

THE “TRIPP” AS A STABILIZING FACTOR IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS? OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES*

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Abstract

The “TRIPP” initiative, although not formally codified as a singular institutional framework, can be conceptualized as a set of coordinated transport and infrastructure development projects in the South Caucasus aimed at enhancing interregional connectivity between Europe and Asia. Emerging in the context of renewed diplomatic engagement – particularly under the mediation of the United State – and potential agreements between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the initiative is increasingly associated with the strategic expansion of the Middle Corridor.

From a geopolitical and geo-economic perspective, TRIPP offers significant opportunities for regional stabilization. By fostering economic interdependence, infrastructure integration, and diversified transit routes, it may contribute to confidence-building and long-term peacebuilding in a region marked by over three decades of conflict and instability following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The emphasis on principles such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, and jurisdictional control constitutes a normative foundation for sustainable cooperation.

However, the initiative also entails notable challenges. Persistent political tensions, unresolved aspects of the Armenia-Azerbaijan former conflict, and competing regional narratives – such as Azerbaijan’s discourse on “Western Azerbaijan” and the concept of the “Zangezur Corridor” – introduce elements of strategic ambiguity and latent instability. These factors may

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undermine trust and complicate the implementation of cooperative infrastructure projects in the South Caucasus.

Furthermore, TRIPP must be situated within a broader geopolitical context involving regional and extra-regional actors, including Turkey, Iran, the European Union, and Russia, each pursuing distinct strategic and economic interests in the South Caucasus. The interplay of these actors shapes both the opportunities and constraints of this initiative where the principal role is played by the United States.

This study argues that while TRIPP holds the potential to function as a stabilizing factor by promoting regional connectivity and economic cooperation, its success will depend on the alignment of political will, the management of competing narratives, and the establishment of robust institutional mechanisms ensuring transparency, inclusivity, and respect for international norms.

Keywords: TRIPP, South Caucasus, opportunities, challenges, peacebuilding, interdependence, connectivity initiatives.

Introduction

The South Caucasus has a strategically significant position at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, functioning historically as both a bridge and a fault line between competing civilizations, empires, political interests, and geopolitical systems as well. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the region – comprising Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – has been characterized by persistent geopolitical fragmentation, unresolved territorial disputes, and the active involvement of external powers pursuing divergent strategic interests (Ordukhanyan et al., 2025, p. 206). These dynamics have produced a pattern of cyclical instability, where periods of fragile calm are interrupted by episodes of escalation and confrontation.

At the core of this instability lies the protracted conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, which has shaped regional security architectures and constrained opportunities for cooperation for more than three decades. The persistence of closed borders, limited regional integration, and securitized political discourse has resulted in the economic isolation of certain actors and the underdevelopment of regional connectivity. Consequently, the South Caucasus has remained relatively marginalized within broader Eurasian economic networks, despite its geographic potential.

In recent years, however, there has been a gradual shift in both regional and international approaches toward the South Caucasus. Increasingly, policymakers and scholars have emphasized the role of connectivity-driven

peacebuilding, which prioritizes economic integration, infrastructure development, and the reopening of transport routes as mechanisms for reducing tensions and fostering cooperation primarily between regional states. This shift reflects a broader transformation in global geopolitics, where connectivity – through routes, supply chains, and logistical networks – has become a central instrument of both economic development and strategic influence.

Within this evolving context, the “TRIPP” initiative emerges as a particularly relevant framework. Although not formally institutionalized or codified in a single agreement, TRIPP can be understood as a composite set of initiatives aimed at reopening and developing transport routes, modernizing infrastructure, and facilitating cross-border trade across the South Caucasus. Its scope includes rail and road connectivity, customs coordination, and the integration of regional transit systems into wider Eurasian networks.

The significance of TRIPP is further amplified by its connection to the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, commonly referred to as the Middle Corridor. As global supply chains undergo reconfiguration – driven by geopolitical tensions, economic diversification strategies, and the search for alternative transit routes – the Middle Corridor has gained increasing prominence as a viable link between East Asia, Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and Europe. In this context, the inclusion of the South Caucasus as a functional transit space enhances its strategic relevance, transforming it from a peripheral region into a potential hub of interregional connectivity.

At the same time, the emergence of TRIPP reflects the growing involvement of external actors, including the United States and the European Union, in promoting regional stability through economic and infrastructural engagement. These efforts intersect with the interests of neighboring regional powers such as Turkey, Iran, and Russia, thereby embedding TRIPP within a complex and often competitive geopolitical environment.

Against this backdrop, the present paper seeks to address the central research question: *Can TRIPP function as a stabilizing factor in the South Caucasus?* This question is particularly relevant given the region’s historical trajectory, where economic initiatives have often been subordinated to security concerns and political rivalries. The analysis proceeds from the hypothesis that while TRIPP possesses significant potential to foster stability through economic interdependence, infrastructure integration, and increased regional cooperation, its effectiveness remains fundamentally constrained by enduring geopolitical rivalries, unresolved conflicts, and the absence of robust institutional frameworks.

By examining TRIPP through multiple analytical lenses – geopolitical, geo-economic, and institutional – this study aims to contribute to the broader

debate on the role of connectivity in conflict transformation. It argues that TRIPP should not be understood as a standalone solution to regional instability, but rather as a conditional and complementary mechanism, whose success depends on its integration with political reconciliation processes, effective governance structures, and a balanced management of external influences.

In doing so, the paper situates the South Caucasus within the wider context of contemporary global transformations, where the interplay between infrastructure, power, and cooperation increasingly defines regional orders and shapes the prospects for peace and stability.

