China in South Caucasus Post-2022: Toward a New Strategic Vision?

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1. Introduction

The 2022 invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation marked a turning point in regional geopolitics, opening space for significant realignment across the Black Sea and Caspian Sea region. The full-scale invasion altered the strategic calculations of many countries in the region, creating opportunities for new alliances and shifting trade and transit routes. These changes have resonated in South Caucasus, with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia increasingly turning to alternatives. Georgia, which was previously staunchly pro-Western, has been reaping benefits from renewed normalization with Russia while simultaneously cutting ties with the European Union. Armenia, having lost the last pockets of territory in Nagorno-Karabakh, has opted for a pivot toward the West. Azerbaijan, for its part, has adopted a more openly anti-Russian stance and has sought closer collaboration with Turkey and Central Asian nations.

Despite their differing trajectories, all three countries have been united by a growing effort to engage more actively with the People's Republic of China (hereafter, China). The past four years have been particularly productive for Sino-Caucasian relations. Each country has signed declarations on strategic partnerships with China, intensified high-level diplomatic exchanges, and expanded bilateral trade. Their leaders have also signaled a willingness to cooperate with Beijing across a broader range of areas, including defense and security. Beijing, for its part, has openly endorsed the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, a transit corridor linking China with Turkey and Europe via Azerbaijan and Georgia, while its diplomatic representations have stepped up engagement on the ground across the region.

The sudden surge in diplomatic and political exchange has led some scholars to argue that Beijing is becoming more actively engaged in Russia's immediate neighborhood. Some expert accounts also highlight that China's emergence brought about a shift in the regional balance of power. Others suggest that China is increasingly viewing the region as part of its broader strategy to limit U.S. influence across Eurasia, while some interpret these developments as an effort to counter a potential expansion of Turkish and American presence in Central Asia. Others, however, assert that it is yet too early to say whether China is willing to challenge other regional powers in South Caucasus. Additional explanations emphasize economic arguments, with Beijing presented as an actor seeking to diversify its export markets and transit routes. Others also indicate the absence of Russian reaction to growing Chinese influence in the region.

More broadly, there is consensus among experts and commentators that Beijing's outlook toward the three countries has shifted to being more active since the invasion in 2022. Likewise, experts and commentators broadly concur on motivations of regional capitals, with most suggesting that engagement with China offers opportunities for the three countries to expand export bases, as well as to solidify their place as transit hubs for east-west trade. A smaller segment also emphasizes more strategic or security-driven motivations. To date, however, there has been no comprehensive assessment of these dynamics.

This research paper explores the implications of these developments, focusing on China's engagement in the South Caucasus region in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It examines how the post-2022 geopolitical landscape, shaped by the war in Ukraine, has influenced the interactions of regional capitals with Beijing. More broadly, the paper assesses whether China's involvement represents a new strategic pivot or remains a continuation of its peripheral, economically driven engagement with individual countries of the region. Additionally, it explores how the potential expansion of the Middle Corridor and the growing interest in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) among states in South Caucasus intersect with broader geopolitical trends. The research paper draws on extensive desk research, coupled with interviews with experts in the target countries and those working in the relevant fields[1].

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The study begins with an outline of bilateral ties, examining each of the countries in three separate chapters. Each chapter is divided into four subchapters that address political and economic aspects, as well as the role of China in the respective country's foreign policy; the fourth subchapters focus on China's socio-cultural influence. The analysis then turns to China's motivations, including the place of South Caucasus in its foreign policy and the significance of the Middle Corridor. This is followed by a comparative assessment of China's policies with the three countries. The final chapter offers concluding remarks.

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2. China-Armenia Relations

2.1 Diplomatic and political ties

Armenia and China share a long history of interactions. The two countries established diplomatic relations on April 6, 1992, with Beijing opening the embassy and trade representation in Yerevan in the same year (Armenia opened its embassy in Beijing in 1996). The bilateral ties in the next two decades developed at a modest but steady level, with the political component being comparatively more pronounced with Armenia than in China's relations with Georgia and Azerbaijan. Accordingly, bilateral visits and the legal framework for cooperation were more developed there than with the two other countries. In addition, despite favoring the principle of self-determination in their foreign policy, Armenian officials still expressed their support for the One China policy from the early years of the relationship. China, in turn, upheld a neutral stance about the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh, a territory in Azerbaijan held by Armenians. The two sides also maintained coordination within the United Nations and other multilateral fora.

The 2010s witnessed a notable increase in diplomatic engagement, driven primarily by expanding economic ties. In 2014, Armenia endorsed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Two years later, Yerevan was granted a status of a dialogue partner to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The momentum of bilateral relations was largely sustained in the immediate aftermath of the 2018 Velvet Revolution, with several high-level meetings taking place, including a meeting between Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2019. Nevertheless, Armenia's China policy in recent years has increasingly followed the regional dynamics shaped by its neighbors, Azerbaijan and Georgia. A telling illustration is the fact that Yerevan secured strategic partnership status considerably later than Baku and Tbilisi.

Yet, despite Armenia's relatively lower strategic profile, Chinese diplomatic activity in Armenia has been intensive. Analysis of Chinese embassy engagements in the country shows interactions across all branches of the Armenian state – executive, legislative, judicial, security, and regional authorities, both in the pre- and post-2022 period. Importantly, this also involves officials from defense and security sectors. No less important is that, these interactions cut across the political spectrum, often involving key opposition leaders, suggesting that China's long-term objective is to cultivate support beyond the ruling party.

Yerevan also increased defense cooperation with Beijing, with Defense Minister Suren Papikyan visiting China twice in recent years, in October 2023 and September 2024. There are also reports of Armenian purchases of military equipment such as the 'robot dogs' and special drones for border monitoring.

In June 2025, Armenia submitted an application for SCO membership, with China pledging its support.

China and Armenia have operated the intergovernmental Joint Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation since 1999. In addition, a China-Armenia Friendship Group has functioned within the National Assembly of Armenia. The most recent high-level meeting between the two countries took place on August 31, 2025, when Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan met with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Tianjin, China, on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit.

