

WHY TRIPP IS STALLED: IRAN, RUSSIA, AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE MIDDLE CORRIDOR

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One year has passed since Armenia and Azerbaijan signed the Washington agreement under the direct mediation of President Trump. Nevertheless, the TRIPP project, an approximately 40-kilometer route that would constitute the shortest segment of the Middle Corridor, has yet to be implemented, leaving the broader project incomplete. Notably, the principal obstacles to its implementation originate neither in Armenia nor Azerbaijan but are predominantly external factors that continue to impede the project's realization.

BACKGROUND: In August 2025, the Trump administration initiated a process aimed at normalizing relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, in which an enhanced U.S. strategic presence in the South Caucasus, particularly in Armenia, was expected to play a significant role. A central element was the proposed Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) on Armenian territory, which would provide Azerbaijan with a direct connection to its Nakhchivan exclave without transiting Iran. The TRIPP would also offer Armenia and Azerbaijan an opportunity to strengthen their integration into the Middle Corridor, connecting Central Asia with Europe via the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus, and Turkey.

In other words, the TRIPP would facilitate the development of the Middle Corridor through Armenia and Azerbaijan, which, according to the Trump administration, would contribute significantly to the normalization of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. From a strategic perspective, the route also offers the prospect of transporting Central Asian energy resources to Europe while bypassing Russia and Iran. At the same time, it would provide Central Asian states with greater opportunities to diversify their export routes and reduce their dependence on China. Kazakhstan has shown particular interest in the project, as reflected in its deepening relations with Armenia, alongside its traditionally close ties with Azerbaijan.

Nevertheless, the project has experienced significant delays despite sustained efforts by Washington to advance its implementation. The U.S. has allocated financial resources for infrastructure development, established a dedicated fund to support the project, and appointed a manager with extensive knowledge of Armenia and its business environment, as well as direct ties to the Trump administration. Despite these measures, construction has yet to begin, and little information has been made available regarding the implementation process. The clearest indication of a potential timeline came from Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, who recently stated that construction on Armenian territory may begin in early 2027.

IMPLICATIONS: Developments over recent months provide a broader picture of the factors that have delayed the implementation of the TRIPP project on Armenian territory and, consequently, the project as a whole. The first concerns Iran. The U.S.-Israeli war with Iran has fundamentally altered the regional security environment, with Tehran targeting U.S. military bases and other facilities in neighboring states within range of its missile capabilities. Against this backdrop, TRIPP represents a U.S.-backed strategic transport route running directly along Iran's northern border, in some places only a few hundred meters away. Its location and strategic significance have generated

considerable concern in Tehran, which has publicly expressed its opposition to the project.

It therefore cannot be ruled out that the delays are partly linked to the negotiations between Iran and the U.S. and uncertainty over their outcome. In the event of renewed hostilities, the route could potentially become a target for Iran despite being located on the territory of a third country. Moreover, prior to the proposed implementation of TRIPP, Iran provided Azerbaijan with its shortest transit route to the Nakhchivan exclave, creating a degree of Azerbaijani dependence on Tehran that TRIPP would substantially reduce. Iran therefore also has an economic and geopolitical interest in the project's development. Yet another significant obstacle concerns the railway component of TRIPP. A functioning rail connection is central to the project's ambition to facilitate trade between Central Asia and Europe and is therefore of critical logistical importance to the viability of the corridor as a whole.

However, Armenia's railway network remains under concession to the state-owned Russian Railways, with the agreement set to remain in force for a considerable period. Russia has shown little willingness to relinquish control, although recent developments suggest that the issue may be subject to negotiation. When the possibility of returning the railway network to Armenian control was raised, the head of Russian Railways emphasized that Russia had invested approximately US\$ 400 million in Armenia's railway infrastructure. This statement can be interpreted in two ways. Moscow may be signaling that it expects compensation for its investments as a condition for terminating the concession. Alternatively, it may indicate an interest in participating in the TRIPP project itself, with its existing investment potentially forming the basis for such involvement. In either case, control over Armenia's railway infrastructure introduces a significant Russian dimension into the implementation of TRIPP.

This considerably complicates the situation, as both Moscow and Tehran are capable of exerting pressure on Armenia, albeit in different ways and in pursuit of their respective strategic interests. Any potential Russian participation in TRIPP would not, however, be a matter for Yerevan and Baku alone, as Washington and Moscow could potentially reach a separate agreement on Russia's role in the project. At present, however, Iranian security concerns and Russia's control over Armenia's railway infrastructure remain among the principal external factors hindering the implementation of TRIPP.

CONCLUSIONS: At present, Armenia and Azerbaijan have limited scope to advance the implementation of TRIPP independently. The outcome of potential negotiations between the U.S. and Iran, and ultimately the termination of hostilities, may prove critical to the project's future. Should the parties pursue a diplomatic settlement, TRIPP may need to form part of a broader package of agreements between Washington and Tehran. The Russian dimension is equally complex. Moscow may seek compensation for its investments in Armenia's railway infrastructure, a substantial burden for Armenia, or demand some form of participation in the project. The latter would present Washington with a strategic dilemma: whether to accommodate Russian involvement in a transport corridor whose broader geopolitical rationale includes reducing regional dependence on Russia.

In either case, the Trump administration would need to engage in substantive negotiations with Moscow, whether to agree on compensation or determine the terms of potential Russian participation in the project. The implementation of TRIPP therefore

depends on a broader set of political and strategic agreements extending well beyond Armenia and Azerbaijan. Without such arrangements, the corridor will continue to entail significant geopolitical and security risks, potentially undermining its attractiveness to businesses seeking reliable routes for transporting goods between Central Asia and Europe.

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