

THE GEOSTRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF SYUNIK: BALANCING REGIONAL AND GLOBAL POWERS

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Abstract

Syunik, the southern region of Armenia, occupies a pivotal and geostrategic position at the intersection of diverse cultures and geopolitical interests, due to its geographical position and natural resources.

After the 44-day Artsakh War in 2020, the issue of unblocking communication channels was raised again. In this context, projects promoted by different states, are studied, particularly, the importance of Syunik in those programs.

Thus, the article explores the intricate layers of Syunik's strategic relevance, examining its impact on regional stakeholders and global powers alike.

Keywords: Historical geography, Syunik, Armenia, International North-South Transport Corridor, “Persian Gulf-Black Sea” project, “The Crossroads of Peace” project.

Introduction

For centuries, Armenia's territory has served as a vital bridge connecting trade routes from east to west and from south to north. However, the recent military-political and geopolitical shifts following the 44-day Artsakh War in the South Caucasus region have once again brought the question of unblocking communication channels to the forefront.

This article aims to underscore the geostrategic importance of the Syunik region of the Republic of Armenia (RA) amidst historical and contemporary regional processes. In our exploration, we delve into several key aspects, including Syunik's historical-geographic location, its abundant natural resources, the historical context of geopolitical struggles waged over the region by both regional and global powers, and the current challenges it faces.

By delving into these issues, this study provides a nuanced analysis and deep understanding of the current geopolitical dynamics in the region, particularly concerning geostrategic interests.

Materials and methods

The article is interdisciplinary and based on geographic determinism theory. According to the theory, the geographical conditions are determining factors in the process of social development.

The article explores the theme, mainly through the aspects of geostrategic review, having the principles of The Strategic Balance of Power and The Correlation of Forces. The principle of historicity is used in the article. The research methodology is based on a combination of sources, comparative-historical analysis, and case study methods. The article is written based on primary sources, including archives, and scientific literature.

Results and Discussion

Historical-geographical Description and Natural Resources of Syunik

Syunik (also known as Sisakan), was the 11th province of historical Armenia, known as Greater Hayk. It was bordered by the provinces of Ayrarat and Vaspurakan to the west, Gugark and Utik to the north, Artsakh to the east, and the Araks (Yeraskh) river to the south, which separated it from Atropatene and Media (Northern Iran)¹. The province of Syunik was divided into 12 administrative-territorial districts². Covering an area of 15,237 square kilometers, it was considered the hereditary homeland of the Syunyats ruling dynasty³. Later in this region was formed the Kingdom of Syunik (987-1170). The administrative boundaries of the Kingdom encompassed the southeastern part of the historical Syunik province. Geographically, this region comprised the Zangezur Mountain Range to the west, the Araks River to the south, the Hagarj River to the east, and the volcanic massif of Ishkhanasar to the north⁴.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, Syunik was referred to as “The World or Land of Ghapanu (Kapanu)”, owing to the prominence of its main and powerful fortress⁵. It's worth noting that all fortresses and fortifications of state importance in historical Armenia were typically constructed on major communication routes⁶.

In the 19th century, Syunik came to be known as Zangezur, occupying the geographical area between the Zangezur and Karabakh mountain ranges and the Araks

¹ Orbelyan 1859: 5.

² Chopin 1852: 66-67.

³ Yeremyan 1963: 81.

⁴ Hakobyan 1966: 5.

⁵ Alishan 1893: 3.

⁶ Sayadyan 2020: 76.

River⁷.

Today, Syunik is the southern marz (region) of the Republic of Armenia, bordering the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Armenian Iranian border stretches for 42 kilometers.

Syunik is renowned for its abundant natural minerals, especially copper and molybdenum. Rich reserves of these minerals are found particularly in the Katar-Kavarti region, the upper reaches of the Voghji River, near the city of Kajaran, 7 km northwest of Meghri, adjacent to the Agarak settlement, in the Sisian region. The earliest documented mention of copper mines in Katar dates back to the 14th century⁸.

Between 1840-1860, 11 copper smelting factories were established in Zangezur⁹. In the result, these smelters supplied 3-5% of the annual copper production in the Russian Empire.