Research Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative, multi-method approach designed to analyze the potential of the TRIPP initiative as a stabilizing factor in the South Caucasus. Given the intersection of geopolitical, economic, and institutional dimensions, the methodology combines document analysis, case study evaluation, and theoretical application, allowing for both descriptive and analytical insights.

The study is structured as an exploratory, interpretive analysis. It examines TRIPP as a complex phenomenon embedded within the South Caucasus, considering both its material infrastructure components and its broader strategic and political implications. The design integrates three levels of analysis:

1. State-Level Analysis – Examining the interests, strategies, and constraints of primary regional actors in relation to TRIPP.
2. Regional System Analysis – Considering the South Caucasus as a strategic subsystem influenced by competing external powers, such as Russia, Turkey, Iran, the United States, and the European Union.
3. Global/Transnational Analysis – Evaluating TRIPP’s role within wider transcontinental connectivity frameworks, including the Middle Corridor, Belt and Road Initiative, and global trade networks.

This multi-scalar approach allows the study to assess both internal dynamics and external influences, providing a holistic understanding of TRIPP’s stabilizing potential.

The research data were collected from primary and secondary sources, including:

- Official documents and agreements: Statements, memoranda, and transport agreements involving regional and external actors.

- Policy reports and strategic analyses: Publications from think tanks, international organizations, and government agencies focused on regional infrastructure, connectivity, and geopolitics.
- Academic literature: Peer-reviewed journals and monographs on international relations theory, regional studies, and transport geopolitics.
- Media sources: Verified news reports providing updates on TRIPP-related developments and regional infrastructure projects.

Where possible, triangulation was applied to validate findings by comparing multiple sources for consistency, reliability, and context.

The analysis applies a theoretical triangulation combining:

1. Realism – To understand the influence of power dynamics, security concerns, and regional rivalries on TRIPP implementation.
2. Liberal Institutionalism – To assess how economic interdependence, trade facilitation, and potential institutional mechanisms may promote stability.
3. Connectivity Geopolitics – To examine how infrastructure routes function as strategic tools shaping regional influence and global trade networks.

This framework allows the research to identify both the stabilizing and constraining factors affecting TRIPP while situating the initiative within broader regional and global processes.

The study also employs a comparative case perspective, focusing on key aspects of TRIPP's implementation:

- Armenia-Azerbaijan transit cooperation: Examining the feasibility and political implications of Armenia's integration into regional routes.
- Middle Corridor integration: Evaluating the strategic, economic, and geopolitical implications for South Caucasus states and external actors.

This case-oriented approach provides context-specific insights while allowing extrapolation to broader regional patterns.

Nevertheless, the study has some limitations which are related to:

- *Data availability*: Some internal planning documents remain inaccessible, limiting the analysis to publicly available sources.
- *Rapidly changing context*: Geopolitical and infrastructure developments in the South Caucasus are dynamic, potentially affecting TRIPP implementation.

Despite these limitations, the methodology enables a robust and systematic evaluation of TRIPP's potential to foster regional stability and connectivity.

Theoretical Framework

The analytical assessment of the “TRIPP” initiative requires a multi-theoretical approach that captures the complexity of the South Caucasus as both a geopolitical and geo-economic space. No single theoretical paradigm sufficiently explains the interplay between conflict, cooperation, and infrastructure development in the region. Therefore, this study employs a complementary framework drawing on *realism*, *liberal institutionalism*, and *connectivity geopolitics*, each of which highlights distinct but interrelated dimensions of TRIPP’s potential and limitations.

From a *realist perspective*, international politics is fundamentally shaped by the pursuit of power, security, and survival within an anarchic system (Waltz, 1979). States prioritize relative gains and remain sensitive to shifts in the balance of power, particularly in strategically significant regions. The South Caucasus exemplifies such a context, where geographic location and historical legacies render it a persistent arena of geopolitical competition.

Within this framework, the region is not merely a space for cooperation but a *contested geopolitical frontier*. Russia has traditionally sought to preserve its influence as a dominant security actor, maintaining a presence through military, political, and economic instruments (Trenin, 2011). Its approach reflects a broader strategy of retaining leverage in its near abroad and preventing the emergence of alternative security architectures that could diminish its role.

Simultaneously, Turkey has expanded its regional footprint, particularly through its strategic partnership with Azerbaijan. This expansion combines economic integration, military cooperation, and infrastructural connectivity, aligning with Ankara’s broader vision of regional influence and transcontinental linkage (Cornell, 2001). Iran, for its part, adopts a cautious posture toward emerging transit configurations, particularly those that may bypass its territory or alter established regional balances.

From a *neorealist standpoint*, infrastructure initiatives such as TRIPP cannot be understood as politically neutral. Instead, they are embedded within broader power competition dynamics, where transport routes and connectivity projects function as instruments of strategic positioning. As a result, TRIPP may simultaneously promote cooperation and intensify rivalry, depending on how it redistributes influence and access across the region.

In contrast to realism, *liberal institutionalism* emphasizes the potential for cooperation under anarchy through institutions, norms, and economic interdependence (Keohane, 1984; Keohane & Nye, 1977). According to this perspective, states are not solely concerned with relative gains but can pursue absolute gains through mutually beneficial arrangements, particularly when institutional frameworks reduce uncertainty and facilitate coordination.

Infrastructure and connectivity projects play a central role in this logic. By increasing cross-border flows of goods, services, and capital, they create interdependence, which raises the economic costs of conflict and incentivizes peaceful interaction. Empirical studies have demonstrated that higher levels of trade and institutional engagement are associated with reduced likelihoods of conflict escalation (Oneal & Russett, 1999; Hover et al., 2025).