2.2 China in Armenia's strategic thinking

Armenia has approached China primarily within the framework of foreign policy diversification, viewing Beijing as an actor capable of broadening Armenia's diplomatic options without incurring political costs from its traditional ally, Russia. In recent years, economic considerations have gained greater prominence in Yerevan's calculus, with policymakers increasingly regarding China as a convenient and expandable export destination. Armenian officials have also sought to position the country within the BRI, presenting their "Crossroads for Peace" initiative of 2023 as complementary to Chinese connectivity projects.

Nevertheless, Yerevan's visions have lacked a level of strategic depth comparable to those of its neighbors. This pattern is also well reflected in Armenia's strategic and programmatic documents, where references to China are relatively sparse and subsumed within broader foreign policy objectives. For example, Armenia's 2020 National Security Strategy states, in general terms, that the authorities will "deepen friendly relations" with Beijing by "expanding broad, multi-sectoral, and mutually beneficial cooperation." Likewise, the Government Program for 2021-2026 refers to the "strengthening of friendly and mutually beneficial ties and the establishment of new cooperative relations" with China, alongside India and Japan.

2.3 Economic cooperation and bilateral trade

Chinese-Armenian economic relations in the 1990s were relatively scarce, constrained by regional conflicts and domestic instability. The few economic interactions that occurred were largely ad hoc, often confined to activities of individual entrepreneurs. This status quo began to change in the 2000s, as bilateral trade grew rapidly, primarily driven by imports from China. The upward trend continued in the 2010s, with trade turnover increasing further, again largely due to imports from China. This period also saw limited Chinese corporate engagement, particularly in the mining sector, telecommunications and infrastructure. The pattern persisted into the 2020s, with economic relations still skewed toward imports, although the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 led to a notable increase in the export of goods.

In 2024, China ranked as Armenia's third-largest trading partner, and second-largest source of imports. Total trade turnover with China reached USD 2.8 billion, accounting for 9.4% of the country's overall trade. The only states with higher trade volumes were Russia, at USD 12.4 billion (41.1%), and the United Arab Emirates, at USD 5.3 billion (17.7%). The 2024 figures represent a significant increase compared to a decade earlier: in 2013, total turnover stood at around 0.5 billion, representing 8.6% of overall trade[2].

Table #1: Foreign trade of Armenia with China (in USD billion)[3]

	2013	2018	2024
Turnover	0.5 (8.6%)	0.8 (10.8%)	2.8 (9.4%)
Exports	0.1 (6.6%)	0.1 (4.1%)	1.1 (8.4%)
Imports	0.4 (9.3%)	0.7 (14.0%)	1.7 (10.1%)

Source: the Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia

In 2024, Armenia's key import commodities from China included automatic data processing machines, telephones and communication equipment, vehicles, and semiconductor devices. Its primary exports to China were dominated by semi-processed gold, accounting for 41% of total exports, and copper ores and concentrates, which made up 40%. Notably, the surge in semi-processed gold exports largely reflected an increase in re-exports from Russia, registering a one-off jump of 78 times compared to 2023.

The sides also launched direct air connection from September 2024, leading to an increase of visitors: in 2024, a total of 32,826 tourists from China visited Armenia – an increase of 65% compared to 2023.

[2] These numbers should be interpreted with caution, as much of the recent growth in bilateral trade reflects the rising re-export of goods to Russia rather than structural improvements in the Armenian economy.

[3] Percentages indicate China's share in Armenia in total trade, exports, or imports. Calculations for 2013 & 2018 are author's own.

Despite expanding trade and connections, China's economic footprint in Armenia remains limited. Chinese companies have mainly participated as construction contractors, working on projects such as a section of the North-South Road (Talin-Gyumri), the Kaps Reservoir in the Shirak region, and the Masrik-1 solar power plant in Gegharkunik. Additionally, the FDI inflows in Armenia have remained meagre.

2.4 Socio-cultural influence

China's cultural and humanitarian presence in Armenia is considerably stronger than its economic engagement. The Embassy of China plays an active role in promoting the Chinese language, culture, and heritage throughout the country[4], a mission further supported by the Confucius Institute at Brusov State University in Yerevan, the oldest in the South Caucasus region. China is particularly active in the education sector, with the number of Armenians studying Chinese or otherwise benefiting from non-formal education opportunities growing steadily. According to some estimates, in June 2024, the number of Armenian students studying Chinese at various institutions in Armenia stood at 5,000 students.

Yerevan is also home to the Armenian-Chinese Friendship School[5], funded and equipped by China between 2016 and 2018, which offers intensive language training. In total, Chinese language learning centers operate in 17 public schools across Armenia. Since 2019, Beijing has also offered 15 annual scholarships to Armenian students wishing to pursue higher education in China. The China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker, which documents academic cooperation between European countries and China, estimates that Armenian universities maintain at least 37 links with Chinese counterparts.

China is also active in the media field. Armenia's state news agency, Armenpress and China's state-run news agency, Xinhua have had a cooperation agreement since 2009. They renewed the document in September 2025. There is also an Armenian-language Facebook page of the China Global Television Network (CGTN), a state-run news channel based in Beijing. The page was launched in October 2022.

China has also provided humanitarian assistance to Armenia; In May 2021, the country received 100,000 doses of Chinese-made vaccines free-of-charge[6]. China has also allocated funding for renovating the broadcasting hall of the Public Television of Armenia, and donated medical equipment and supplies.

China's "soft power" activities are gradually translating into more favorable public perceptions. For instance, according to CRRC's Caucasus Barometer, the share of Armenian respondents identifying China as a role model for development increased from 4% in 2021 to 8% in 2024. By comparison, China did not feature at all among Georgian respondents in 2021, while in 2024 only 1% of Georgians named it as a preferable development model. Similarly, in the opinion surveys of the International Republican Institute, conducted over the course of 2023, only 3% of respondents in Georgia named China as the most important political partner for Georgia[7], compared to 33% of respondents in Armenia (up from 22% in 2018). Moreover, the most recent Neighbors East survey, commissioned by the European Union in 2025, shows that the level of trust to China among Armenian respondents stands at 48%, lower than the corresponding figures for the EU (69%) and the United States (58%), and higher than the Russian Federation (39%). According to the same survey, China enjoys 57% trust in Azerbaijan and 24% trust in Georgia.