In 1932, the Ghapan-Minjevan railway commenced operations, leading to the abolition of copper transportation by carts. Subsequently, in 1935, the Ghapan mining beneficiation factory, equipped with modern facilities, began operations. On January 30, 1941, the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Armenia decided to construct a copper molybdenum combine in Zangezur. As a result, this plant was established in Kajaran in 1951¹⁰. Today, "Zangezur copper molybdenum combine" is the largest taxpayer of the Republic of Armenia¹¹.

Historical Context: Geopolitical Struggle of Regional and Global Powers for Syunik

In his seminal work, the distinguished American diplomat Henry Kissinger emphasized that in the different historical periods, world has comprised several countries of comparable power, and therefore must establish its order based on one of the concepts of balance¹². Even though during its thousands of years of political history, Armenia was endowed with the degree of sovereignty (independence, autonomy), or whether this sovereignty was extended to all of Armenia or any of its constituent parts (Cilicia, Artsakh, or Syunik). Armenia has consistently been an essential component of the military-political, and economic structures of the Middle Eastern region, influencing the balance of power therein. Consequently, Armenia's neighbors, Iran, Rome, Byzantium, the Arab Caliphate, and later the Ottoman Empire and Russian Empire have been compelled to consider the Armenian factor to varying extents in their political strategies and quests for dominance in the Middle East and conquest policies¹³.

⁷ Lisitsyan 1969: 11.

⁸ Hakobyan 1966: 24.

⁹ Aslanyan and Avetisyan 1975: 80-81.

¹⁰ Aslanyan and Avetisyan 1975: 84-87.

¹¹ See more in detail in "Zangezur Copper Molybdenum Combine". Accessed March 10, 2024. <http://www.zcmc.am/eng/our-company/who-we-are/>

¹² Kissinger 1997: 11.

¹³ Hovhannisyan 1996: 9.

Armenia and the Transcaucasia, situated geographically between the Caucasus Mountain range, the Black and Caspian seas, the Asia Minor peninsula, and the Iranian plateau, have served (and continue to serve) as a bridge connecting the East and the West. Particularly, transit land routes of international trade passing through Armenia¹⁴ have connected Europe and Asia. Despite the decline in land trade due to the discovery of the sea route to India (circumventing the Cape of Good Hope) and later the construction of the Suez Canal, the renowned Silk Road through Persia (Iran) and Armenia has retained its strategic significance¹⁵.

In 1453, the capture of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks led to a significant shift in the strategic balance of power in the Middle East, which also affected the Caucasus region¹⁶. Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, Armenia became a focal point for Turkish-Persian wars, ultimately resulting in the division of Armenia between the two powers. The Turks, in particular, gained the larger portion of Armenia¹⁷. In fact, Armenia turned into a “buffer zone”. According to N. Spykman, the existence of small buffer states is due to the balance of power between the great powers, and “when the balance disappears, the small states usually disappear with it”¹⁸. In the 20s of the 18th century, the regions (Melikdoms) of semi-independent Armenian Syunik (Ghapan) and Artsakh, emerged in the strategic balance of power among the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire, and the Persian state, owing to their geostrategic position, trade-economic potential, and military strength. In 1724, when Ottoman troops invaded Transcaucasia, the geostrategic position (importance) of Artsakh and Syunik, along with their local military capabilities¹⁹, played a pivotal role in the formation of the Armenian-Persian military alliance in 1727. This alliance was solidified by the Shah of Persia's recognition of Davit Bek's rule in Syunik and granting the Armenians the right to mint drams. Subsequently, on June 14, 1735, the joint Armenian-Persian forces, led by Nadir Khan (who later became Shah in 1736), achieved a decisive victory against the Ottoman army in the battle of Yeghvard. This victory ensured the survival of the Armenian people within the Persian state and prompted Nadir Shah to grant numerous privileges to the Armenian Meliks²⁰.

Thus, the victorious battle of Yeghvard thwarted Turanian expansion to the east and reinstated the balance of power in the region. This equilibrium persisted until the

¹⁴ The military and commercial roads of historical Armenia are represented in the ancient Roman map known as the “Tabula Peutingeriana”. See more in detail in Manandyan 1936.

