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## **The Importance of the North-South Transport highway for Iran<sup>1</sup>**

In 1999, a transport project was announced to connect India with the Baltic countries through Iran. The length of the India-Iran-Caucasus-Russia international transport route was supposed to be about 7,200 km. The representatives of the above-mentioned countries signed an intergovernmental agreement on the creation of the North-South Corridor in 2000 at the St. Petersburg. Later, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Syria, and Oman applied to join the agreement.

However, the route created at first sight for purely economic purposes turned into a political one.

After the 2020 Artsakh war, due to the advance of the Azerbaijani troops and the occupation of the sovereign territory of the Republic of Armenia, the width of the Armenia-Iran land road was reduced. The Armenian authorities constructed an alternative road. Nevertheless, this road does not have the capacity for the volumes of transportation of goods that would ensure the North-South direction.

In my opinion, the intensification of the activities of India and Iran to promote the Armenia's participation in the North-South route is connected with Pakistan's support to Azerbaijan during the 2020 war. However, the Turkish-Azerbaijani tandem managed to push Armenia out of the North-South project because the Armenian authorities failed to construct the

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Armenian part of the North-South highway, and because the width of the Iran-Armenia road was also reduced in the result of the 2020 war. Authorities of Armenia currently are carrying out work for the construction of the Armenian section of the Yeraskh-Julfa-Ordubad-Meghri-Horadiz railway.

A railway line from the Iranian border to join Armenia's existing railway system could have been an alternative. However, there has been no progress until now, mostly due to high costs and lack of investors. Plans to restore the railway link between Armenia and Azerbaijan following the trilateral statement on November 9, 2020, still have not been implemented. Azerbaijan and Turkey press for a 'corridor' to connect to each other and Iran is not in their priority plans. Therefore, the construction of the Rasht-Astara railway seems to be the only practical and visible opportunity for Iran to join a railway system linking with the Russian and European markets. This would increase the influence of Baku and further isolate Yerevan from regional trade.

Today, the authorities of Armenia face a serious challenge to do everything to have their place and role in North-South project, so that Iran considers the territory of Armenia as an alternative way to export goods to the European markets.