

Avrasya Ulaşım Koridorunda Yeni ve Önemli Bir Bağlantı Bakü-Tiflis-Kars (BTK) Demiryolu - 3

THE POLITICS OF THE BAKU-TBLISI-KARS RAILWAY

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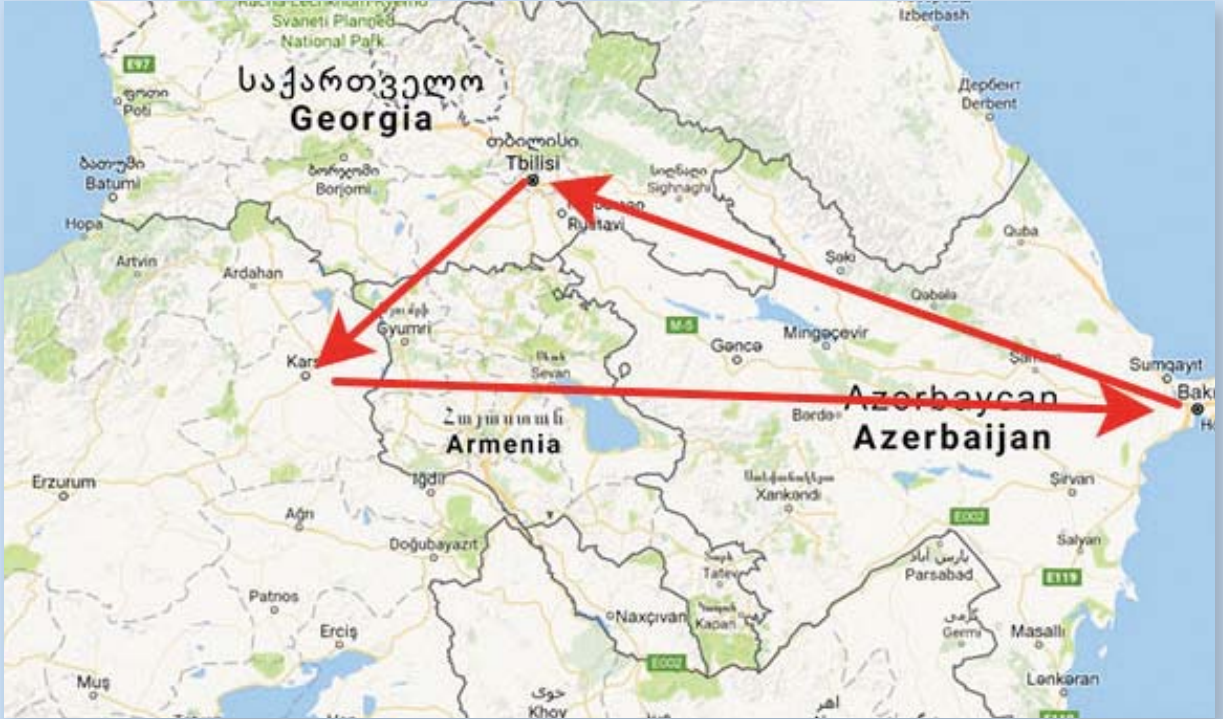
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On October 30th 2017, the Baku-Tblisi-Kars(BTK) railway was finally inaugurated with the participation of the leaders of Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey and Uzbekistan. In fact, the project was first proposed very long time ago, in 1993. When Turkey closed its border with Armenia as a reaction to the occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh, the only railway that directly linked the South Caucasus to Europe became obsolete. The persistence of the frozen conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia led to the development of the BTK railway project as an alternative route, bypassing Armenia. The project was postponed several times since then. However circumstances became more favourable and its momentum increased with recent developments. Its completion is part of a larger trend: the economic integration of the Eurasian continent through land which was identified by the World Bank as one of the most significant developments of the 21st century¹. This trend towards Eurasian integration includes several projects. Many of them are under the umbrella of the Road and Belt initiative proposed by the Chinese

president Xi Jinping in 2013 as the key policy of his term, which is expected to contain a staggering 4 trillion dollars in investments across Eurasia(The Economist)².

