
Turkey Connects Nakhchivan To Azerbaijan With Railway, Natural Gas Projects

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Stuck between Iran and Armenia and located far from its national homeland of Azerbaijan, the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic will be better connected to Baku thanks to the Turkish rail line that will be built between Igdır and Nakhchivan and natural gas transfer projects announced by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

During a joint press conference with Azerbaijani President İlham Aliyev in Ankara in November, Erdoğan underlined Nakhchivan's importance to Turkey and said Ankara will work to improve the country's difficult position. He explained about natural gas and railway projects involving Nakhchivan that are about to commence, stressing that Turkey is dedicated to the continuation of its plans for the isolated region.

"Nakhchivan is of considerable importance to Turkey. ... Natural gas [transfer] from Igdır to Nakhchivan and constructing a rail line between Igdır and Nakhchivan [that will be connected to the Kars-Tbilisi-Baku railway] were also discussed. The research on these [projects] is beginning," he said. Erdoğan also underlined Turkey's commitment to the projects, stating, "We are taking these steps determinedly."

One of the projects to improve the autonomous Nakhchivan's connection with Azerbaijan is the Kars-Tbilisi-Baku railway, expected to be completed in 2014. When operational, the railroad will unite the rail networks of Central Asia, the Caucasus and China with those of Turkey and Europe, facilitating the movement of cargo between the Asian and European continents. With an additional rail line from between Igdır to Nakhchivan, an eastern Turkish city bordering Nakhchivan, the land-locked region will benefit from the increased economic activity through Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan after the completion of the main railroad.

The Center for Middle Eastern Studies' (ORSAM) Eurasia advisor, Sureyya Yigit, told Sunday's Zaman that Turkey seemed to display the importance it places on the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan at the same press conference.

"Turkey wants Azerbaijan to regain the territories it lost and re-establish its territorial integrity. And Nakhchivan is a part of Azerbaijan. The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway has the potential to increase economic development in the region. If the railway project is finalized [with an additional rail line between Igdır and Nakhchivan], Nakhchivan's economy will improve considerably. The region will provide more employment for its citizens and enjoy the increasing trade activity in the region," Yigit said.

The territory linking Nakhchivan and Azerbaijan became part of Armenia under the Soviet leadership of the early 1920s, thus separating the autonomous region from the rest of Azerbaijan. All railways and highways connecting the two regions were closed after Azerbaijan and Armenia fought over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region. Since then, air travel has been the most frequently used form of transport between Azerbaijan proper and Nakhchivan.

A land connection between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan is important for both

sides, as apart from 15-kilometer border with Turkey, Azerbaijan's decades-old enemy Armenia and Yerevan's close ally Iran enclose most of the autonomous region. Relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia suffered greatly when they experienced a crisis over the Nagorno-Karabakh region in the early 1990s, and Nakhchivan is still affected by the conflict as Karki, an exclave of the autonomous region, is still under Armenian occupation. Although Baku uses Iran to access its province, Iran's stance, which changes according to Tehran's interests, jeopardize a strong connection between Baku and Nakhchivan.

Kamer Kasim, vice president of the Ankara-based International Strategic Research Organization (USAK), said that as Nakhchivan's economy is dependent on Turkey, the trilateral connection between Turkey, Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan will help to decrease the autonomous region's isolation.

"The only way out for Nakhchivan is Turkey, in terms of its connection with Azerbaijan. With the help of Turkey, it will be more connected to its home country," he told Sunday's Zaman, referring to the fact that among the neighboring countries, Turkey is the only door that is open to the autonomous region.

Among the topics discussed between Erdogan and Aliyev were steps on transferring gas from Igdir to Nakhchivan, another project that will help strengthen the connection between Azerbaijan and its region. In a display of solidarity with Azerbaijan on the Nakhchivan issue, Turkey announced in 2010 that it would transport Azerbaijani gas to Nakhchivan without asking any payment in return.