¹⁵ On the strategic significance of the trade routes of New Period (contemporary) Armenia, see more in detail in Rouben 1948.

¹⁶ Throughout history, the Caucasus region has been a scene of conflict between the interests of the Great Powers, and it is no coincidence that Karl Haushofer, the leading representative of German geopolitics, classified the Caucasus as one of the so-called “zones of struggle”. See more in detail in Haushofer 2001.

¹⁷ Chardin 1902: 240.

¹⁸ Spykman 1942: 20.

¹⁹ See more in detail in Ayvazyan 2022.

²⁰ Bournoutian 1992: 4. Melik is a hereditary Armenian noble title given to Armenian lords under Persian rule.

early 19th century when Transcaucasia was absorbed into the Russian Empire.

By the early 20th century, Transcaucasia had acquired significant political, economic, and strategic significance, including due to the availability of huge oil reserves in Baku. Consequently, the clash of geostrategic interests among the world's empires in this region became inevitable during the First World War.

Following the collapse of the Russian Empire at the end of the First World War, three republics emerged in Transcaucasia by the end of May 1918: the Republic of Georgia, the Republic of Armenia, and the Republic of Azerbaijan. During the negotiations in Batumi in May 1918, Vehib Pasha, the commander of the Ottoman army on the Caucasian front, conveyed to the Armenian delegation: "You Armenians are impeding our access to Persia by insisting on Nakhichevan and Zangezur. You prevent us from going down the Kura valley leading to Baku, Kars, and Akhalkalak and block our way to Gazakh and Ganja. Armenians should step aside and allow Turk's passage to the East, encompassing Transcaucasia, Dagestan, and Central Asia"²¹. Months later, Khalil Pasha proposed the following diplomatic solution during a meeting with the Minister of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, Aram Manukyan: to concede only the small Meghri region to them, in exchange for promising most of Zangezur. The underlying motive behind this "generosity" was that the direct route from Julfa-Ordubad-Meghri-Alyat-Baku opened the gateway to the entire Turanian world²².

On September 15 of the same year, the armed forces of the Republic of Azerbaijan, in collaboration with the Ottoman army, seized control of Baku. The city was declared the new capital of Azerbaijan. As the Prime Minister of Azerbaijan, Fatali Khan Khoyski remarked that Baku was considered "the second Istanbul of the Turkic world"²³. Khan-Khoyski also noted that "this development marked the realization of Azerbaijan's Turkish identity, symbolized by its alignment with the Ottoman Caliphate. The long-held ideal of pan-Islamism, aiming to unite all under the green flag of the Sultan, was finally coming to fruition. The arrival of Turkish "liberation forces" was eagerly anticipated by the peoples of the Caucasus highlands, the Turks, and Kyrgyz of Turkestan, the Sarts, the Khivas, and the Bukharans of the Trans-Caspian region, as well as Afghanistan and the vast territory of India"²⁴.

In the context outlined above, it was noteworthy the Secretary of Foreign Affairs of Great Britain G. Curzon promoted the geostrategic theory of the "Armenian wedge". Specifically, he stated that a great Pan-Muslim or Pan-Turan movement could develop and, for the sake of global peace, "it was desirable to create a division between the Muslims of Turkey and those of the East by establishing a Christian community, which would form the basis of the new Armenian state"²⁵. The presence of that "wedge" was mainly determined by the geographical location of Syunik, the capture of which and the

²¹ Badalyan 1980: 63.

²² Rouben 1925: 100.

²³ NAA. fund 200. inv. 1. list 7. sheets 159.

²⁴ Simonyan 2017: 61.

²⁵ Lloyd 1938: 1307.

plan to cut off Armenia from Iran became the main concern for the Turkish-Azerbaijani alliance.