Within this framework, TRIPP can be interpreted as a mechanism for institutionalizing cooperation in the South Caucasus. The involvement of the European Union and the United States reflects efforts to promote a rules-based order grounded in transparency, legal norms, and multilateral engagement. Such involvement is consistent with broader liberal strategies aimed at stabilizing conflict-prone regions through economic integration and governance reforms.

However, liberal theory also acknowledges that institutions must be sufficiently robust to manage asymmetries and enforce commitments. In the absence of formalized mechanisms, interdependence may remain shallow and vulnerable to political disruption. Thus, while TRIPP aligns with liberal expectations of cooperation, its effectiveness depends on the degree to which it evolves into a structured and institutionalized framework.

Recent scholarship has introduced the concept of connectivity geopolitics, which bridges the gap between realist and liberal perspectives by emphasizing infrastructure as both an economic and strategic resource. Rather than viewing connectivity as inherently cooperative, this approach conceptualizes it as a form of power that shapes spatial relations, access, and influence (Khanna, 2016; Sidaway & Woon, 2017).

Connectivity geopolitics highlights that transport routes, energy networks, and digital infrastructure are not merely technical systems but political instruments that can include or exclude actors, redirect flows, and reconfigure regional hierarchies. In this sense, infrastructure becomes a means of exercising control over territory and economic interactions.

TRIPP fits squarely within this paradigm. As part of the broader Middle Corridor, it contributes to the reconfiguration of Eurasian connectivity by offering alternative routes that bypass traditional pathways. This reconfiguration has significant geopolitical implications, particularly in the context of efforts to diversify supply chains and reduce dependence on established transit routes.

Moreover, connectivity projects often generate asymmetric dependencies, where control over key nodes or routes confers strategic advantages. As a result, participation in TRIPP may enhance the influence of certain actors while constraining others, reinforcing the dual nature of connectivity as both a cooperative and competitive phenomenon.

Importantly, connectivity geopolitics also underscores the role of external actors in shaping regional infrastructure landscapes. Competing initiatives and overlapping route projects reflect broader struggles over influence, standards, and economic orientation. In the South Caucasus, this dynamic is evident in the interaction between regional powers and global actors, each seeking to embed their strategic preferences within emerging connectivity frameworks.

Taken together, these three perspectives provide a comprehensive analytical lens for understanding TRIPP:

- *Realism* highlights the constraints imposed by power competition and security concerns;
- *Liberal institutionalism* emphasizes the potential for cooperation through interdependence and institutions;
- *Connectivity geopolitics* integrates these dimensions by conceptualizing infrastructure as a strategic domain where cooperation and competition intersect.

This theoretical synthesis suggests that TRIPP should not be interpreted through a single paradigm. Rather, it represents a hybrid phenomenon, simultaneously enabling economic cooperation, reflecting geopolitical rivalry, and reshaping regional connectivity patterns.

Consequently, the stabilizing potential of TRIPP is inherently more conditional. It depends on the extent to which cooperative dynamics can be institutionalized, competitive pressures managed, and connectivity leveraged in a manner that aligns economic incentives with political stability.

Conceptualizing the TRIPP Initiative

First the “TRIPP” is officially announced in the Joint Declaration signed by Armenia, Azerbaijan and the United States in Washington on August 8, 2025*. In the context of this document TRIPP appears as a key infrastructure and regional integration initiative. It stands for the *Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity* (as referenced in U.S.-Armenia communications and policy analyses**). Within this declaration, TRIPP's mentions are primarily in relation to:

I. Regional Connectivity

- Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to facilitate the development of cross-Caucasus transit routes.

* See more in detail in Joint Declaration (Aug 8, 2025).

** See more in detail in Official Website of the Prime Minister of the RA. (2025); Avdaliani, E. (2025).

- TRIPP was presented as a route project linking Armenia with Azerbaijan and wider regional networks, aiming to integrate it into the so-called Middle Corridor connecting Europe and Asia.

2. *Peace Dividend*

- TRIPP is framed as both an economic and political instrument:
 - a) Economically: opening transport, trade, and investment routes.
 - a) Politically: fostering trust and cooperation between Armenia and Azerbaijan post-conflict.
- The declaration notes that cooperation under TRIPP would be undertaken in partnership with U.S. and mutually designated third-party entities.

3. *Implementation Framework*

- While the 2025 declaration mentions TRIPP in principle, details on governance, funding, and operationalization were deferred to subsequent frameworks (such as the *TRIPP Implementation Framework**, January 2026). This includes forming a development company, defining shares and investments, and establishing oversight mechanisms.

4. *Symbolic Significance*

- TRIPP is positioned as a flagship initiative of U.S.-facilitated peace efforts, signaling that economic interconnectivity can reinforce political reconciliation.

The “TRIPP” initiative should be understood not merely as a set of infrastructure projects, but as a comprehensive framework aimed at transforming the South Caucasus into a functional hub of regional and transcontinental connectivity. Its multidimensional nature reflects both economic and strategic objectives, linking national development priorities with broader geopolitical and global trade considerations.

TRIPP can be conceptualized as a multi-layered initiative with several interrelated dimensions:

1. *Transport Route Development:*

Central to TRIPP is the expansion and modernization of physical transport infrastructure, including railways, highways, and multimodal terminals. By improving both internal connectivity within each state and cross-border transport links, TRIPP aims to reduce logistical bottlenecks, shorten transit times, and increase the reliability of supply chains. This includes upgrading existing Soviet-era infrastructure,

* See more in detail in Official Website of the United States Government. (2026).

constructing new high-capacity routes, and ensuring interoperability with international standards.

