

Following the powers: Baku is activating the “Georgian track”

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Annotation

ARVAK is analyzing the intensified diplomatic and economic engagement of Azerbaijan with Georgia, viewing it within the framework of the global competition for control over the “Middle Corridor” transit routes. The analysis focuses on the outcomes of Ilham Aliyev’s visit to Tbilisi and his informal discussions with the Georgian leadership. A key concern for Baku is the potential jeopardization of the TRIPP project and the prospect of unblocking the Abkhaz railway section, which poses a threat to Azerbaijan’s current transit monopoly. Furthermore, the study highlights the influential, yet often unseen, role of China as a “shadow moderator” of regional developments and addresses the risks of a covert transport and economic conflict emerging between Baku and Tbilisi.

Keywords: South Caucasus, Georgia, Azerbaijan, China, Ilham Aliyev, Bidzina Ivanishvili, “Middle Corridor”, TRIPP, Abkhazian railway, transport war, geoeconomics.

1. Transformation of Georgia’s logistical role

In previous publications, ARVAK analyzed the context of the increased activity of major geopolitical power centers (the U.S., UK and RF) on the Georgian front, linking this trend to processes in the Middle East. The Iranian campaign and its consequences are forcing global actors to reconsider their logistics concepts in West Asia, where Iran holds a key position. Due to the deteriorating security environment in the Iranian direction and the uncertainty of the situation change within and around the country, the global power centers are considering shifting their main trade and energy routes to the South Caucasus as an alternative. This significantly increases the geostrategic role of Georgia, which is poised to become a major beneficiary of transit operations under the “Middle Corridor” project.

ARVAK has previously analyzed the heightened activity of major geopolitical power centers (the U.S., UK, and RF) in Georgia, linking it to developments in the Middle East. The ongoing Iranian campaign and its consequences are compelling global actors to re-evaluate their logistical strategies in West Asia, a region where Iran now is a crucial player. Given the deteriorating security environment surrounding Iran and the uncertainty regarding changes both within and around the country, these global powers are considering the South Caucasus as an alternative route for their primary trade and energy flows. This strategic shift significantly elevates Georgia’s geostrategic importance, positioning it to become a key beneficiary of transit operations under the “Middle Corridor” project.

In this regard, China’s growing activity in Georgia is particularly interesting. Unlike the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia, Beijing has almost entirely avoided attempts at direct “interference” in the political situation in the South Caucasus republic, focusing instead on large-scale investments in the construction of new port complexes, the introduction of technological innovations in transit infrastructure, and the expansion of its road, rail, and tunnel communications network.

Events demonstrate that this is an indirect yet effective method of projecting influence over political processes. Beijing initially built the “One Belt, One Road” initiative on the principle of broad route diversification, and therefore the Iranian crisis, which it has been

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predicting since the mid-2010s, will not critically damage China's trade and economic interests in the context of the "*Middle Corridor*" program. While developing Iranian multimodal routes, China simultaneously invested in major logistics projects in Central Asia, set the "*Trans-Caspian International Transport Route*" (TITR, i.e. - "*Middle Corridor*"), and initiated the synchronization of Azerbaijani-Georgian transit routes, thereby duplicating access to the European market. At the same time, Beijing consistently reinforced its trade and logistics projects with strategic partnership agreements with the countries of Central Asia and the South Caucasus.

2. Chinese dominance and competitors' reactions

Beijing's financial and economic expansion in this direction allowed it to reduce its dependence on the Iranian transit zone and become an influential geo-economic player in the area – primarily in Georgia, which is strategically important to it. Moreover, China's financial and economic activity in this region has been subtly transformed into a source of unpublicized but consistently growing political influence. This influence has intensified as the standing of the United States and Western European nations has diminished, a result of their explicit attempts to "*interfere in Tbilisi's internal affairs and foreign policy agenda*".

It was precisely large-scale Chinese investments and reliance on Beijing's discreet political support that enabled the incumbent authorities in Georgia to neutralize the "*attacks*" from the EU and the U.S., which had planned since 2023 to implement a new "*liberal revolution*" in Georgia. As a result, China has unofficially become the most powerful foreign policy player in Georgia, and its increased role has become especially noticeable in light of recent events in Iran. Georgia is currently becoming the sole "*gateway*" to the main transcontinental route, the "*keys*" of which are in the hands of Beijing. The renewed activity of geopolitical centers competing with Beijing on the Georgian route is driven by the recognition of this reality: their goal is to restore influence over Tbilisi, depriving China of its position as the leading power seeking to establish dominant control over the "*Middle Corridor*" transit routes and the vast raw material base of Central Asia.

The resurgence of activity by geopolitical centers in competition with Beijing along the Georgian route is predicated upon the acknowledgment of this reality: their objective is to re-establish influence over Tbilisi, thereby displacing China from its standing as the foremost power endeavoring to secure dominant control over the transit routes of the "*Middle Corridor*" and the extensive raw material resources of Central Asia.