On October 29, 1919, a Turkish-Azerbaijani offensive-defensive agreement was signed by M. Djemal Pasha, Chief of the General Staff of the Ottoman Army, and M. Kerimov, representative of the Musavat Azerbaijani government. According to the first point of the agreement, in case of an external threat to the territorial integrity of one of the states, both parties were obliged to act jointly. Under this agreement, the Ottoman Empire assumed responsibility for organizing the Azerbaijani army, including the training of officers and instructors²⁶. This agreement was reaffirmed on April 15, 1920, with the signing of the Military Convention between the nationalist movement led by Mustafa Kemal in Turkey and the Musavat government of Azerbaijan. According to Article 5 of the Convention, the Azerbaijani government pledged to facilitate military cooperation between the Turkish nationalist movement and the Soviet Russian government, with the condition of entering an alliance with the latter if necessary (to be Sovietized - H.N., V.H.). Additionally, according to Articles 7 and 16, "the parties agreed to unite their forces against Armenia in case of an attack on Azerbaijan by Armenia or if the Paris Peace Conference allocated the eastern provinces of Turkey to the Republic of Armenia".²⁷ Subsequently, the Turkish-Azerbaijani alliance evolved into a Turkish (Kemalist)-Azerbaijani-Russian (Bolshevik) tripartite alliance. However, Azerbaijan's territorial ambitions for Syunik faced military resistance of Armenian forces led by Garegin Nzhdeh over several years²⁸. Ultimately, Syunik was confirmed as part of Soviet Armenia, as verified by the Moscow agreement on March 16, 1921, and the agreement of Kars on October 13, 1921.

Geostrategic Significance of Syunik in Modern Times

The Second Artsakh War (also known as the 44-Day War) in 2020 brought about significant alterations to the political map of the South Caucasus. Particularly, a trilateral ceasefire accord, mediated by the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin and endorsed by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan, and the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, completely altered the dynamics of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Notably, the ninth clause of the 2020 ceasefire announcement mandates the unblocking of all economic and transport channels in the region, with provisions for the construction of new transport links. Control over transport communication shall be exercised by the Border Service of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation²⁹. This clause addresses the

²⁶ NAA. fund 275. inv. 5. list 184. sheets 67.

²⁷ NAA. fund 200. inv. 1. list 33. sheets 43-44.

²⁸ See more in detail in Simonyan 2017; Georgian 1991.

²⁹ The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia. 2020. Statement by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and the President of the Russian Federation. Accessed January 19, 2024. <https://bit.ly/4eRmv4L>

closure of various transport routes both on roads and railways since the early 1990s. Unblocking important transport routes could be of key importance not only for the South Caucasian states, but also for regional and global powers, both economically and politically. If implemented as outlined, one of the most conspicuous consequences would be the reactivation of an east-west as well as north-south trade ways. Especially, the reactivating of a relatively modest Yerevan-Nakhichevan-Julfa-Tabriz railway between the Republic of Armenia, the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic (Azerbaijan), and the Islamic Republic of Iran could significantly enhance the feasibility of the 7,200-kilometer (4,400-mile) International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)³⁰. It is worth noting that the reactivating of this railway will not only significantly reduce travel time between destinations but also enhance transportation efficiency, leading to a substantial increase in cargo capacity and facilitating the transportation of goods. This, in turn, is expected to stimulate economic activity and foster greater trade connections between the areas connected by the railway.

The inception of the INSTC stemmed from the collaborative vision of India, Russia, and Iran, which was later joined by 10 other countries, including Armenia, aiming to promote strategic partnership and economic cooperation by bolstering connectivity across Central Asia. While initial progress was sluggish, the project has undergone significant expansion, with the potential to extend its reach to Northern Europe. However, extending its geographical scope to such an extent and fully leveraging its vast potential is expected to be a time-consuming endeavour. Challenges such as sanctions on Iran and Russia, securing sufficient economic resources, and limited private sector involvement persist. Nevertheless, as development on the corridor continues, there remains ample opportunity to address structural issues and adapt the project accordingly³¹.

One of the key communications of South Caucasian region passes through the Syunik region of Armenia. The land route in the Syunik region of Armenia holds significant geopolitical importance and has the potential to significantly influence the transportation and communication infrastructure that has developed in the region in recent decades.