2. *Trade Facilitation Mechanisms:*

Beyond physical infrastructure, TRIPP encompasses regulatory and procedural reforms designed to streamline cross-border trade. This involves harmonizing customs procedures, introducing digital tracking and monitoring systems, and reducing bureaucratic barriers that have historically slowed trade in the region. Efficient trade facilitation not only enhances economic performance but also fosters cooperation by creating tangible incentives for states to maintain open and predictable routes.

3. *Infrastructure Modernization:*

Modernization under TRIPP extends to ports, logistics hubs, energy grids, and telecommunications networks. Integrated infrastructure networks enable the South Caucasus to function as a cohesive transit region rather than a series of disconnected national territories. Modernization also increases the resilience of transport and trade systems against environmental, technical, and political disruptions (Jenelius & Mattsson, 2021).

4. *Integration into the Middle Corridor:*

TRIPP's strategic relevance is amplified by its alignment with the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Middle Corridor), which links East Asia to Europe through Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, and the South Caucasus (Rentschler et al., 2025). Integration into this corridor offers Armenia and Azerbaijan an opportunity to diversify trade routes, attract investment, and enhance their geopolitical relevance as transit states. By participating in a corridor that bypasses traditional routes through Russia or Iran, regional actors gain leverage in negotiating economic and political partnerships (Starr, 2026).

The emergence of TRIPP reflects a shift from conflict-centric to connectivity-centric regional policies. For decades, the South Caucasus was defined by contested borders, security dilemmas, and ethnopolitical tensions. TRIPP represents a conscious attempt to redirect attention toward shared economic opportunities, interdependence, and regional integration, signaling a potential reorientation of regional strategic thinking from zero-sum security dynamics to mutually beneficial connectivity.

The Middle Corridor, or the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, represents a critical strategic and economic framework for TRIPP (Halsey & Ali, 2026). This corridor connects China to Europe via Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, and the South Caucasus, offering an alternative to the northern route through Russia and the southern route through Iran and Turkey. Its

growth has been driven by global supply chain diversification, the expansion of Chinese trade under Belt and Road initiatives, and Europe's interest in secure, alternative logistics routes.

For Armenia, participation in the Middle Corridor is particularly significant. Historically, Armenia's landlocked geography, coupled with closed borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey, constrained its ability to participate in regional transit systems (Zakaryan, 2021). TRIPP opens the possibility for Armenia to become a functional node within transcontinental trade networks, enhancing both its economic prospects and geopolitical relevance. The development of Armenia-inclusive routes would reduce the country's historical isolation and contribute to regional interconnectivity by linking Armenian infrastructure to Azerbaijani, Georgian, and Caspian transport systems.

From a regional perspective, integration into the Middle Corridor allows the South Caucasus to collectively benefit from transcontinental trade flows, attracting foreign investment, promoting economic diversification, and creating incentives for political cooperation (Cooley & Nexon, 2020). The route thus functions simultaneously as an economic enabler and a strategic instrument, providing a platform for collaboration while embedding the region within broader global connectivity networks.

Moreover, TRIPP's alignment with the Middle Corridor reflects the convergence of national interests with extra-regional economic strategies, particularly those promoted by the European Union, the United States, and Chinese-led infrastructure initiatives. By linking local infrastructure development to international transit frameworks, TRIPP amplifies both economic potential and geopolitical significance, positioning the South Caucasus as a critical junction between Europe and Asia.

Opportunities for Regional Stabilization

TRIPP opens new perspectives and opportunities for regional stabilization which relates to several factors playing an important role on the way of economic interdependence, post-conflict peacebuilding, and strategic diversification.

As for the economic interdependence, it constitutes one of the central mechanisms through which the "TRIPP" initiative may contribute to regional stabilization in the South Caucasus. Rooted in liberal international relations theory, interdependence refers to a condition in which states become mutually reliant on cross-border flows of goods, capital, services, and infrastructure, thereby increasing the costs of conflict and incentivizing cooperation (Keohane & Nye, 1977; Moravcsik, 1997).

The liberal argument posits that trade and economic integration reduce the likelihood of interstate conflict by altering state preferences and raising opportunity costs. Empirical studies demonstrate that higher levels of bilateral trade are associated with a lower probability of militarized disputes (Oneal & Russett, 1999). From this viewpoint, TRIPP can be understood as a structural mechanism embedding Armenia and Azerbaijan in a network of mutual economic dependence.

However, this relationship is not linear or universally pacifying. Barbieri (2002) challenges the liberal assumption by demonstrating that interdependence may, under certain conditions, increase conflict propensity - particularly when it is asymmetrical. In such cases, the less dependent actor can exploit economic ties as a source of political leverage. This nuance is highly relevant in the South Caucasus, where disparities in economic size, energy resources, and external partnerships shape the structure of interdependence.

A key economic dimension of TRIPP lies in its capacity to transform the region into a transit hub within the Trans-Caspian corridor. Infrastructure development (railways, highways, and logistics hubs) can generate substantial transit revenues and stimulate economic activity. According to the World Bank (2019), transport corridor integration can significantly increase trade volumes and contribute to GDP growth in participating countries, particularly in landlocked regions.

For Armenia, improved connectivity may mitigate the structural constraints of partial economic isolation, while for Azerbaijan, it aligns with broader strategies of economic diversification beyond hydrocarbons. These developments create shared economic incentives that can reinforce cooperative behavior.

Transport and infrastructure integration under TRIPP is expected to reduce transaction costs, a critical factor in international trade theory. Lower transportation costs and improved logistical efficiency enhance competitiveness and expand market access. The World Bank (2019) estimates that corridor-based infrastructure improvements can reduce trade costs by up to 15–20% in some regions, depending on implementation quality and institutional coordination.

