyond the state, the weaponisation of trade corridors and continuing regional fracture to the benefit of external actors and detriment of regional resilience.

### Introduction

On 11 February 2023, five trucks carrying 100 tonnes of aid crossed the land border from Armenia into Turkey, in response to the cataclysmic earthquakes in southern Turkey five days previously (Kucera 2023). It was the first time that the border had been opened since 1993, when Turkey closed it in response to Armenian forces' capture of Azerbaijan's Kelbajar region in the First Karabakh War (1992–94). The border crossing was also the first breakthrough in the South Caucasus after more than two years of animated discussions about the opening of the region's borders following the Second Karabakh War in 2020 that saw Azerbaijan retake its occupied lands.

The story of the Armenian-Turkish border is symptomatic of wider dynamics surrounding connectivity in the South Caucasus. Although the region is typically evoked as a historical crossroads on the fabled Silk Route, the post-Soviet South Caucasus has been more noteworthy as a bottleneck gridlocked by contested borders, frontlines and blockades. The Second Karabakh War appeared to offer a resolution of this impasse, ending the occupation of Azerbaijani lands that was the primary obstacle to restoring connectivity. The much-discussed Article 9 of the 9 November 2020 ceasefire statement explicitly committed signatories Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia to opening all economic and transportation links.<sup>1</sup> Connectivity subsequently became the primary theatre for the discussion of peace narratives, evoking both the region's history as a meeting point and marketplace and an extensive literature affirming the pacifying effects of trade.

Rather than new connections, however, over the interceding two years the Armenian-Azerbaijani context was convulsed by repeated escalations of violence, fierce contestation over the meaning of Article 9, and more

recently the blocking of the Lachin Corridor connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia. Connectivity is in crisis, and some observers of the region have expressed fears of new conflict driven by the issue of corridors. How, in just two years, has connectivity shifted from a panacea for the region's ills to a prospective *casus belli*?

This article identifies three interlinked features of the connectivity debate as it has unfolded in the South Caucasus over the last two years that can account for this outcome. These are its tendencies to simplification, securitisation, and conservatism. When viewed through these prisms, we see that, far from heralding a new dawn for peace and prosperity in the region, current approaches to connectivity enable both old and new forms of regional fracture to persist.

### The Simplification of Connectivity

The connectivity discussion in the South Caucasus has largely focused on the unblocking of key routes and corridors through the region. Since the 1990s, reciprocal blockades between Armenia and Azerbaijan have cut through-transit by road and rail from Russia to Armenia, Iran and Turkey, disconnected road and rail transit between mainland Azerbaijan and its exclave Nakhchivan, and limited the feasibility and attractiveness of north-south and east-west transit through the region (de Waal 2021).

Yet, while transit is important, a fuller definition of connectivity embraces not only access and transit, but also the nature and density of other kinds of connection: the civic ties, transnational networks, everyday interactions and communities of practice that embody a networked connectivity between and among societies and social spaces (Ohanyan 2022). The South Caucasus connectivity debate has unfortunately remained overwhelmingly focused on a 'thin' conception of connectivity focused on large, state-directed infrastructural

<sup>1</sup> Заявление Президента Азербайджанской Республики, Премьер-министра Республики Армения и Президента Российской Федерации [Statement by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and the President of the Russian Federation], 10 November 2020, kremlin.ru. Available at: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64384> (accessed 22 February 2023).

projects, rather than a ‘thicker’ conception of connectivity encompassing actors and spaces beyond the state.

An important implication is that the resulting advocacy for connectivity heavily simplifies its presumed impact, essentially arguing that increased economic interdependencies will as a matter of course have pacifying effects. Yet numerous conflict settings have demonstrated that connectivity is no guarantee of peace absent a wider political transformation in relations or transformation of key power asymmetries. For example, by the late 1980s, some 40% of the Palestinian workforce was employed in Israel, while the Israeli economy was in turn dependent of this substantial source of cheap and precarious labour. Yet this highly asymmetric economic relationship did little to restrain the onset of the First Intifada, which would begin in December 1987 and last six years (Black 2017: 274).

The history of India and Pakistan is also instructive. Part of the same economic space prior to partition, India and Pakistan enjoyed deep trade relations, with India being Pakistan’s largest trading partner, in their early independence period. Yet this did not contain their descent into war over Kashmir in 1965. Trade subsequently continued throughout the two countries’ enduring rivalry, continuing even after 164 people were killed in the Mumbai attacks in November 2008.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has interrogated the foundational premise of Germany’s *Wandel durch Handel* (‘transformation through trade’) policy. This policy assumed that trading with authoritarian regimes would over time induce political change, leading Germany to uphold a strategic relationship with Russia in the field of energy (specifically through the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project) despite growing international criticism. Russia’s invasion, however, forced upon Germany a watershed moment (*Zeitenwende*) and the discrediting of the *Wandel durch Handel* notion (Blumenau 2022).