3. China-Azerbaijan Relations

3.1 Diplomatic and political ties

Chinese-Azerbaijani relations officially began on December 27, 1991, when Beijing recognized Azerbaijan's newly declared independence from the USSR. The two countries formalized their ties on April 2, 1992, with the establishment of diplomatic relations. Beijing quickly set up its embassy, and Baku followed suit by

[4] Notably, these initiatives coincide with Yerevan's parallel efforts to promote Armenian cultural heritage in China.
[5] The school had approximately 400 students in 2021.
[6] Beijing donated 200,000 doses of Chinese vaccines to Georgia, and 150,000 doses of vaccines to Azerbaijan in 2021.
[7] Multiple answers allowed.

opening its diplomatic representation in September 1993. However, in the first two decades of bilateral relations, diplomatic engagement remained limited. Although trade gradually increased, political relations did not experience significant growth during this period. The foreign policy of Azerbaijan, which was heavily invested in developing its oil and gas sectors, focused primarily on Turkish and western directions. Still, China and Azerbaijan found common ground in their support of the principle of territorial integrity.

Bilateral relations began to intensify in the mid-2010s, following the announcement of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Azerbaijan quickly positioned itself as a proactive supporter of the initiative, emphasizing the potential role of the Trans-Caspian transport route as a reliable transit direction. In 2016, Baku also joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a dialogue partner, further solidifying its ties with China. However, Azerbaijan's ongoing involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, along with Russia's role and influence in it, hindered deeper engagement of Beijing in the country.

The situation started to change visibly in 2023, when Azerbaijan regained control over the last remaining Armenian-held territories in Nagorno-Karabakh, marking the start of a period of increased Chinese engagement with Azerbaijan. This momentum culminated in the signing of a declaration on strategic partnership on July 3, 2024, which was further upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership on April 23, 2025. The two sides also began discussing a potential free trade agreement. In parallel, Azerbaijani officials started voicing clearer support for China's global initiatives, while also demonstrating renewed interest in China-led international organizations such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In return, Beijing pledged its support to Azerbaijan's peace agenda in South Caucasus.

High-level interactions have been accompanied by increased Chinese embassy activity in 2024-2025. Frequent meetings of the Chinese ambassador with Azerbaijani ministers, lawmakers and regional authorities have been complemented by proactive media outreach, aimed at articulating China's positions on international issues, as well as garnering both elite and popular support. Unlike in Armenia, however, the Chinese embassy has avoided engaging with political actors outside the ruling New Azerbaijan party.

Recent years have also seen an increase in defense cooperation, with Azerbaijani Defense Minister Zakir Hasanov visiting China twice in recent years, in October 2023 and September 2025. Progress has also been made in weapons acquisitions. The most prominent recent purchases include the JF-17 fighter jets, jointly produced by China and Pakistan. The jets were on display during a military parade in Baku in November 2025. The parade also featured another Chinese-made system, the HQ-9 long-range surface-to-air missile. Beijing is reportedly also working with Baku on the development of the Azerbaijani drone industry.

The two sides operate the Azerbaijan-China Intergovernmental Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation. There is also working group for the Azerbaijani-Chinese inter-parliamentary relations. The most recent high-level visit from Azerbaijan occurred in September 2025, when President Ilham Aliyev met Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the SCO summit in Tianjin. This was just months after Aliyev's April visit to Beijing, which ended with the declaration of comprehensive partnership.

3.2 China in Azerbaijan's strategic thinking

Baku regards China as a key economic partner, both in trade and investments. Azerbaijani authorities have sought Beijing's collaboration on energy, telecommunications, and infrastructure projects. More recently, Baku has emphasized cooperation in green energy transition and industrial modernization. In the wake of strained relations with Brussels following the Nagorno-Karabakh war, Azerbaijan has actively tried to secure Beijing's endorsement of its conflict resolution agenda. More recently, Baku has also promoted the Syunik/Zangezur corridor as a potential transit route for Chinese cargo to Turkey and Europe[8].

[8] In May 2021, the Chinese ambassador to Azerbaijan, Guo Min was quoted as saying that "the new corridor for transportation to Europe via Armenia, Nakhchivan and Turkey … will play an active part in promoting peace and stability for the region." High-level Chinese officials have not yet commented on the issue of the Syunik/Zangezur corridor.

Importantly, ties with China are part of Azerbaijan's broader pursuit of a multi-vector foreign policy, aimed at expanding the geography of its traditional diplomatic engagement beyond Turkey, the West, and Russia. They also align with Baku's ambition to diversify its economy beyond oil and gas sectors, as well as to transform the country into a transit hub connecting various regions. Azerbaijan has been particularly keen to secure Chinese support for the Middle Corridor, a flagship project linking China with the West.

The importance Azerbaijan attaches to China is well documented in its strategic and programmatic documents. For example, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs explicitly refers to the country's bilateral relations with China as being of "special importance." In addition, an official government portal describes Azerbaijan as an active participant in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The same source emphasizes Azerbaijan's ambition to transform itself into an integrator of North-South and East-West connectivity projects, noting that China, among other countries, stands to benefit from this role. Likewise, the official website of the Azerbaijani president indicates that transit routes traversing the country, including the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway, facilitates movement of goods from China to Europe.

3.3 Economic cooperation and bilateral trade

For much of the 2000s, Chinese-Azerbaijani economic ties were limited, with trade turnover accounting for only around 2-3 percent of Azerbaijan's total foreign trade. The exchange was also largely asymmetric, with imports from China outweighing exports from Azerbaijan. The import structure was dominated by industrial goods and machinery, aimed at supporting Azerbaijan's expanding oil and gas sector.