In this regard, for Armenia, the reopening of transport links with Turkey and Azerbaijan would represent a structural shift in trade geography, potentially integrating the country into regional and global supply chains. As for Azerbaijan, an enhanced connectivity will strengthen its position as a logistical bridge between Central Asia and Europe.

Beyond direct trade gains, economic interdependence generates spillover effects across multiple sectors. Baldwin (2016) emphasizes that economic

networks often produce secondary benefits, including investment flows, technological diffusion, and institutional convergence.

In the context of TRIPP, these spillovers may include:

- *Energy cooperation*, facilitated by interconnected infrastructure.
- *Industrial development*, driven by improved logistics and foreign direct investment.
- *Agricultural and service sector expansion*, supported by better market access.

The engagement of the European Union through connectivity initiatives (European Commission, n.d. a) further enhances these prospects by promoting regulatory alignment and investment standards consistent with international norms.

Economic interdependence also plays a political role by fostering repeated interactions and institutionalized cooperation. Keohane and Nye (1977) argue that complex interdependence creates multiple channels of interaction, reducing the dominance of military considerations in interstate relations.

In post-conflict environments, such as the South Caucasus, TRIPP-related cooperation (joint infrastructure management, customs coordination, and trade facilitation) can function as confidence-building measures. These mechanisms contribute to trust formation and the gradual normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, complementing formal diplomatic processes.

Despite its stabilizing potential, economic interdependence also entails risks. Barbieri (2002) demonstrates that asymmetrical trade relationships can generate vulnerability and political dependence, potentially exacerbating tensions rather than mitigating them. In the context of TRIPP, disparities in economic capacity and control over infrastructure may lead to unequal distribution of benefits.

Moreover, external actors - including the United States and the European Union - play a significant role in financing and shaping infrastructure projects. While their involvement can enhance capacity and standards, it may also introduce forms of external dependency and geopolitical conditionality (Baldwin, 2016).

The stabilizing effect of economic interdependence under TRIPP is conditional and mediated by political and institutional factors. As Moravcsik (1997) argues, state preferences and domestic political structures shape how economic incentives translate into foreign policy behavior.

For TRIPP to function as a stabilizing mechanism, several conditions must be met:

1. *Balanced distribution of economic gains* – minimizing asymmetry.

2. *Institutionalization of cooperation* – including dispute-resolution mechanisms.
3. *Sustained political commitment* – opening and securing transit routes.
4. *Resilience to external shocks* – including geopolitical competition.

If these conditions are absent, interdependence alone is unlikely to prevent conflict and may even create new sources of tension.

Therefore, the economic interdependence is a central pillar of TRIPP's potential stabilizing role in the South Caucasus. By embedding regional actors in networks of trade, infrastructure, and shared economic interests, it can increase the opportunity costs of conflict and incentivize cooperation. However, as critical scholarship suggests, these effects are neither automatic nor uniform. The ultimate impact of interdependence depends on the symmetry of relationships, the strength of institutions, and the broader geopolitical environment. Consequently, TRIPP should be understood as a conditional stabilizing mechanism, whose success depends on both economic design and political will.

As for post-conflict peacebuilding, it constitutes a critical dimension through which the "TRIPP" initiative may contribute to long-term stabilization in the South Caucasus. In contrast to traditional security-centered approaches, contemporary peacebuilding frameworks emphasize the role of economic cooperation, infrastructure development, and institutional engagement in transforming conflict dynamics (Paris, 2004; Richmond, 2011). Within this paradigm, TRIPP can be conceptualized as a *connectivity-driven peacebuilding mechanism*, operating at the intersection of geo-economics and conflict transformation.

Peacebuilding theory distinguishes between *negative peace* (the absence of direct violence) and *positive peace* (the presence of cooperative and institutionalized relations) (Galtung, 1969). While the cessation of large-scale hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan represents a shift toward negative peace, TRIPP has the potential to facilitate a transition toward positive peace by including cooperation in material and institutional structures.

To this point, Paris (2004) argues that sustainable peace requires the construction of socio-economic foundations that reduce incentives for renewed conflict. In this respect, infrastructure connectivity and economic integration can serve as *peace-sustaining mechanisms*, particularly in post-conflict regions characterized by weak institutions and mutual distrust.

Infrastructure development has increasingly been recognized as a tool of peacebuilding. As Collier et al. (2003) demonstrate, post-conflict economies that invest in reconstruction and connectivity are less likely to relapse into violence. TRIPP-related projects (railways, roads, and customs systems) can contribute to *reconstruction of war-affected regions, reintegration of*

previously isolated territories, and restoration of economic normalcy and mobility.

In the South Caucasus context, the reopening of transport routes between Armenia and Azerbaijan carries both symbolic and practical significance. Symbolically, it reflects a departure from blockade and isolation; practically, it facilitates the movement of goods, people, and services.

Moreover, the involvement of external actors such as the United States and the European Union aligns with the broader trend of liberal peacebuilding, where international actors support reconstruction and institutionalization processes (Richmond, 2011).

The central mechanism linking TRIPP to peacebuilding is the concept of functional cooperation. Drawing on neo-functionalist theory (Haas, 1958), cooperation in technical and economic sectors can generate spillover effects into political domains. In this regard, joint management of infrastructure projects will require *regular communication between state agencies, coordination of regulatory frameworks as well as establishment of dispute-resolution mechanisms.*

These interactions contribute to *confidence-building measures*, which are essential in post-conflict settings. As Lederach (1997) emphasizes, peacebuilding is a process that requires sustained engagement across multiple levels of society and governance.