These examples in different ways suggest that more caution and complexity are needed when thinking about trade’s transformative potential for Armenia and Azerbaijan. The privileging of ‘thin’ connectivity as an instrument for geopolitical ambitions, its separation from a wider mindset that cooperation should bring benefits for all, and its embedding—rather than transformation—of asymmetric power relations can all dilute or block trade’s pacifying effects. Economic relations can transform conflict when mutually embedded with commitments to a set of values and rules. This is evident in the history of the world’s most successful trading bloc: the European Union (EU). While the EU is widely understood as an economic community, it is also a mnemonic community founded on the collective memory of the Second World War and

the Holocaust, and a consensus on the inadmissibility of war, conquest and genocide (Subotić 2019: 34–36).

### The Securitisation of Connectivity

Rather than being linked to a political transformation or commitments to certain values or rules, connectivity in the South Caucasus has instead become mired in coercive tactics and pressure (Broers 2021). This accounts for a second feature of connectivity debates: the securitisation of connectivity as a public good in which fundamental, even existential, security is implicated, isolating connectivity from positive sum calculations of benefits for all. This played out in a highly securitised vision of connectivity that could be understood, at its most reductive, as ‘a corridor for a corridor’ as applied to the two key routes that have been the focus of Armenian-Azerbaijani disagreements.

These are, firstly, the Lachin Corridor connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to the Republic of Armenia, the existence and status of which have a constant agenda item since talks began due to Karabakh’s enclave geography. The Lachin Corridor is referenced as such in the ceasefire statement, where it was allocated to the supervision of the Russian peacekeeping force. This provision thereby embedded a diminished Azerbaijani sovereignty over the corridor for as long as the Russian peacekeeping mission is present (its first term ends in 2025 and is subject to automatic renewal unless Azerbaijan or Armenia request the termination of its presence—which Baku has indicated it may do). That situation drove Azerbaijani concerns over the lingering compromising of its sovereignty, leading to Azerbaijan’s establishment of a checkpoint at the entrance to the corridor on 23 April 2023 and, in effect, its dissolution as a corridor strictly understood.

The second route, alluded to in Article 9 in the reference to ‘unimpeded movement of citizens, vehicles and goods in both directions’ between mainland Azerbaijan and its exclave Nakhchivan across southern Armenia. In Azerbaijan, this route has been dubbed the ‘Zangezur Corridor’, with ‘unimpeded movement’ assumed to imply an element of extra-territoriality.<sup>3</sup> The idea of an Azerbaijani easement across southern Armenia is not new; it was first brought up as part of negotiations in the 1998–2001 period. Current disagreements focus on whether this second route would constitute a corridor with elements of extra-territoriality diminishing Armenian sovereignty, or provide for secure transit within the framework of Armenian sovereignty.

The ‘Zangezur Corridor’ became a new national cause in Azerbaijan. President Ilham Aliyev hailed the

2 In 2015–16, Indian-Pakistani trade was estimated at US\$2.2 billion (Zaidi et al. 2017).

3 Zangezur is a historical place-name used in both Armenia and Azerbaijan.

notional corridor as a historic achievement, while his threat to take it by force further elevated the 'Zangezur Corridor' to an issue of national security. Another explanation is that the 'Zangezur Corridor' is a 'bait and break' negotiating gambit, threatening Armenia with a worse outcome if it does not concede on the core issue of Karabakh's status (Ahmadzada 2023). Armenian perspectives, conversely, highlight that access to Karabakh cannot be equated with access to Nakhchivan, since the latter is neither under a total blockade nor has it been the site of active warfare (Libaridian 2023).

Discussions of the 'Zangezur Corridor' have unfolded in Azerbaijan in parallel to a mainstreaming of wider irredentist narratives that in varying versions lay claim to the south-eastern parts or the whole of Armenia. These claims are not new, having been developed since around 2010 in a mirroring response to Armenian irredentist claims on large parts of western Azerbaijan, but have accelerated in scope and dissemination since Azerbaijan's victory in 2020 (Jafarli 2022). Rather than a supportive wider politics embedding connectivity in a transformation of regional relations, the result is an ambivalent, dualistic approach combining a new discourse of connectivity and interdependencies as a pathway to peace with an old discourse of irredentism and historical claims that inevitably securitise new transit infrastructure as a source of threat and encroachment.