During the 2010s, despite relatively modest FDI inflows, Chinese companies gradually established an active presence in Azerbaijan's domestic market, primarily as construction and engineering contractors. By the late 2010s, Chinese firms were operating in traditional sectors such as oil and gas – for example, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) in onshore oilfield projects – as well as in telecommunications, with Huawei engaged in network infrastructure deployment. Chinese companies were also involved in the repair and modernization of thermoelectric and hydropower facilities, including the Mingechevir and Varvara hydropower stations (China National Electric Equipment Corporation, CNEEC) and projects at the Mingechevir power complex (Dongfang Electric). In addition, Chinese firms were active in heavy industry, including steel industry (China National Machinery Industry Corporation).

The contract signed during President Aliyev's visit to China in April 2019 provided a significant boost to Chinese corporate engagement in Azerbaijan. These contracts, valued at around USD 800 million, involved Chinese companies in a range of projects across heavy industry, agriculture, and telecommunications.

In recent years, as Azerbaijan prioritized diversifying its oil-dependent economy, Chinese companies have expanded into relatively new sectors such as green energy and clean technologies. This push accelerated particularly after the 2020 takeover of parts of the Armenian-controlled areas of Nagorno-Karabakh, when Azerbaijani authorities emphasized green initiatives in the reconstruction process. The traditional mode of corporate engagement remained intact, with Chinese companies continuing primarily as service providers, bringing the technological expertise that Azerbaijan lacked. For example, Huawei has been engaged in smart village projects in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, while Sinopec, China's energy giant, has been involved in the development of the Gobustan Solar Power Plant. Chinese companies have also contributed to solar power projects in Bilasuvar, Garadagh, and Neftchala, among other locations. Additionally, BYD, China's electric vehicle manufacturer, has begun assembling electric buses in Sumgait.

The rising trajectory of economic relations is clearly reflected in bilateral trade figures. In 2024, trade turnover reached USD 3.7 billion, accounting for 7.9% of Azerbaijan's overall trade[9]. This represents a twofold increase compared to 2018 and a fourfold rise relative to 2013. Bilateral trade, however, remains

[9] China was the fourth largest trading partner in 2024. The three biggest trading partners were Italy (USD 11.4 billion), Turkey (USD 6.1 billion), and Russia (USD 4.8 billion).

highly unbalanced: imports from China stood at USD 3.7 billion in 2024, while Azerbaijani exports to China amounted to only USD 0.02 billion. Importantly, the trade gap was narrower in the two previous timepoints, meaning that Azerbaijani exports have not kept pace with the rapid growth of imports.

Table #2: Foreign trade of Azerbaijan with China (in USD billion)[10]

	2013	2018	2024
Turnover	0.76 (1.9%)[11]	1.3 (4.2%)	3.7 (7.9%)
Exports	0.09 (0.4%)	0.1 (0.6%)	0.02 (0.1%)
Imports	0.56 (5.2%)	1.2 (10.4%)	3.7 (17.7%)

Source: the State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan

Much like Azerbaijani exports, Chinese FDI has remained modest. In 2024, Chinese companies invested USD 17.5 million in the Azerbaijani economy, accounting for only 0.2% of total investments (USD 7 billion). By comparison, the largest investors were the United Kingdom (USD 1.7 billion), Turkey (USD 1.2 billion), and Hungary (USD 1 billion). In 2023, Chinese FDI stood at USD 4.1 million (0.1% of total investments), while in 2019 it reached USD 12 million (0.3%), and in 2020 it amounted to USD 7.7 million (0.2%).

3.4 Socio-cultural influence

Chinese "soft power" efforts in Azerbaijan are primarily driven by two actors: the Chinese embassy and the Confucius Institute. The latter has two branches in the country, at Baku State University and Azerbaijan University of Languages. Their activities focus on language education, cultural events, and seminars.

Beijing also provides state-funded scholarships for Azerbaijani students to study in China. According to some sources, an estimated 500 young Azerbaijanis attended various Chinese universities on Beijing-funded scholarships between 2016 and 2019. The China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker estimates that Azerbaijani universities maintain at least 164 links with Chinese educational institutions. Additionally, Huawei is actively involved in IT education through its partnerships with Azerbaijani universities.

China is also active in the media, following the same operational model observed in Armenia. Specifically, China's news agency Xinhua cooperates closely with Azertac, Azerbaijan's state news agency. In addition, CGTN launched an Azerbaijani-language Facebook page in October 2022. As in Armenia, the Chinese embassy actively promotes a positive image of China, including through systematic media outreach.

The EU Neighbors East survey, conducted in 2025, shows that the level of trust to China among Azerbaijanis stands at 57%, higher than the corresponding figures observed in Armenia (48%), and Georgia (24%). China ranks second only to Turkey, which enjoys a near-universal level of confidence (95%).

4. China-Georgia Relations

4.1 Diplomatic and political ties

Georgian-Chinese ties trace back centuries, but their modern iteration dates to June 9, 1992, when the two countries established diplomatic ties[12]. In the early years of independence, Georgian-Chinese political relations remained limited and were largely confined to formal diplomatic engagement. China recognized Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity early on, and its diplomats have periodically reiterated this position in subsequent years. Georgia, for its part, has consistently adhered to the "One China" policy.

Despite this reciprocal approach, the relationship has not been without challenges. Since 2008, when the Russian Federation occupied and recognized the independence of two Georgian regions – Abkhazia and

[10] Percentages indicate China's share in Azerbaijan's total trade, exports, or imports. The data does not contain trade figures for Hong Kong and Taiwan, which the Azerbaijani statistical office tracks separately.

[11] Import and export data reported by the State Statistical Committee do not fully reconcile with the total trade volume.

[12] China opened its embassy in Tbilisi in 1992, while Georgia opened its embassy in Beijing in 2004.

Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, Beijing has opted to take a largely neutral stance towards the issue[13]. Nevertheless, several economic delegations from these entities have participated in trade exhibitions in China, raising concerns in Tbilisi. Moreover, when the current ruling party came to power, it initially signaled a degree of hostility toward China. Shortly after his electoral victory in October 2012, the party's leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili, warned of an alleged plan by the previous authorities to settle "126,000 Chinese" in Tbilisi, a claim that was later proven unfounded. The subsequent period also saw a number of xenophobic statements targeting Chinese nationals, including remarks made by high-level GD officials. Nevertheless, bilateral ties in the early 2010s have generally remained within constructive bounds.