In the case of Armenia and Azerbaijan, TRIPP may create institutionalized channels of interaction, reducing misperceptions and fostering incremental trust. Over time, such functional cooperation can help normalize relations and reduce the salience of conflict narratives.

It is important to note that post-conflict peacebuilding is not only limited to state-level dynamics; it also involves the reintegration of societies and the improvement of human security. According to the United Nations (2009), sustainable peace requires addressing economic marginalization, inequality, and lack of access to basic services.

In this context, TRIPP can contribute to:

- *Job creation* in construction, logistics, and services
- *Improved access to markets and resources* for local communities
- *Reduction of regional disparities*, particularly in border areas

Such socio-economic improvements are critical for reducing grievances that may otherwise fuel renewed tensions. In this sense, TRIPP aligns with the concept of economic peacebuilding, which links development to conflict prevention (Hendrix & Brinkman, 2013).

Despite its potential, the peacebuilding impact of TRIPP is inherently limited in the absence of a comprehensive political settlement. As Paris (2004)

cautions, economic liberalization without strong institutions may exacerbate instability rather than mitigate it.

Key unresolved issues between Armenia and Azerbaijan (including border delimitation, security guarantees) pose structural constraints on peacebuilding efforts. Without addressing these issues, infrastructure cooperation risks being:

- *Instrumentalized for political leverage*
- *Disrupted by renewed tensions or incidents*
- *Perceived as asymmetric or imposed*

Furthermore, competing narratives undermine the trust necessary for effective cooperation.

The involvement of external actors adds another layer of complexity. The United States and the European Union promote connectivity as part of a broader strategy of regional stabilization, while Russia, Turkey, and Iran pursue their own geopolitical interests.

Mac Ginty (2011) highlights that peacebuilding processes are often shaped by a *hybrid political order*, where local and external actors interact in complex ways. In the case of TRIPP, external funding and mediation can facilitate implementation but may also introduce geopolitical competition, potentially undermining the neutrality and inclusivity of peacebuilding efforts.

The contribution of TRIPP to post-conflict peacebuilding is therefore conditional upon several interrelated factors:

1. *Integration with political peace processes*, ensuring that economic cooperation complements diplomatic agreements.
2. *Inclusive governance mechanisms*, incorporating local communities and stakeholders.
3. *Transparency and accountability*, reducing perceptions of inequality or exclusion.
4. *Protection of sovereignty and legal norms*, addressing core concerns of regional actors.

Lederach (1997) emphasizes that sustainable peace requires a long-term, multi-level approach. TRIPP can serve as one component of this broader architecture but cannot substitute for political reconciliation.

Therefore, TRIPP represents a promising but limited instrument of post-conflict peacebuilding in the South Caucasus. By promoting infrastructure development, economic cooperation, and functional interaction, it can contribute to the transition from negative to positive peace. However, its effectiveness is contingent upon the resolution of underlying political conflicts, the management of competing narratives, and the alignment of external and local interests. In this sense, TRIPP should be understood as a complementary peacebuilding mechanism, capable of reinforcing but not replacing comprehensive political settlement processes.

As for the strategic diversification, it represents a critical dimension of the “TRIPP” initiative, reflecting both regional and global efforts to reduce dependency on single transit routes, dominant geopolitical actors, and concentrated economic structures. In the context of the South Caucasus, diversification is not merely an economic objective but a *geostrategic imperative*, shaped by shifting global trade patterns, energy security concerns, and evolving great-power competition.

Strategic diversification refers to the process by which states and regions expand the range of their economic partners, transit routes, and infrastructural linkages in order to minimize vulnerability and enhance resilience. In international political economy, diversification is closely linked to the concept of complex interdependence, where multiple channels of interaction reduce reliance on any single actor (Keohane & Nye, 1977).

In the case of TRIPP, diversification operates on three interconnected levels:

1. *Geographical diversification of transport routes.*
2. *Economic diversification of trade and revenue sources.*
3. *Geopolitical diversification of external partnerships.*

One of the primary strategic functions of TRIPP lies in its integration into the *Trans-Caspian International Transport Route** (Middle Corridor), which connects East Asia to Europe via Central Asia and the South Caucasus. This route has gained increasing importance as an alternative to:

- *The Northern Corridor, traditionally dominated by Russia*
- *The Southern Corridor, involving transit through Iran*

Following geopolitical disruptions, particularly after 2022, European and global actors have sought to diversify supply chains and reduce exposure to geopolitical risks (André et al., 2024). In this context, the inclusion of Armenia and Azerbaijan in a functional transit network enhances the strategic relevance of the South Caucasus.

As noted by the World Bank (2019), corridor diversification improves trade resilience by providing alternative routes in times of crisis, thereby reducing systemic vulnerability.

For regional actors, TRIPP offers an opportunity to diversify domestic economies:

- Azerbaijan can reduce its dependence on hydrocarbon exports by expanding its role as a logistics and transit hub.
- Armenia can overcome structural constraints associated with limited market access and geographic isolation.

* See more in detail in Trans-Caspian International Transport Route. (n.d.).

Economic diversification is widely recognized as a key determinant of long-term stability and growth. According to Rodrik (2008), economies that diversify production and export structures are more resilient to external shocks and less prone to volatility.