3. Baku's interests on the Georgian track

Azerbaijan's apparent revival in the Georgian arena appears symptomatic. Chronologically, it coincides with U.S. and UK initiatives to launch a new phase in relations with Tbilisi, indicating Baku's plans to also engage in the "*Georgian game*". Azerbaijan is positioning itself as an independent and significant regional actor with its own interests in transit configurations and sufficient potential to advance them. However, it should be noted that Baku's recent actions on the Georgian track may be dictated not only by the "*sovereign interests of Azerbaijan*" but concurrently serve as an element of the aforementioned large-scale geopolitical strategy to diminish Chinese influence in Tbilisi.

On April 6, 2026, Azerbaijani leader Ilham Aliyev paid a state visit to Tbilisi, where he met with Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze and President Mikheil Kavelashvili. However, some believe that the unofficial, yet crucial, element of his visit was a meeting with Georgia's "informal leader", billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, founder and honorary chairman of the ruling "Georgian Dream–Democratic Georgia" party. This fact particularly underscores the importance of Aliyev's agenda in Tbilisi for Baku. It prompted the Azerbaijani president to hold a one-on-one meeting with the man considered the architect of Georgia's entire foreign policy and the initiator of allowing Chinese investment expansion into the country as part of the "Middle Corridor" project.

It is evident that Ilham Aliyev harbored a specific interest in Tbilisi's prospective strategies, particularly in the context of recent developments concerning Iran and the heightened engagement of international stakeholders in the Georgian transit sector. This is circumstantially corroborated by Baku's official *communiqués* detailing the substance of Aliyev's discussions with Irakli Kobakhidze and Mikheil Kavelashvili, which primarily centered on deliberations regarding the outlook for the "Middle Corridor" and the contribution of collaborative Georgian-Azerbaijani transit initiatives within this framework.

4. The TRIPP crisis and the threat to the so called "Zangezur Corridor"

Apparently, the Azerbaijani leader is concerned about two issues that could jeopardize the configuration of the "Middle Corridor" transit routes in the South Caucasus that most fully reflects Baku's interests.

Firstly, these are the growing threats to the TRIPP project, whose implementation has become uncertain amid the growing escalation surrounding Iran. Although Baku avoids acknowledging the obvious connection between this project and the situation in Iran, Azerbaijani politicians understand that Tehran is extremely opposed to its implementation. If the war against Iran drags on, TRIPP construction will be delayed due to the constant threat of destruction of its infrastructure by the Iranian Armed Forces. If Washington and Tehran mutually decide to thoroughly address all the accumulated issues at the negotiating table, the Iranian side will predictably include the elimination or reformatting of the "Trump Corridor" project among the priority conditions of a peace agreement. Given this, the prospects for TRIPP are currently truly uncertain.

This is also evidenced by Nikol Pashinyan's statement of April 13, 2026, in which he acknowledged that events in Iran could delay the project's implementation. The Armenian Prime Minister cited the fact that "the U.S. administration, at least for now, does not consider TRIP to be a priority". The "Trump Corridor", viewed by Baku as a component of the broader and more ambitious so called "Zangezur Corridor" project, was intended, in addition to other geopolitical advantages in the context of pan-Turkic integration, to diversify cargo flows into and out of Azerbaijan via Turkey, thereby reducing Georgia's role in the configuration of the "Middle Corridor". By launching TRIPP as an alternative to Georgian highways, Azerbaijan, according to the Baku authorities' plan, would become the main hub of the "Middle Corridor" in the South Caucasus, relegating Georgia to a position as a secondary, but not the primary, logistics hub in the region. Furthermore, the launch of TRIPP as part of the settlement of the conflict between Baku and Yerevan would facilitate the unblocking of Armenian-Azerbaijani road communications, opening Yerevan a shorter route to the Russian market bypassing

Georgia. This would also contribute to the devaluation of Georgia's key transit role along the "North–South" axis, diverting cargo flows from Armenia and Iran to Russia and back to Baku.

Thus, the implementation of TRIPP is considered a critical component of Azerbaijan's geopolitical and geoeconomic programs, aimed at establishing its role as a key player in the region, dictating its agenda and distributing "transit quotas" at its own discretion. Clearly, Ilham Aliyev is concerned about the potential collapse of this structure and is trying to understand how Georgian leaders intend to utilize the opportunity for transit leadership in the region that has opened up to them, and what role they envision for Azerbaijan in this configuration.

5. Prospects for the "Abkhaz direction": "North–South" versus "East"

Secondly: an important topic discussed by Ilham Aliyev in Tbilisi was apparently the Abkhaz railway. Baku cannot help but be alarmed by the increasing talk about the possibility of opening the Zugdidi–Ochamchire–Sukhum–Sochi railway line in the context of its use to lift Armenia out of transit isolation. While repeated statements on this matter by the Armenian opposition, represented by Robert Kocharyan, could be interpreted in Azerbaijan as election rhetoric, the rise of this topic in Abkhazia itself, Russia, and Georgia forces Baku to assess the situation differently.