More recently, particularly following the signing of the Free Trade Agreement in 2017, bilateral ties have seen a visible upgrade. This has been reflected in expanded economic cooperation, an increase in high-level visits (albeit disproportionately on the Georgian side), and deeper sectoral engagement. In 2023, the bilateral ties were elevated to a strategic partnership, making Georgia the first in the region to gain such status. In addition, Georgian PM Irakli Garibashvili openly endorsed President Xi's global initiatives, the BRI, the Global Security Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, and Global Civilization Initiative.

Importantly, intensified cooperation has also extended into other areas of political life in Georgia. In particular, following the declaration of a strategic partnership in July 2023, China has received noticeably more positive coverage from GD politicians, GD-affiliated experts, and government-friendly media. The key narrative surrounding China emphasizes that the world is becoming multipolar and in this new setting, Beijing is emerging as a major power. Within this narrative framework, China is increasingly portrayed as a source of investment, a model for economic modernization, and a potential mediator in the conflict with Russia. China is also depicted as a non-violent, peace-oriented actor. It is also worth noting that growing positive messaging[14] concerning China has coincided with Georgia's rapidly deteriorating relations with the West, particularly the European Union, over the country's democratic backsliding.

It is also worth noting that this rhetorical alignment has taken place against the backdrop of recurrent disinformation campaign voiced by the Chinese state funded media about Georgia's partnership with the West. More specifically, starting from around 2019, Chinese media outlets have been referring to Georgia's Rose Revolution, a bloodless change of power in November 2003, as an example of Western attempts to meddle in domestic affairs, alongside other 'color revolutions,' such as Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004 and Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution in 2005. The accusations were further amplified by Chinese state agencies, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stating in its report of December 2021 that the U.S. State Department[15] had 'openly admitted playing a central role in these regime changes'. A similar message was voiced by the Chinese MFA in May 2022. Additionally, starting from 2020, the Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research, a US-funded biological research facility in Tbilisi, has been recurrently mentioned in the context of broader bio-warfare allegations against the United States, amplifying the standard Russian

[13] In the voting on Georgia's IDP resolution at the United Nations General Assembly, which calls for the return of all displaced individuals to Georgia's occupied regions, China has consistently abstained, except in 2022, when it voted against the resolution.

[14] A December 2024 study by the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) found that pro-government social media in Georgia increasingly portray China as a major power that respects Georgia's sovereignty, as a country that could serve as a mediator in territorial issues, and as an actor with a key role in Georgia's function as a bridge between East and West. The study also noted that posting activity on China on these pages peaked three times: August 2022, July 2023, and May 2024, coinciding with Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, to the signing of a strategic partnership between Georgia and China, and to the announcement of a Chinese company winning the Anaklia port contract, respectively. A similar observation was made by the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), the country's largest election watchdog. In a report issued in September 2024, a month before the parliamentary elections, the organization said anonymous social media pages were presenting China in a positive light, while discrediting Georgia's western partners.

[15] Interestingly, just a day after the MFA statement, on December 6, China's ambassador to Syria held a meeting with the newly-appointed diplomatic envoy of the Russian-backed authorities of Abkhazia at the premises of the Chinese embassy in Damascus. The meeting was later described as a "misunderstanding" by the Chinese ambassador to Georgia.

narratives that dangerous pathogens were being tested in the facility. The two narrative lines were particularly strongly promoted in 2022[16], but despite their intensity, the GD government refrained from commenting on these accusations. Over time, however, as the party adopted a more authoritarian and anti-western line, the Chinese and Georgian messaging started to increasingly align[17].

Much like in Baku, Chinese embassy activity has concentrated on access-building with the Georgian Dream party, as well as with GD-affiliated anti-Western groups such as European Socialists and People's Power.

The two sides currently operate two cooperation platforms: the Joint Commission on the Free Trade Agreement and the Joint Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation. There is also a friendship group in the Parliament of Georgia. The latest high-level visit from Georgia took place in November 2025, led by the GD prime minister, Irakli Kobakhidze, who attended the International Import Expo in Shanghai.

4.2 China in Georgia's strategic thinking

Tbilisi views China primarily as a source of investment and a means of diversifying the geography of trade, with Georgian officials repeatedly expressing their desire to expand economic exchanges with Chinese companies. They have also been keen to secure Beijing's backing for connectivity projects transiting through Georgia, frequently underling their support for the BRI and the importance of the Middle Corridor. Georgian officials have also been keen to emphasize what they describe as a convergence between their values and those promoted globally by China, highlighting shared commitments to peace, stability, and modernization, alongside the preservation of family values and a traditional way of life.

Closer cooperation with China also aligns with Georgia's emerging geopolitical identity as a transit hub between East and West – a narrative Georgian officials are eager to highlight in their messaging to domestic and international audiences. Importantly, deeper engagement with China also corresponds with GD's post-2022 positioning, which emphasizes a multi-vector foreign policy and envisages a gradual distancing from the EU while simultaneously strengthening ties with other global and regional actors.

China also features in ruling party's programmatic documents. The Government Program for 2025-2028, issued in November 2024 and based on the Georgian Dream's (GD) election program, identifies China as a target market for government initiatives and envisages expanded cooperation in trade and people-to-people ties. It also states that Georgia attaches "special importance" to strategic partnership with China. In addition, Tbilisi seeks to obtain observer status in the China-CEEC (14+1) format[18], which it describes as "an additional and effective mechanism for promoting economic cooperation between the EU and China."

China was also featured in the annual government program for 2024, which identified it as one of the priority areas for external relations. The document stated that 'special attention' would be devoted to developing cooperation in trade, social, cultural, educational, and other fields, as well as to 'maintaining a positive agenda of cooperation in international formats.' It further emphasized that the authorities would pursue active cooperation aimed at increasing Europe-China transit passing through Georgia.