In this sense, TRIPP aligns with broader development strategies aimed at:

- *Expanding non-resource sectors.*
- *Attracting foreign direct investment.*
- *Enhancing participation in global value chains.*

Strategic diversification also involves the recalibration of external partnerships. The South Caucasus has historically been influenced by a limited number of dominant actors, particularly Russia. However, recent developments indicate a shift toward a more multi-polar engagement framework, involving:

- *The European Union, promoting connectivity through initiatives such as the Global Gateway*.*
- *The United States, supporting diplomatic normalization and infrastructure development.*
- *Turkey, advancing regional integration aligned with its economic and strategic interests.*

This diversification of partnerships enhances strategic autonomy for regional states by reducing overdependence on any single external actor. At the same time, it introduces new dynamics of competition and coordination.

An important aspect of TRIPP's strategic value lies in its potential contribution to energy diversification. The South Caucasus already plays a significant role in energy transit, particularly through pipelines connecting the Caspian region to Europe.

The expansion of transport infrastructure under TRIPP may complement existing energy corridors by:

- *Facilitating the transport of energy resources and equipment.*
- *Enhancing redundancy in supply routes.*
- *Supporting the integration of renewable energy networks.*

For the European Union, diversification of energy supply routes has become a strategic priority, particularly in the context of reducing dependence on Russia (European Commission, 2022). Thus, TRIPP contributes to broader energy security objectives.

Despite its advantages, strategic diversification is not without risks. As Waltz (1979) emphasizes in neorealist theory, the distribution of power in the

* See more in detail in European Commission. (n.d. b). Policies: Global Gateway; European Commission. (2021). Global Gateway.

international system constrains the autonomy of smaller states. In the South Caucasus, diversification efforts may be limited by:

- *Geopolitical pressure from competing great powers.*
- *Infrastructure bottlenecks and capacity constraints.*
- *Political instability and unresolved conflicts.*

Moreover, diversification can generate overlapping dependencies rather than eliminating them. For example, reliance on multiple external actors may increase exposure to competing political agendas, complicating decision-making processes.

Additionally, the coexistence of multiple corridor initiatives such as those promoted by Turkey, Iran, and other actors, may lead to fragmentation rather than integration if not properly coordinated.

In the context of TRIPP, diversification can:

- *Mitigate geopolitical risks by balancing external influences.*
- *Enhance economic resilience through multiple revenue streams.*
- *Strengthen regional integration by connecting diverse markets.*

However, these benefits are contingent upon effective governance and coordination. Without institutional mechanisms to manage competing interests, diversification may exacerbate fragmentation rather than promote stability.

Strategic diversification is one of central pillars of TRIPP's geopolitical and geo-economic significance. By expanding transport routes, economic structures, and external partnerships, the initiative enhances the resilience and strategic autonomy of the South Caucasus. It aligns with broader global trends toward supply chain diversification and multi-polar engagement.

Nevertheless, diversification is not inherently stabilizing. Its success depends on the ability of regional actors to manage geopolitical competition, coordinate infrastructure development, and align diversification strategies with long-term development goals. In this sense, TRIPP functions as a strategic enabler of resilience, whose stabilizing impact remains conditional on political, institutional, and economic factors.

Challenges and Constraints of TRIPP

While the "TRIPP" initiative presents significant opportunities for regional stabilization, its implementation is constrained by a complex set of political, geopolitical, and institutional challenges. These constraints are deeply rooted in the historical dynamics of the South Caucasus and reflect both unresolved bilateral issues and broader systemic pressures. This section of the research provides a detailed examination of the key limitations affecting TRIPP's viability as a stabilizing mechanism.

Despite periods of diplomatic engagement, fundamental issues between Armenia and Azerbaijan remain unresolved.

From the perspective of conflict theory, the absence of a final signature and ratification of the comprehensive peace agreement creates what Zartman (2001) defines as an “incomplete conflict resolution,” where underlying incompatibilities persist despite the cessation of large-scale violence. In such contexts, economic initiatives risk becoming substitutes for political settlement, rather than complementary mechanisms.

Infrastructure projects under TRIPP are particularly vulnerable to politicization. As Mansfield and Snyder (2006) argue, in transitional or unstable political environments, economic cooperation can be disrupted by nationalist mobilization and security concerns. Transport routes due to their strategic and symbolic importance, may become focal points of contestation rather than cooperation.

Furthermore, the lack of clearly defined legal frameworks governing transit rights, sovereignty, and jurisdiction increases the risk of disputes. Without legally binding agreements, even minor incidents can escalate and disrupt infrastructure operations, undermining investor confidence and long-term sustainability.

A critical obstacle to TRIPP’s implementation lies in the persistence of *destructive narratives* and the resulting strategic ambiguity. Narratives advanced by Azerbaijan, particularly those related to “Western Azerbaijan”*, “Zangezur Corridor”*** and “Constitutional Amendments’ Claims”****, introduce sensitivities regarding sovereignty, territorial integrity, and historical interpretation.

Constructivist approaches to international relations emphasize that narratives and identities shape state behavior and perceptions (Wendt, 1999). In the South Caucasus, mutually exclusive historical narratives reinforce mistrust and complicate efforts at normalization. These narratives from Azerbaijani side are not merely rhetorical; they influence policy decisions, public opinion, and negotiation dynamics.

The concept of the “Zangezur Corridor,” in particular, illustrates the problem of strategic ambiguity. While it is often framed by Azerbaijan as a logistical and economic project, it is perceived by Armenia as potentially undermining sovereignty if interpreted as an extraterritorial corridor. This divergence in interpretation creates a discursive gap that complicates agreement on implementation modalities.

* See more in detail in Canbäck, R. (2025).

** See more in detail in Kopalyan, N. (2026).

*** See more in detail in Aktas, A. (2026).

As Hopf (2002) argues, identity-based conflicts are particularly resistant to resolution because they involve deeply embedded perceptions and symbolic meanings. In this context, infrastructure cooperation under TRIPP risks being interpreted through the lens of zero-sum competition, rather than mutual benefit.