The potential for connectivity to be weaponised under these conditions was demonstrated in the civilian blockade of the Lachin Corridor that began on 12 December 2022 and ended five days after the establishment of the Azerbaijani checkpoint on 23 April 2023. While claim and counterclaim surround the reasons for the blockade, its practical impact has been to isolate the civilian population in Nagorno-Karabakh, which according to the International Committee of the Red Cross (2023) is experiencing shortages of medicines, baby formula and basic foodstuffs, reduced healthcare necessitating medical evacuations, and separation from family in Armenia. The result is the 'humanitarianisation' of the Karabakh Armenian population, whereby continued existence in the territory is dependent on humanitarian mediation, access and aid. The Lachin Corridor blockade underlines the ambivalence of connectivity in the South Caucasus today, framed discursively as a benefit for all but securitised in state practice to target particular groups.

In the longer term, a key stakeholder in connectivity will be Azerbaijan's returnee population. After decades in displacement, these communities will return to what are the most remote parts of mainland Azerbaijan geographically and economically, given the concentration of the country's development on the Abshehon peninsula. Secure connectivity will be an essential component of establishing viable, long-term commu-

nities in what will likely be, at least initially, a precarious, frontier existence.

### The Conservatism of Connectivity

A third feature of the current approach to connectivity in the South Caucasus that needs consideration is its conservatism, meaning its preservation of geopolitics of great power overlay. If the arrangements foreseen in the 9 November 2020 ceasefire statement were to come to fruition, then it is Russia that would emerge as a key beneficiary, since it is Russian security agencies—its peacekeeping mission in Nagorno-Karabakh and the Russian Border Service, respectively—who are designated as the guardians of the two key transit routes stipulated in the statement through the Lachin Corridor and southern Armenia. This would establish Russian control over two of the key routes in the South Caucasus, the significance of which for Russia's own connectivity having grown tremendously as a result of its war in Ukraine, its increased dependence on Turkey and its growing strategic intimacy with Iran.

Russia's role as the 'policeman' of securitised Armenian-Azerbaijani transit is predicated on continued conditions of insecurity and, by implication, adversarial relations between the two nations. The underlying approach assumes the preservation of the fragmented geography inherited from colonial rule, and the need for compensatory 'safe corridors', rather than the building of an inclusive regional governance infrastructure that would diminish the political salience of adversarial identities and their associated territorial boundaries.

This is a fundamentally conservative approach, reviving a neo-imperial geopolitics of the South Caucasus rather than advancing a post-colonial emancipation of the region from external influences. The logic of Russian-supervised corridors essentially assumes that no bilateral, sovereign or civil framework exists for territorially fragmented communities to communicate with one another. Their access to each other is instead to be mediated by a distant metropole. This perspective highlights the ironies underlying current discussions of connectivity in the South Caucasus. Connectivity, framed as a new horizon of peace-inducing interdependencies, may instead deliver a securitised connectivity that is the base enabling condition for increased Russian presence and, potentially, the embedding of the South Caucasus in a new post-Ukraine war network of limited and hegemonic connectivity.

### Conclusion

Two different visions and logics of connectivity are in play in the South Caucasus today. The predominant vision, detailed in the ceasefire statement and discussions of corridors, emphasises risk, danger and a need for safe passage across enemy territory, necessitating security guarantees of

neighbouring powers. The key actors in this vision of connectivity are states, and it is a thin form of connectivity between ‘state spaces’—between mainlands and exclaves/enclaves, between buyers and suppliers of core commodities, between allied states in special relationships, and between former metropole and peripheries—that is emphasised.

An alternative vision of connectivity would emphasise de-securitisation and the advancement of a regional governance infrastructure predicated on rights and citizenship. Alongside states, this alternative vision emphasises the necessity of including societal actors to generate thicker, multi-sectoral and networked forms of regional connectivity beyond state-managed linkages in key commodities and infrastructural projects. This

vision calls for greater attention to be paid to the agency of communities of practice in social spaces beyond the state, allowing for thick connectivity at multiple levels to take hold (Lehti/ Romashov 2022).

Connectivity in the South Caucasus lies at an impasse between these different horizons, between neo-imperial, sovereign and civic forms of agency, between thick and thin understandings of who or what needs to be connected, and their implications for regional hegemony and political incumbency. This impasse has blocked breakthroughs on connectivity over the last two years, leaving it to the devastating human tragedy of the earthquakes in Turkey to finally account, after three decades of desuetude, for the opening of a border.

#### *About the Author*

Laurence Broers is Co-Director of the South Caucasus Programme at peacebuilding organisation Conciliation Resources. He is the author of *Armenia and Azerbaijan: Anatomy of a Rivalry* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019) and co-founded the first scholarly journal dedicated to the Caucasus, *Caucasus Survey*. He also serves as associate fellow at the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House.

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