For Armenia, given the closure of two out of its four borders, maintaining relations with Iran is crucial, providing a significant alternative to Georgia's dominant role as Armenia's primary trade corridor. While Armenia's ability to serve as a complete "bridge" to Iran may be limited, Yerevan possesses strategic advantages to capitalize on as it seeks to strengthen its ties with Iran. One such advantage lies in Armenia being Iran's sole stable and amicable neighbour in the region, positioning it uniquely to offer Iran a means to alleviate its isolation. Another advantage is that, while Iran has access to maritime trade routes with Russia via the Caspian Sea and with the West through Persian Gulf ports, only Armenia presents a dependable overland route, particularly

³⁰ De Waal 2021.

³¹ Cheema 2020.

appealing to Iran amidst tensions with Azerbaijan. This land route holds tangible potential for expanding road and rail connections and establishing a broader energy infrastructure network, with the existing natural gas pipeline between Iran and Armenia serving as a foundation for further energy transport expansion and Armenian exports of surplus electricity to Iran³².

The relationship between Armenia and Azerbaijan, both of which share land borders with Iran, has sparked concerns in Tehran regarding its potential regional ramifications. One of the most immediate consequences of this crisis for Iran is the disruption of its transit routes. Azerbaijani actions in the Syunik region pose a threat to Iran's access to Armenia, a route of significant importance for connecting Iran to Europe via Armenia. Baku's breach of the trilateral agreement reached in November 2020, aimed at ensuring smooth transit through this region, has exacerbated tensions. In early 2021, Azerbaijani forces seized control of the road linking the Iranian border to Yerevan and detained Iranian truck drivers under allegations of illegal border crossing. This dispute has strained relations between Iran and Azerbaijan. Tehran perceives Azerbaijan's policies towards Armenia as an effort to depict Armenia as an unreliable alternative route for the INSTC, of which Iran is a major participant³³.

The tension between Azerbaijan and Iran peaked when the President of Azerbaijan I. Aliyev and the President of Turkey R. Erdogan floated the idea of the so-called "Zangezur Corridor"³⁴ and announced their readiness to open it by force. Azerbaijani armed aggression against the sovereign territory of the Republic of Armenia occurred in November 2021 and September 2022, aimed at resolving this issue. In response, the Islamic Republic of Iran declared the inadmissibility of changing the internationally recognized borders between states in the South Caucasus and even threatened military intervention³⁵. Iran also informed the Turkish side about this position, stating that "if efforts are made to block the border between Iran and Armenia, the Islamic Republic will oppose it, because this border has been a communication route for thousands of years"³⁶.

On October 21, 2022, the opening of the Consulate General of Iran in the city of Kapan, Syunik region, seems to be a direct message to Azerbaijan and Turkey. Iran is the first country to establish a diplomatic mission in Syunik, which Baku and Ankara are seeking. In this way, Iran reaffirms its position that any change in its borders and transit

³² Giragosian 2021: 148-149.

³³ Bazoobandi 2022: 15-17.

³⁴ Azerbaijan is endeavoring to situate this within the framework of the China's initiative "Middle Corridor", also known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, which spans from East to West. It is part of the New Silk Road. Azerbaijan seeks China's political backing in this endeavor. A train comprising 61 containers traversed the 7,000-kilometer route from Xian to Absheron via the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), arriving in Baku within 11 days. See more in detail in Kenderdine and Bucskey 2021; Omirgazy 2024.

³⁵ Mammadi 2023; Iran International, 2023.

³⁶ "Azatutyun" Radio Station, 2022.

connections with Armenia would be a “red line” that it would not tolerate crossing³⁷. Iran's stance is influenced by threats to its interests on both geopolitical such as preventing the unification of the Turkic world, which could potentially activate separatist aspirations in its northern Turkic-speaking province of Azarbaijan, and geo-economic such as the implementation of the “Persian Gulf-Black Sea” project initiated by Iran in 2016³⁸. This project aims to unite Georgia, Armenia, Iran, and India.