The South Caucasus is situated at the intersection of multiple spheres of influence, making it a classic example of a geopolitically contested region. The implementation of TRIPP is therefore shaped by the strategic interests of external actors, including:

- Russia, which seeks to maintain its traditional role as a security provider and regional arbiter (Trenin, 2011).
- Turkey, which promotes regional integration aligned with its economic and geopolitical ambitions, particularly through its close partnership with Azerbaijan.
- Iran, which is wary of transit routes that may bypass its territory and alter regional balances.
- The European Union and the United States, which support connectivity initiatives as part of broader strategies of stabilization and diversification.

From a neorealist perspective, this environment reflects a multi-polar competition for influence, where infrastructure projects become instruments of geopolitical strategy. Rather than purely economic initiatives, routes such as those envisioned under TRIPP are embedded in broader power dynamics.

This competition produces several challenges:

- *Fragmentation of initiatives*, as different actors promote competing corridor projects.
- *Politicization of investment*, where infrastructure financing is tied to strategic alignment.
- *Coordination deficits*, due to divergent regulatory standards and strategic priorities.

As Cooley and Nexon (2020) argue, contemporary global order is characterized by overlapping spheres of influence, where infrastructure becomes a site of contestation. In this context, TRIPP risks being drawn into broader geopolitical rivalries, potentially undermining its stabilizing function.

Despite ongoing works and the signed document about the implementation framework, a significant structural challenge to TRIPP is still the absence of institutional bodies on the ground governing its implementation.

Institutionalist theory highlights the importance of institutions in reducing uncertainty, facilitating cooperation, and managing conflicts (Keohane, 1984). Without such mechanisms, the cooperation will remain *ad hoc* and vulnerable to disruption.

For the success of this geo-economic project the works related to its institutionalization have to be accelerated.

The challenges and constraints facing TRIPP highlight the limits of connectivity-driven stabilization in the absence of political, institutional, and geopolitical alignment. Finally unsigned and not ratified peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Azerbaijani destructive narratives, great-power rivalry, as well as institutional deficiencies, collectively create a complex environment in which infrastructure initiatives operate.

These factors suggest that TRIPP cannot be understood as a purely economic project. Rather, it is embedded in a broader system of political relations and power dynamics. Its success as a stabilizing mechanism will depend on the extent to which these constraints are addressed through comprehensive peace agreements, narrative reconciliation, coordinated external engagement, and robust institutional development.

Conclusion

Based on the comprehensive analysis regarding TRIPP's initiative as well as its opportunities and challenges for the regional stability, the main conclusions are defined below:

- The “TRIPP” initiative embodies a significant strategic opportunity to redefine the South Caucasus from a historically conflict-prone geopolitical space into a functional route of connectivity linking Europe and Asia. By prioritizing transport integration, economic interdependence, and regional cooperation, it introduces a geo-economic logic that has the potential to gradually reshape interstate relations and reduce the structural incentives for confrontation. In this sense, TRIPP reflects a broader transformation in international relations, where infrastructure and connectivity increasingly serve as instruments of stabilization and influence.

However, the analysis demonstrates that the stabilizing potential of TRIPP is neither automatic nor guaranteed. Its effectiveness is inherently contingent upon a set of interrelated political, institutional, and strategic conditions. First and foremost, the absence of a final and comprehensive settlement between Armenia and Azerbaijan remains the most critical constraint. Without signed and ratified peace agreement, sovereignty, and security arrangements, infrastructure projects risk becoming vulnerable to disruption, politicization, or instrumentalization in periods of renewed tension.

- Equally important is the need to address Azerbaijani destructive narratives and perceptions that continue to shape the regional security environment.

The persistence of exclusive interpretations of history, territory, and political legitimacy limits the development of trust, which is essential for any form of sustained cooperation. In this regard, TRIPP cannot function effectively in isolation from broader processes of reconciliation and dialogue. Economic connectivity may create incentives for cooperation, but it cannot substitute for the political and societal dimensions of peacebuilding.

- Institutional capacity constitutes another decisive factor. The long-term success of TRIPP depends on the establishment of transparent, rules-based, and inclusive governance mechanisms and bodies on the ground capable of managing cross-border infrastructure, regulating transit, and resolving disputes. Without institutionalization, even well-designed economic initiatives may remain fragile and susceptible to external shocks or internal disagreements. Institutionalization is therefore not merely a technical requirement, but a fundamental component of stability.
- At the same time, the initiative must be understood within the broader context of regional and global geopolitics. The South Caucasus remains an arena of overlapping interests involving actors such as Russia, Turkey, Iran, the European Union, and the United States. While their engagement can provide resources, guarantees, and political support, it also introduces elements of competition that may complicate coordination and implementation. The ability of regional actors to balance these external influences while preserving strategic autonomy will be crucial.
- In its current form, TRIPP should therefore be understood as *a potential stabilizer with conditional effectiveness*. It offers a framework through which economic cooperation can reinforce peacebuilding, but it cannot independently generate stability in the absence of political alignment. Its transformative potential lies in its capacity to complement diplomatic efforts, create shared economic interests, and gradually institutionalize cooperation.
- Ultimately, the long-term impact of TRIPP will depend on whether regional actors can successfully align economic integration with political reconciliation. If these processes evolve in parallel, the initiative may contribute to a gradual reconfiguration of the South Caucasus into a space defined less by conflict and more by connectivity, interdependence, and cooperative regionalism. Conversely, if political divisions persist and governance mechanisms remain weak, TRIPP risks remaining an underutilized or contested framework, reflecting the very tensions it seeks to overcome.

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