

The Middle Corridor in the Shadow of Tolkien's Middle-earth

The Dawn After the Ring: An Emerging Peace

Bakhtiyar Salmanov

The South Caucasus stands between the remnants of war and the promise of a new era of peace and connectivity. Following the Second Karabakh War, the destruction of the symbolic “ring,” which marks the end of the conflict in this context, has opened an opportunity to reshape relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Yet, as in Tolkien's Middle-earth after the fall of Sauron, peace remains vulnerable and incomplete. The shadows, so to speak, have not fully lifted as no formal peace treaty has been signed, and the path toward trust remains gradual and complex.

Recent developments, however, have signaled a cautious yet significant thaw. Two recent key events mark a shift toward pragmatic engagement: Azerbaijan's decision in October 2025 to [allow](#) cargo transit from its territory to Armenia for the first time in decades, and the first commercial [shipment](#) of Azerbaijani gasoline to Armenia following years of economic disengagement, with SOCAR dispatching over 1,200 metric tonnes of fuel in December 2025. These gestures, while largely symbolic for now, represent the initial sparks of a more interconnected future.

This trajectory was further reinforced by a joint [Euronews interview](#) in December 2025, where Azerbaijani senior presidential aide Hikmet Hajiyev and Secretary of the Armenian Security Council Armen Grigoryan appeared together to speak before the cameras for the first time. Both men described peace as “irreversible” and emphasized that each step taken, from transit openings to economic cooperation, is “another brick in the wall of trust.” Their discussion of accelerating the U.S.-backed Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity ([TRIPP](#)) implementation signaled that connectivity

Bakhtiyar Salmanov is an MPA graduate from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) with a focus on economic policy and governance. His research and professional experience explore how digital transformation and evidence-based policymaking can drive economic growth. The views and opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author.

is no longer an abstract aspiration in the South Caucasus, but a maturing political project grounded in mutual commitment.

Like the strategic logic of TRIPP, the [Schuman Declaration](#) (1950) also underscores that establishing economic interdependence can serve as a cornerstone of post-conflict reconciliation. By reopening trade corridors while fully respecting each country's [substantive sovereignty](#), the region can begin to weave new patterns of concrete cooperation that extend beyond political breakthroughs and diplomatic successes. Connectivity can, over time, evolve into a stabilizing force, turning sovereign borders from barriers into bridges. However, the absence of a comprehensive peace treaty leaves these initiatives precariously balanced. The dawn has arrived, but the morning mist of uncertainty still veils the landscape.

Corridors as Rings of Power: Competing Visions of Connectivity

In Tolkien's legendarium, the Rings of Power were tools of influence, coveted by all. The contest over corridors in the South Caucasus reflects deeper struggles over sovereignty, influence, and economic direction. The Zangezur Corridor, advocated by Azerbaijan and Türkiye, envisions a continuous passage linking the Azerbaijani mainland with Nakhchivan and onward to Türkiye. For Baku, this would restore historic connectivity links and improve direct access to regional markets without infringing on Armenian sovereignty and territorial integrity. TRIPP (and only TRIPP) achieves this. On one side, its infrastructure and operational terms will be developed through what Trump calls an "exclusive partnership" with the U.S.; on the other, it will operate in accordance with Armenian law, as the country's prime minister has emphasized. Thus, TRIPP addresses the critical question of the kind of security guarantees Armenia can provide in a novel way (in effect, through outsourcing)—an arrangement that is acceptable to both Baku and Yerevan.

Moreover, TRIPP has garnered significant international attention, having been endorsed by the U.S. president at the 8 August 2025 White House summit, which was attended by the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the United States. In this context, delays or perceived backtracking by Armenia could cause political friction with American stakeholders. While Yerevan's approach remains cautious, any adjustments to the implementation may be interpreted as a deviation from prior agreements reached with the world's most powerful state. Careful communication and incremental steps can mitigate misunderstanding, ensuring that TRIPP advances without jeopardizing trust. This underscores the importance of balancing domestic priorities with international expectations in pursuing pragmatic, sustainable progress along the Middle Corridor.