The Baku-Tblisi-Kars railway is among the geopolitically most significant nodes of this emerging trade network for several reasons. One of the defining characteristics of the BTK railway is that it is part of the first Eurasian rail route that bypasses Russia. Its main implication will be to provide former Soviet republics' access to world trade, thus reducing their dependence on Moscow. This is among the main reasons that Central Asian leaders participated in the inauguration of the line, along with their counterparts from the South Caucasus. Currently, these countries depend on Russia to access European markets and production centres. Hydrocarbon trade is one aspect of this problem that is being dealt with through the new pipeline projects in the region. For other products, rail lines are also necessary. Until these infrastructural projects are completed, former Soviet nations are not going to be fully sovereign. Notably, Georgia's only railway link to Europe currently goes through the unrecognised



republic of Abkhazia and then Russia. This provides Moscow with extremely powerful leverage on its « near abroad ». The United States and Europe were interested in contributing to infrastructural projects that would diminish this leverage. Zbigniew Brzezinski, the veteran US national security adviser himself directed the negotiation for the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline which was finished in 2005, with the stated goal of diminishing Russian influence in the region³. However, regarding their support to the BTK railway, Armenia's

inclusion was a condition that proved to be important for Western countries. In 2005 the European Commission expressed its wish that the old Soviet railway that went through Armenia would be opened⁴ while US contribution to the funding of the railway was denied by congressmen lobbied by pro-Armenian organisations⁵. As a result, the project met difficulties until Azerbaijan decided to provide a very low interest loan to Georgia from its sovereign wealth fund.



This demonstrates the project's geopolitical importance for Baku. In fact, Azerbaijan is also participating in the North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC) project that aims to connect Mumbai to Moscow through Iran. As Armenia's only connection to Russia is through Georgia, Azerbaijan became a more viable option in the NSTC project as well. In fact, Baku sits at the heart of this corridor. These developments show that Baku will potentially obtain significant leverage against Yerevan by becoming a key transport hub between Europe and Asia. It could possibly gain concessions on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue in exchange for Armenia's integration to the trade network.

Finally, Turkey could potentially benefit greatly from the completion of the BTK railway and its integration to other trade networks. Once the NSTC project (to which Turkey is also a member) is completed, the country will have access to India through Baku. On the other hand, the current development of Central Asian infrastructure along with the BTK railway could bring Turkey closer to Central and East Asia.

One crucial question is unresolved though. The Chinese government, as of now, did not play the proactive role it embraced during the development of similar infrastructure projects. In 2018, an Azerbaijani delegation is expected to present the project to Chinese authorities⁶. The BTK railway's role within the larger framework of the Belt and Road initiative will be

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defining and that is mostly dependent on China's ties with the South Caucasus and perhaps more importantly with Russia which hosts the current land route between China and Europe. If Sino-Russian relations deteriorate, the BTK railway could see its importance rise even further.

Evidently, infrastructure is a geopolitically loaded subject because different logistic arrangements will benefit different regions and countries. Perhaps the Chinese government changed the name of its infrastructure initiative from « One Belt One Road » to « Belt and Road Initiative » to decrease the geopolitical weight of the project⁷. It is objectively true that connectivity will benefit Eurasian countries as a whole. However, the shaping of the new trade network is clearly going to be shaped by politics.

Endnotes

- 1 Cordula Rastog and Jean-Francois Arvis, Eurasian Connection: Supply Chain Efficiency along the Modern Silk Route through Central Asia (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group, 2014).
- 2 "Our bulldozers, our rules," *The Economist*, last modified July 2, 2016, <https://www.economist.com/news/china/21701505-chinas-foreign-policy-could-reshape-good-part-world-economy-or-bulldozers-our-rules>
- 3 William Engdahl; Color Revolutions, Geopolitics and the Baku Pipeline; Global Research; 2005. <https://www.globalresearch.ca/color-revolutions-geopolitics-and-the-baku-pipeline/518>
- 4 Samuel Lussac; The Baku-Tblisi-Kars railroad and its geopolitical implications for the South Caucasus; Caucasian review of International Affairs; Autumn 2008.
- 5 Raoul Lowery Contreras; With new railroad, the world shrinks and Russia gets choked; The Hill; 13th November 2017.
- 6 Azerbaijan to present BTK's railway's potential in China; Azernews; 24th November 2017.
- 7 Wade Shepherd; Beijing to the world: Don't call the Belt and Road Initiative OBOR; Forbes; 1st August 2017.