

The impact of the 2022 Ukraine War on transit corridors in the Caucasus region

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Original Article Main Object: International Relations Scope: Ukraine, Russia, Caucasus</p> <p>Received: 30 August 2023 Revised: 06 October 2023 Accepted: 07 October 2023 Published online: 04 November 2023</p> <p>Keywords: Caucasus region, energy, Russia, transit corridors, Ukraine war.</p>	<p>The war in Ukraine is arguably the most significant tension between Russia and the West since the Cold War, with far-reaching consequences beyond Ukraine itself. The neighboring Caucasus region, in particular, has been greatly impacted by this conflict. This study aims to explore the effects of the war in Ukraine on the economic corridors of the Caucasus. The researchers test the hypothesis that the increased economic risks resulting from the war, Russia's diverted attention to Ukraine, and Europe's search for alternative energy sources are three crucial factors that enhance the significance of the economic corridors in the Caucasus. The research data indicates that, since the onset of the war in Ukraine, transit routes for goods and energy passing through the Caucasus, such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipelines, the western corridor of the north-south corridor, the Trasca corridor, and the Zangzor corridor, have gained considerable attention and favor by regional and extra-regional actors. Furthermore, it is anticipated that China will increasingly express interest in the Caucasus region for its One Belt One Road project in the near future.</p>

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Extended Abstract**Background**

The 2022 war in Ukraine commenced with the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. This conflict arose from ongoing disputes between Ukraine and Russia, which have persisted for eight years, including the annexation of the Crimean peninsula by Russia in 2014.

The war has not only strained the political relations between Russia and the West but has also had significant repercussions on various economic and political aspects in neighboring regions, particularly the Caucasus region.

The Caucasus region serves as a crucial hub for trade and energy transit corridors, acting as a vital link between the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea. Numerous transit routes traverse the Caucasus, connecting Asia to Europe and providing access to the abundant energy resources of the Caspian and Central Asia. Consequently, the Caucasus has become a region where geopolitical interests intersect, with Russia, the European Union, the United States, Turkey, and Iran all vying for influence and control over these transit corridors. This often leads to complex power dynamics and competition among these actors.

Furthermore, the war in Ukraine has disrupted the traditional routes for European energy supply from Russia, prompting Europe to reassess its energy transit options. Additionally, trade exchanges through the northern corridor, which typically passed through Belarus, Ukraine, and the Black Sea, have been severely impacted. Consequently, the Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian), connecting Central Asia to Turkey via the Caucasus, and the North-South Corridor (INSTC), linking Russia to India and China through Iran, are expected to gain prominence as alternative routes.

Aims

In summary, the war in Ukraine has had far-reaching consequences, affecting not only the political landscape but also the economic dynamics and transit routes in the Caucasus region. In this article, we aim to address the following question: How has the 2022 war in Ukraine impacted the transit routes of the Caucasus? To explore this, we have tested the hypothesis that the war has led to heightened economic risks, a power vacuum in the Caucasus resulting from Russia's focus on Ukraine, and increased European demand for alternative energy sources. These factors collectively contribute to the growing significance of the transit corridors in the Caucasus.

Methods

An attempt has been made to address the main question through the utilization of qualitative research methodology and the analysis of available data and statistics. While numerous studies have been

conducted on the ongoing tensions between Russia and Ukraine, these works have primarily focused on the political and security aspects of the crisis, emphasizing the competition between Russia and the West. In contrast, this article aims to shed light on the geopolitical consequences of the Ukrainian war specifically within the corridors of the Caucasus region. The Caucasus region can be considered as one of the peripheral areas impacted by the core of this crisis.

Results

The imposition of Western sanctions on Russia and Russia's pressure on Europe have posed significant challenges to the export of energy from Russia to Europe. As a result, Europe has sought to diversify its energy suppliers by turning to Central Asia, the Caspian Basin, and the Caucasus. The presence of abundant oil and gas resources in these regions, coupled with the Caucasus' strategic location for energy transit to Europe, has made the energy corridors of the Caucasus crucial.

However, the power vacuum created in the Caucasus due to Russia's focus on the war with Ukraine has disrupted the balance of power in the region. This vacuum has exacerbated existing tensions between the countries in the region, such as the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. Additionally, it has opened the door for greater foreign involvement, including from Turkey and Israel. Turkey is likely to prioritize the development of transit corridors in the region, especially the Zangezur Corridor, to establish direct connections with Azerbaijan and Central Asian countries, enhancing its economic benefits and moving closer to the idea of a "Turkish world." Meanwhile, Israel seeks to expand its influence in the Caucasus, particularly in Azerbaijan, with subversive intentions against Iran.

The development of transit corridors in the Caucasus, both for goods and energy, is one of the significant outcomes of the 2020 war in Ukraine. This development will likely bring the geopolitical position of the region to a new stage.

Conclusions

Meanwhile, the Islamic Republic of Iran can mitigate the risks posed by these developments and capitalize on the situation by implementing three key policies. Firstly, it should prioritize the development of the North-South corridor, particularly its western route through the Caucasus. This corridor intersects with the Caucasus corridors rather than competing with them. Secondly, Iran should focus on enhancing the east-west rail and road connections within its territory, linking Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia to Turkey and Iraq via Iran. By improving these routes and optimizing goods transit, Iran can attract a portion of the traffic currently passing

through the Trans-Caspian corridor, offering an alternative pathway. Thirdly, it is crucial for Iran to maintain the existing geographical borders in the Caucasus region as a red line. The establishment of the Zangezur Corridor, which would involve altering the border area between Iran and Armenia, would grant Turkey complete control over the Caucasus and Central Asia, effectively eliminating the transit route connecting Turkey to Central Asia via Iran. Iran must approach any potential changes to the political borders in the Caucasus region with utmost seriousness and authority.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Authors' contributions

All authors contributed to the original idea, study design.

Ethical considerations

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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