Armenia's participation in this program is also important from India's point of view. On March 8, 2021, India's ambassador to Iran, Gaddam Dharmendra, announced that India plans to connect the Chabahar port³⁹ (a seaport in the southeast of Iran, where India has invested heavily) and the Indian Ocean through the territory of Armenia with Eurasia and Helsinki, creating INSTC, adding that New Delhi plans to make Chabahar the most important and busiest port in the region. INSTC will help India to have smooth access to Central Asia and other countries through the territory of Iran. Geopolitically and geo-economically, INSTC is also seen as New Delhi's counter-strategy to China's One Belt, One Road initiative, given the fact that China is India's rival in the region⁴⁰. Over the past three years, the collaboration between India and Armenia has surged significantly, particularly with the establishment of a burgeoning defense and security partnership. Notably, India has explicitly expressed its intention to ally with Yerevan in the South Caucasus, citing shared strategic interests in the region. This partnership is seen as crucial for balancing the influence of the “Three Brothers” alliance comprising Pakistan, Turkey, and Azerbaijan. Through bilateral and multilateral engagements, such as Armenia-India-Iran and Armenia-India-France-Greece, Armenia gains a valuable strategic ally in a region where Turkish dominance looms large⁴¹.

India, Iran, and Armenia had formed a trilateral partnership aimed at exploring the transport corridor. During a meeting convened in Yerevan in April 2023, representatives from the three countries deliberated on economic ventures, regional communication networks, and the potential for enhancing cultural exchanges. Armenia has come to rely on India as a dependable source of weapons tailored to its specific requirements⁴². In fact, Armenia has become the main importer of Indian-made weapons. The military-technical cooperation between the two states creates a possibility for Armenia to get access to new military technologies, including western advanced technologies, which are used to develop the military-industrial complex of India⁴³. In this case, Iran's logistical role also increases, because Iran provides its air and land routes for this transportation. In fact, an informal “trilateral alliance” between India, Iran, and Armenia has been formed in the political, economic, and defense spheres.

³⁷ Motamedi 2022.

³⁸ Sargsyan 2021.

³⁹ See more in detail in Haji-Yousefi and Narouei 2021; Akbari, Ghazi and Ghaffarlou 2022.

⁴⁰ Tashjian 2022: 161-163.

⁴¹ Antonyan 2023.

⁴² “The Times of India”, 2023.

⁴³ Nazaryan 2023: 28.

The changing dynamics of the region create opportunities for the implementation of new projects and directions of communication. One such project is the “Persian Gulf - Black Sea” initiative, which aligns with the geostrategic interests of India, Iran, Armenia, and Georgia, while sidelining the interests of Azerbaijan, Turkey and Russia. Armenia and Iran view the development of an alternative transport route, bypassing Azerbaijan, as a solution to regional challenges. Recent years’ official statements from both countries highlight their joint efforts in implementing the “Persian Gulf - Black Sea” project, which traverses Iran, Armenia, and Georgia, providing India with access to the European market. A new transit route for Iranian trucks within Armenia, via the Tatev-Kapan road, has already been established, as an alternative road to the previous route (a part of Goris-Kapan highway is under Azerbaijan's control since the end of 2020). In this case, the construction of new roads and the removal of blockades represent initial steps towards fostering a secure and dependable region. All communication passing through Armenia's territory should be under Armenian control. Additionally, for Yerevan, it is imperative to advance the India-Iran-Armenia-Georgia geostrategic axis, which not only benefits these countries but also the wider region by offering new communication opportunities⁴⁴.

Regarding Armenia's participation in this program, in February 2024, the reconstruction of the 32 km road section of the Kajaran-Agarak (Iranian border) of the “North-South Road” (total length 556 km) connecting the south of Armenia to the north was started⁴⁵. It should be the largest infrastructure project implemented in Armenia. The goals of the project are facilitating communication with neighbouring countries, expanding opportunities for access to foreign markets through communication routes stretching to Central Asia, Europe, development of the main sectors of the economy and expansion of exports (industry, agriculture, construction, and tourism), activation of internal population movements, etc. The construction of this road of strategic importance will ensure easy traffic from the southern border of Armenia to the border of Georgia, and to the Black Sea ports, will allow carrying out high-standard cargo and passenger transportation, will provide serious development opportunities to all settlements from the south to the north of Armenia⁴⁶.