4.3 Economic cooperation and bilateral trade

Over the past 25 years, Georgian-Chinese relations have been largely economically driven, with a strong focus on trade, transport, and connectivity between the two countries and, more broadly, between China and Europe. Despite the establishment of diplomatic relations, the economic interaction in the 1990s

[16] Chinese media have also claimed that it was Georgia that provoked Russia into the 2008 conflict, while Russia was simply "forced to react". Similarly, EU and NATO involvement in Russia's neighborhood was presented as an attempt to "encircle Russia".

[17] A clear illustration of this alignment occurred in August 2024, when the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in a report on the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), accused the organization of inciting domestic unrests, including in Georgia. Speaking about the spring 2024 anti-government protests in Georgia, the report stated that NED "rallied support for and instigated protests in Georgia against the foreign agents bill." Notably, the GD politicians – who had previously refrained from commenting on similar allegations – this time adopted a position that was closely aligned with China's narrative.

[18] The China-CEEC format is a multilateral cooperation framework between China and countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

remained modest, characterized by few high-level contacts and the absence of concrete economic projects. This began to change in the early 2000s, alongside the emergence of regional transport and connectivity initiatives across the Black Sea and Caspian Sea region. This period also coincided with the activation of major energy projects of regional significance, most notably oil and gas pipelines transporting Caspian resources westward, which helped increase the strategic relevance of Georgia as a transit hub. By the late 2000s, Chinese economic activity in Georgia had increased modestly, with companies such as the Hualing Group making notable investments, particularly in real estate, trade, and banking sectors.

The third decade of independence marked a visible progress in bilateral relations. Georgia was among the early supporters of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and cooperation intensified through high-level political engagement, culminating in the signing of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in May 2017, which entered into force on January 1, 2018. Importantly, this occurred just a year after the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreement with the EU came into force, allowing Tbilisi to present the country as a platform linking European and Asian markets. The sides also advanced efforts to ease passenger and freight transportation procedures. In 2015, the country also joined the China-based Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, making it the first state in the South Caucasus region to do so.

The 2020s have been characterized by a deeper institutionalization of bilateral relations. Regular meetings of joint economic commissions have focused on the implementation and potential updating of the FTA, while cooperation on the Middle Corridor has further strengthened logistical ties. The introduction of a visa-free regime, by Georgia in September 2023 and by China in May 2024, together with the expansion of direct air connections[19], has contributed to a sharp increase in tourism. In 2024, a total of 88,583 Chinese visitors traveled to Georgia, more than ten times the corresponding figure for 2012 (7,633).

The intensity of economic relations is clearly reflected in bilateral trade figures. In 2024, China ranked as Georgia's fourth-largest trading partner, with total trade turnover reaching USD 1.9 billion, accounting for 8.2% of Georgia's overall trade and trailing only Turkey, Russia, and the US. This represents a substantial increase compared to a decade earlier: in 2013, total trade turnover between the two countries amounted to approximately USD 0.6 billion, representing 5.9% of Georgia's trade turnover. Despite the nearly threefold increase in trade volumes, the data shows a persistent asymmetry, with Chinese imports continuing to dominate the relationship. In 2024, imports from China to Georgia stood at USD 1.6 billion, more than five times higher than Georgia's exports to China, USD 0.3 billion. The numerical imbalance suggests that Georgian producers[20] have not been able to keep up with the growth of imports.

Table #3: Foreign trade of Georgia with China (in USD billion)[21]

	2013	2018	2024
Turnover	0.64 (5.9%)	1.0 (8.1%)	1.9 (8.2%)
Exports	0.03 (1.2%)	0.2 (5.9%)	0.3 (4.6%)
Imports	0.61 (7.6%)	0.8 (8.9%)	1.6 (9.6%)

Source: the Statistics Office of Georgia (GeoStat)

Moreover, foreign direct investment data shows that China remains only a marginal investor in Georgia. In 2024, Chinese FDI amounted to just USD 6.2 million, well below the 2018 level (USD 75.9 million) and significantly lower than in 2013 (USD 101.1 million). To date, Chinese involvement has largely been limited to participation in large-scale infrastructure projects, including the construction of sections of the East-West and North-South highways, as well as several inter-city roads. Notably, many of these firms had previously faced reputational challenges, with some even being blacklisted by the US and the World Bank.

[19] Flights are operated by China Southern Airlines and Air China.
[20] The major export commodities of Georgia are raw materials, wine, spirits, and mineral waters.
[21] Percentages indicate China's share in Georgia's total trade, exports, or imports.

Today, the Chinese economic presence in Georgia is effectively limited to Hualing Group, which operates a number of projects in real estate, banking, and logistics, including Hualing Kutaisi Free Industrial Zone. Additionally, in May 2024, a Chinese company, China Communications Construction Company Limited (CCCC), which is also under restrictions by the US government, was granted the contract to build a deep-sea port in Anaklia[22], on the shores of the Black Sea, but the project has remained frozen since then. A Chinese company, China Railway Construction Corporation Limited was also involved in the construction of a container yard project at Poti port, funded by investors from Kazakhstan, Georgia, and Azerbaijan.
Moreover, the Chinese telecommunications company Huawei is reported to be responsible for building approximately 75% of Georgia's communications and mobile networks. Chinese companies, Hikvision and Dahua Technology, are also active in supplying surveillance systems to GD authorities[23], including facial recognition cameras powered by artificial intelligence used against pro-democracy protesters in 2025.

