

## **Rahim Rahimov**

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Russian, Iranian and Azerbaijani presidents The putin, Hassan Rouhani and Ilham Aliyev, respectively The atrilateral summit in Tehran, on November 1. They stressed the necessity to complete the Resht Transport Corridor (NSTC). The NSTC will connect India and Southeast Asia to Russia and Northern Europe, via Azerbaijan and Iran (Kremlin.ru, November 1). During the summit, Azerbaijans President Aliyev announced the successful conclusion of negotiations to issue a \$500 million loan to Iran to complete the missing Resht The segment of the railway Rresident.az, November 1). As a result of this project, St. Petersburg, Russia, will be connected to the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas, on the Persian Gulf, via a direct railway link. President Putin specifically expressed support for the construction of the NSTCs last missing segment The caspian route, which includes the Resht-Astara rail line (Kremlin.ru, November 1).

A long-proposed alternative to the western Caspian (or Azerbaijani) route within the NSTC is the Armenian-Iranian rail link, also known as the South Armenian Railway, which would connect Irans Bandar Abbas port to the Black Sea and Russia through Armenia and Georgia (Regnum, October 17, 2016; Civilnet.am March 23, 2017; EurAsia Daily, January 13, 2016; Ritmeurasia.org, February 17, 2016). However, since Baku is a crossing point for

First, the Azerbaijani route will solidify the blockade on Armenia implemented by Azerbaijan and Turkey due to the Karabakh conflict. And the more isolated Armenia is, the more dependent on Russia it becomes. Indeed, a major rationale for the Armenian-Iranian railway was to subvert the blockade of Armenia while simultaneously reducing its dependence on Russia. This reasoning also explains why the United States was not opposed to the construction of a rail line linking its regional adversary Iran with Armenia, which is home to Russian military bases (see EDM, January 30).

The second basis for Russias indifference is the fact that the choice of the Azerbaijani route over the Armenian-Iranian railway will seriously undermine Yerevans attempts to build closer relations with Tehran independent of Moscow. It will also prevent Armenia from developing stronger transport connectivity with Europe as well as Georgia. As noted above, the Armenian-Iranian route would have continued northward into Georgia, which is politically at odds with Russia (Jam-news.net, February 28).

Third, at a cost of around \$3.5 billion, the South Armenian Railway is not commercially viable (Newsarmenia.am, October 31). This sum is close to Armenias entire state budget. Yerevan has no prospects to finance the Iranian-Armenian railway on its own, while Baku has agreed to fund the \$500 million still needed for the completion of the missing railway segment of the NSTC. In 2015, the president of Russian Railways made it clear that Moscow was not interested in the South Armenian Railway project, calling it commercially unviable (Azatutyun.am, June 9, 2015; Arka.am, January 19, 2016).

Fourth, by supporting the Azerbaijani route, Moscow also aims to neutralize Chinese intentions to help fund the Iranian-Armenian railway to serve the One Belt, One Road project (Armenpress.am, November 16, 2015). The South Armenian Railway and Chinas involvement in bringing it to fruition would have pulled Armenia out of Russias exclusive control. President Sargsyan had publicly stated that this project would lead to a stronger Chinese presence in the South Caucasus, something Moscow obviously would not like to see.

Many in Armenia feel betrayed by Russia due to the effective failure of the Iranian-Armenian railway project. Yerevan has repeatedly counted on Moscows political support or economic backing for various regional initiatives, only to be disappointed. Ultimately, it seems, Armenia is simply too small to sacrifice Russian interests for (see EDM, April 14, 2016; February 13, 2017). This disconnect, however, has yet to fully register for the Armenian ruling elite (see EDM, July 27, September 8). And the reality is, Yerevans stubbornness on the Karabakh conflict has made the economy of Armenia and the prosperity of its people hostage to unrealistic ambitions for more than 25 years.

Yazar hakkında :		

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