The Government of the Republic of Armenia has also proposed a transformative initiative known as the Crossroads of Peace project. It seeks to establish vital transportation corridors linking Armenia to neighbouring countries along both the north-south and east-west axes. According to the Armenian Government, by facilitating the opening of regional transport routes, the Crossroads of Peace project aims to foster closer economic, political, and cultural ties among participating nations. Moreover, the project can contribute significantly to the promotion of peace and stability in the

⁴⁴ Ordukhanyan 2022: 316-317.

⁴⁵ Road Department Fund, 2024.

⁴⁶ Road Department Fund, 2023.

region⁴⁷. Simultaneously, the unblocking of communication channels enables Armenia's participation in both North-South Transport Corridor, and the China's "The One Belt, One Road"⁴⁸ geo-economic project.

Conclusion

As a result of our research, several key points emerge as a summary of the findings.

Firstly, owing to its geographical location and natural resources, Syunik has held significant military, strategic, and geostrategic importance throughout various historical epochs. Consequently, Syunik has been a focal point for military-political and geopolitical struggles among regional and global powers. For centuries, the Armenian territory has served as a pivotal bridge connecting trade routes from the east to the west and from the south to the north.

Secondly, following the 44-Day Artsakh War, a new military-political and geopolitical landscape emerged in the South Caucasus region, reemphasizing the need to address the issue of unblocking communication channels. Various regional and global entities envision the unblocking of communication channels in their distinct ways. Notably, the Republic of Azerbaijan has proposed the concept of the "Zangezur Corridor", which entails an extraterritorial corridor connecting its exclave, the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic, through the territory of the Syunik region of the Republic of Armenia. This corridor must be free from Armenian checkpoints and the imposition of customs duties as established by international law. On the other hand, the Russian Federation seeks to resume freight transportation between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan through the involvement of a third party, ideally under its supervision.

Thirdly, the proposal of the "Zangezur Corridor" by the Republic of Azerbaijan poses a threat not only to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Republic of Armenia but also to the Islamic Republic of Iran, Armenia's southern neighbour. Linked to the concept of the "Turanian Corridor", the implementation of this corridor would sever the southern Syunik region of the Republic of Armenia from the Islamic Republic of Iran, potentially fostering separatist tendencies in the Turkic-populated Azarbaijan province of northern Iran. Consequently, Iran views the threat to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Republic of Armenia and any alteration to the border between the Republic of Armenia and the Islamic Republic of Iran as a "Red Line", and it warns of the potential use of force in response.

Fourthly, at the same time, Syunik plays a crucial role in the implementation of the "Persian Gulf-Black Sea" (India-Iran-Armenia-Georgia) project proposed by Iran, which could potentially integrate into the larger "North-South" international transport initiative.

⁴⁷ The Government of the Republic of Armenia, 2023.

⁴⁸ See more in detail in Sahakyan 2018.

Iranian companies have been actively involved in constructing the southern segment of the “North-South” road within the territory of the Republic of Armenia, extending to the Iranian border. Furthermore, the Islamic Republic of Iran has leveraged its logistical capabilities to facilitate India's arms supplies to Armenia, thereby bolstering Armenia's security in collaboration with India. This stands in contrast to the Turkey-Azerbaijan-Pakistan tripartite alliance formed in the region.

Fifthly, alternatively, Armenia has introduced an ambitious initiative called the Crossroads of Peace project. This transformative endeavour aims to create essential transportation routes connecting Armenia with its neighbouring countries along both the north-south and east-west directions. By unblocking communication channels, Armenia can actively engage in both the North-South Transport Corridor and China's “The One Belt, One Road” geo-economic project.

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the Institute of Philosophy, Sociology, and Law of NAS RA for their invaluable contributions to this article. They also extend their appreciation to the editorial board of the “Fundamental Armenology” electronic journal.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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The article was delivered on 29.04.2024, reviewed on 20.05.2024, accepted for publication on 22.06.2024.