4.4 Socio-cultural influence

In recent years, China has significantly solidified its "soft power" efforts in Georgia, a trend largely amplified by the Georgian Dream authorities' own agenda favoring greater exposure to China.
A key pillar of China's influence, the Confucius Institute, operates three branches in the country and plays an active role in promoting the Chinese language, culture, and heritage. In addition to these institutes, Georgian universities maintain individual partnerships with Chinese educational institutions (there are an estimated 54 links between Georgian and Chinese universities), including short-term exchanges and visits; however, most of these partnerships remain ad hoc. Chinese is also taught at 15 public schools across the country. In addition, there are several private language-learning centers offering Chinese courses.
Recent years have also seen increased collaboration in the fields of arts and culture, spearheaded by a growing number of non-governmental organizations dedicated to promoting Georgian-Chinese relations. For this purpose, in recent years, several feature programs and stories have been produced and aired on pro-government television channels, including a travel documentary filmed by a senior GD MP Irakli Mezurnishvili, highlighting historical and contemporary aspects of Georgian-Chinese relations.
In April 2024, the two sides also announced that a museum would be opened in Adjara, in the farmhouse of Lao Jin Zhao, an agronomist, who facilitated the introduction of tea culture in Georgia in the 1920s.
Beijing has also been active in disseminating its views on global governance and international affairs through interviews and occasional op-eds, as well as through facilitating study visits of journalists to China. To this end, the Chinese embassy has traditionally partnered with outlets such as *Georgian Times*, *TV24*, *NewsDay*, and *TV Obiektivi*. More recently, however, it has forged a partnership with Georgia's largest pro-government television channel, *Imedi TV*. In addition, CGTN operates a Georgian-language Facebook page that regularly publishes content on news and other developments related to China.
Despite these efforts, as of the time of writing, the real footprint of China has remained limited. While the overall trend is upward, the lack of Chinese language proficiency, combined with limited prior exposure to China, makes it difficult to speak of any significant "soft power" influence in Georgia. This is corroborated by survey data; the CRRC's Caucasus Barometer shows that, in 2024 only 1% of respondents identified China as Georgia's main friend, a figure significantly lower than that of the top-ranked country, the United States (24%). Similarly, in the same survey, just 1% of respondents viewed China as a model for Georgia's development, with the US again ranking highest (24%), followed closely by Germany (20%). Similarly, the level of trust towards China, according to the EU Neighbors East survey, remains lowest in Georgia, at 24%, with the EU and the United States ranking highest, 67% and 58%, respectively.

[22] The official U.S. and NATO positions have been critical of Chinese involvement in the Anaklia port project, emphasizing the risks to Georgia's security and transparency.
[23] According to Radio Liberty, from 70% to 80% of state agencies are equipped with China-made surveillance cameras.

5. Strategic Motivations in Chinese Policy toward South Caucasus

5.1 South Caucasus in Chinese strategic documents

Chinese strategic and policy documents devote limited attention to the South Caucasus and individual countries in the region, reflecting their peripheral role in Beijing's overall foreign policy priorities. When they are referenced, the South Caucasus countries are typically framed as part or extension of broader geographic constructs, such as Eurasia, West Asia and Central Asia, rather than being treated as a distinct or strategically important region. In recent years, China has increasingly framed the South Caucasus countries as part of the Global South, a concept Beijing has long used to distinguish itself from Western-led initiatives and organizations. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia are also highlighted as positive cases of China's international development cooperation projects, but such references remain symbolic.

In recent years, particularly following the activation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in mid-2010s, indirect references to South Caucasus have become more frequent. This is largely due to the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCAWEC), one of BRI's overland routes connecting China and Europe via the Caspian Sea region. The Trans-Caspian route (also known as the Middle Corridor), which passes through Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey and represents the only fully operational segment along the CCAWEC, has recently gained significance for China's connectivity agenda. In May 2023, Chinese President Xi Jinping endorsed the development of the Trans-Caspian route, reaffirming his support in October 2023[24]. In November 2023, the route was explicitly referenced in the "Vision and Actions for High-Quality Belt and Road Cooperation", a document of the State Council of China, underscoring the Trans-Caspian route's importance in China's new economic and transportation strategy for the Eurasian region.

5.2 China and the Middle Corridor

The Trans-Caspian route is a transport corridor linking China and Europe through Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Its origins date back to 1993, when the EU launched its Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA), a project aimed at developing transit infrastructure across the Black Sea and Caspian Sea regions. More recently, the institutional foundations of what is now known as the Middle Corridor were established in 2013, when the national railway companies of Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia created a coordination mechanism, later formalized as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR).

TITR integrates rail transport across Kazakhstan, ferry services across the Caspian Sea, and rail transport through Azerbaijan and Georgia, either onward to Turkey via the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway or to Europe through Georgia's Black Sea ports of Poti and Batumi. Following a series of test runs in 2015-2016 and the opening of the BTK line in 2017, the route became operational. In addition to the transport and logistics companies of the three founding members, TITR's members also include the Turkish and Ukrainian railways[25].

The importance of this route is twofold. Geographically, it constitutes the shortest overland link between China and the European Union, and between China and Turkey. Under normal circumstances, cargo can reach the EU in approximately 13-21 days[26], which is significantly faster than maritime transport via the Suez Canal (35-45 days), the most widely used route for trans-continental trade. Second, the route bypasses the Northern Corridor running through Russia and Belarus – the traditional overland route for China-Europe trade – thereby reducing the risks associated with reliance on a single transit corridor.