In early April 2026, Abkhazia's Minister of Economy, Adgur Mikvabia, speaking at the Abkhazia Economic Forum, stated that the possibility of opening the Georgia–Abkhazia–Russia railway was quite high. Other forum participants also expressed confidence that the launch of this route would be highly beneficial for Abkhazia, Russia, Turkey, Armenia, and Georgia, as it would provide end-to-end trade and transport links between them, ensuring cost-effective and rapid access for all parties to each other's markets. The speakers cited the successful test run of a large-scale freight terminal in Ochamchire, which is capable of handling large volumes of freight traffic.

Baku obviously understands that the Ochamchira complex could not have been built without the prospect of unblocking the Georgian-Abkhaz highway and, therefore, believes that all that remains is the announcement of Tbilisi's political decision, which, in their opinion, was agreed upon between Russia and Georgia long before the recent events.

The opening of the Georgian-Abkhaz railway could fundamentally alter the entire planned logistics structure in the region, complementing the "Middle Corridor" with a cross-cutting route along the "North–South" axis. This would create a crossroads with Georgia at its center. This configuration would not only make Tbilisi dependent on Azerbaijan's entire transit potential but also provide Russia and Turkey with the opportunity to establish the shortest and most cost-effective land link, bypassing the options proposed by Baku. It would also free Armenia from isolation, which Azerbaijan is currently pushing toward using its communications exclusively, thereby increasing its economic dependence. Furthermore, unblocking the Georgian-Abkhaz railway would encourage Iran to exploit Armenia and Georgia's transit potential toward Europe as the most optimal option, which would also be unsuitable for Azerbaijan.

Baku clearly understands that it is impossible to ignore the possibility of a similar scenario in the South Caucasus, and that is why Ilham Aliyev visited Georgia to clarify these issues for himself.

6. Latent transport war: ports and bureaucracy

It's not yet clear what I. Aliyev left Tbilisi with or whether he's satisfied with the answers he received. Judging by indirect information, it's highly likely that the Azerbaijani leader was

unable to resolve the problematic issues with his Georgian partners and is not particularly inclined to trust them, even though Tbilisi tried to demonstrate to Baku that its interests were taken into account. On April 15, 2026, Georgian Foreign Minister Maka Bochorishvili, speaking in the republic's parliament, stated that *“Until the issue with Abkhazia and South Ossetia is resolved, the issue of railway communication between Georgia and Russia cannot be resolved”*. This statement can be interpreted as a kind of official response to Baku's concerns.

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan is apparently less optimistic on this issue. According to Georgian economic experts, Baku has been significantly impeding Georgian exports at the port of Alat on the Caspian Sea in recent months. They claim that Azerbaijan is creating artificial delays and bureaucratic red tape for the transit of Georgian containers, and this practice has recently become systematic. This may be referring to the period following Aliyev's talks in Tbilisi. There are clear signs of a hidden, but potentially escalating, transport and economic war between the two neighbors. It appears the Azerbaijani leader is sending signals to his partners in Georgia, seeking to demonstrate that Baku is not prepared to relinquish its role as a key player in the *“Middle Corridor”* and is capable of harming Georgian economic interests if Tbilisi attempts to wrest leadership from Azerbaijan in this framework, especially if it seeks to advance the North-South trade and energy route project to the detriment of Azerbaijani interests.

Resume

It should be noted that this is a rather risky undertaking given Beijing's geostrategic and geoeconomic interests. China is the primary beneficiary of the *“Middle Corridor”*, its architect, and its largest investor. China has also made a significant contribution to synchronizing infrastructure parameters and developing mechanisms for an optimal tariff policy between Azerbaijan and Georgia, with the aim of increasing the efficiency and financial and economic benefits of South Caucasus transit operations. Beijing has been consistently building this structure for over a decade and is unlikely to remain indifferent to such contradictions, which are still local in nature, but which could, in the future, develop into a systemic problem for the entire *“Middle Corridor”* architecture.

Beijing may currently view these developments as Azerbaijan's attempts to optimize its weakened position within the *“Middle Corridor”* architecture, given the changing geopolitical landscape in the region. This represents a form of competition within the project that is acceptable to China. At the same time, China cannot help but monitor the situation from the perspective of Baku's actions in the interests of Beijing's global competitors. This possibility also exists, given the significant dependence of Azerbaijani political elites and financial and economic groups on Western centers of power, which have also become active in the Georgian arena. Given the critical situation in the region, Baku could find itself drawn into the game of Beijing's global competitors and act contrary to Chinese interests in the South Caucasus, particularly in Georgia.

However, Beijing is adopting a wait-and-see approach and maintains public restraint, notwithstanding current developments.