The broader geopolitical context further complicates the picture. Russia, Iran, the EU, and China all view the South Caucasus as a critical link in a wider transport network

across the Silk Road region. Competing visions, from the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route to the International North-South Transport Corridor, intersect here, each with its own political and economic logic. The Middle Corridor, therefore, is not only a logistical project but also a strategic narrative. How it is ultimately defined will play a significant role in shaping the region's geopolitical trajectory.

Like Tolkien's rings, the various sections and routes of the Middle Corridor carry both promise and peril; they can bind states together through shared prosperity or tilt regional dynamics in unintended ways if not managed through trust, transparency, mutual benefit, and a rejection of zero-sum, winner-take-all approaches. Therefore, the strategic logic of TRIPP should enable Armenia to provide clear and credible guarantees to ensure the route's smooth and uninterrupted operation.

The Fellowship of the Corridor: Regional and Global Stakes

Every epic journey in Middle-earth requires a fellowship, a coalition of diverse actors with distinct strengths and vulnerabilities, united by a common goal. The emerging Middle Corridor, spanning China, the Silk Road region (Central Asia and the South Caucasus), Türkiye, and Europe, similarly depends on collaboration among states, institutions, and private actors. It represents the collective pursuit of a Eurasian transport network that can diversify supply chains and broaden the region's strategic connectivity options.

For Armenia, the corridor represents the key to ending its regional geopolitical and geoeconomic isolation. For Azerbaijan and Türkiye, it offers a defining opportunity to become a bridge between continents. For Central Asian states like Kazakhstan, the corridor provides a reliable outlet to global markets. For China, it ensures that the shortest commercial route to the West becomes the fastest (and most secure), lending strategic credence to the vision underpinning its Belt and Road Initiative. And for the European Union, the corridor aligns with efforts to promote resilient, sustainable connectivity under the Global Gateway initiative. Regional financial institutions like the [European Bank for Reconstruction and Development](#) seem increasingly engaged in funding logistics infrastructure and digitalization projects along the route.

Yet, physical connectivity alone is insufficient. The corridor's real success will hinge on soft infrastructure, including standardized regulations, digital logistics systems, and interoperable customs procedures. Just as the strength of Tolkien's fictional Fellowship lay in its unity of purpose rather than force of arms, the Middle Corridor's future depends on governance, not geography. Without institutional coherence, the corridor risks becoming a fragmented patchwork rather than an integrated artery of trade. At the heart of this project now lies TRIPP.

Unleashing the Middle-earth: From Shadow to Shared Prosperity

This stage of regional development calls for political will equal to the technical ambition. If successful, the Middle Corridor can redefine Eurasia's transport map, transforming a once-divided region into a corridor of cooperation and shared growth.

In Tolkien's universe, the defeat of darkness was not an end but a beginning, a moment to rebuild, to heal, and to restore trust among once-warring peoples. The South Caucasus now faces a similar challenge, which is to transform the fragile calm following decades of conflict into a sustainable peace rooted in shared prosperity. The reopening of the Zangezur Corridor through TRIPP and the rekindling of dialogue between Azerbaijan and Armenia represent the first steps in this long journey.

To "unleash the Middle-earth" in policy terms means to release the Middle Corridor from the shadow of geopolitics and enable it to function as an open, cooperative geoeconomic space. That requires a new "fellowship of institutions," not just governments, but regional organizations, financial institutions, and private-sector partners. Joint facilities and infrastructure arrangements, as well as transparent dispute resolution mechanisms, could ground trust in practice rather than promise.

The corridor's digital dimension is equally vital, as it would make the corridor resilient to political fluctuations, which occasionally reflect revanchist sentiments in parts of Armenia. At the same time, environmental and social safeguards must also accompany infrastructure development to ensure everyone benefits from improved connectivity.

As Tolkien reminds us, the end of one age heralds the dawn of another. The South Caucasus stands at such a threshold, caught between memory and renewal. The goal is no longer to win the war, but to secure peace. The Middle Corridor can become the symbol of that victory, the bridge that binds former adversaries into partners and turns a region once divided by mountains and mistrust into a landscape of connection and hope.