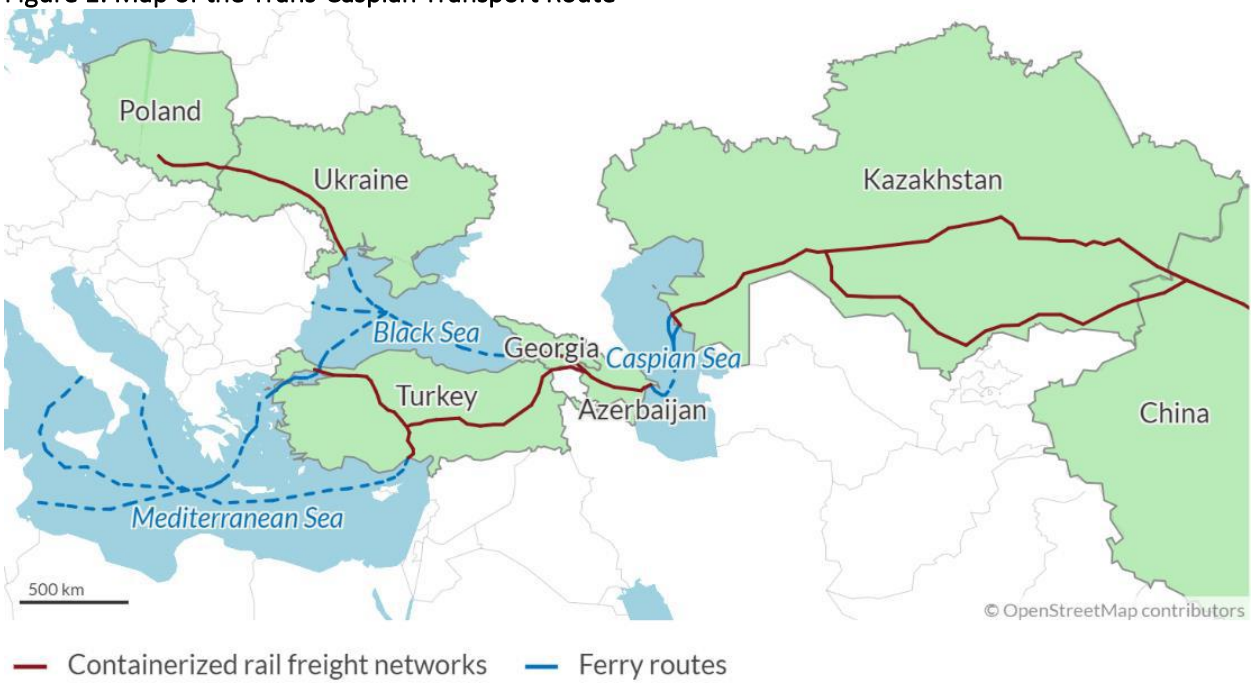
[24] The Chinese President reiterated his support for the Middle Corridor several times in later years.

[25] A second sub-route of the Middle Corridor runs through Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan (connecting to Baku through its port of Türkmenbaşy), but it remains less developed and less used due to infrastructure gaps and limited coordination.

[26] The first direct container train from China's Xi'an to Tbilisi, dispatched in February 2021, arrived to Tbilisi in 21 days.

The authorities of the three TITR countries were eager to position the corridor as one of the sub-routes of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, China has largely refrained from making extensive use of the route in the initial years of its operation. Several factors accounted for Beijing's attitude.
First, China's primary mode of transportation for trade with Europe has traditionally been – and remains – maritime. Even in 2020, amid COVID-19-related disruptions in maritime shipping, as little as 1% of Chinese cargo was carried using the Middle Corridor, while 81.5% was shipped by sea. Second, despite its shorter distance, the TITR has faced significant capacity constraints. These stem in part from its multimodal nature, which requires transfers between rail and maritime transport across the Caspian Sea, as well as from technical incompatibilities in rail infrastructure, notably differences in track gauge between the Soviet-era railway system used in much of Central Asia and South Caucasus, and the standard gauge employed in China and Turkey. Some studies also suggest that there is lack of transport vessels on the Caspian Sea, as well as wagons and locomotives in Azerbaijan and Georgia, leading to significant delays in cargo transit. Others highlight deficiencies in absence of unified regulatory frameworks and procedures. Finally, geopolitical considerations seem to have played a role too. It appears that China was reluctant to significantly expand the use of routes that bypass Russia, Beijing's key strategic partner. As a result, in the initial years of its announcement, the TITR played only a minor role in China-Europe cargo transit.

Figure 1: Map of the Trans-Caspian Transport Route



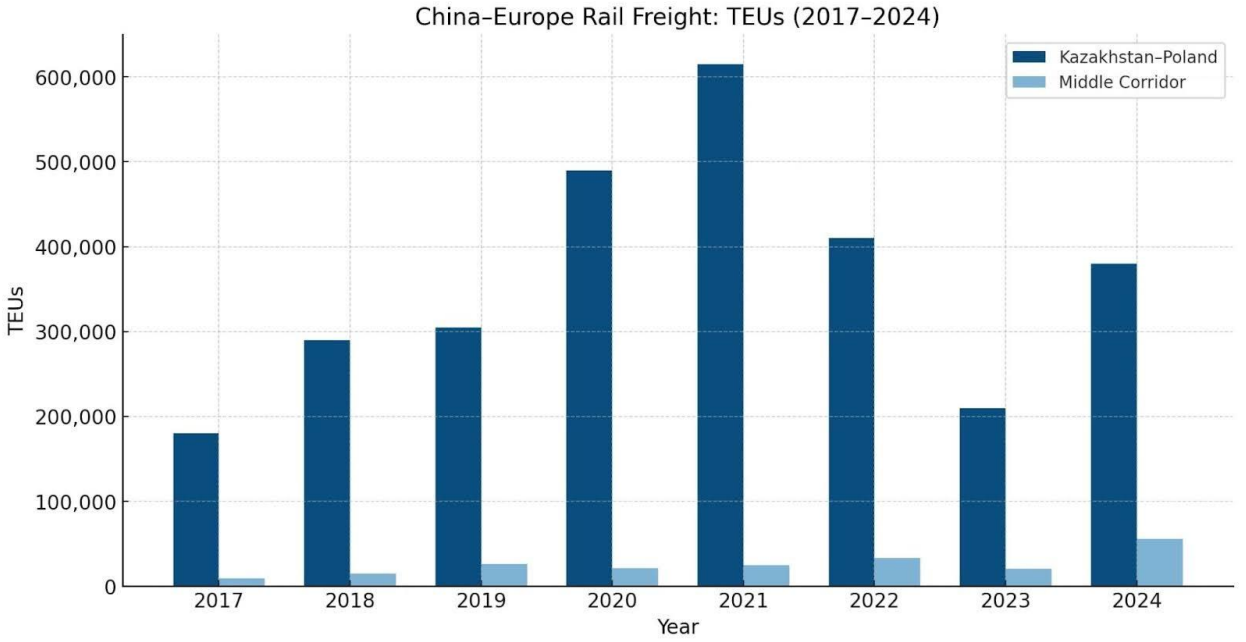
Source: *railfreight.com*

The situation changed in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022[27]. The temporary disruption of the Northern Corridor in the initial months of the war, driven partly by western sanctions, redirected a portion of trade flows to the Middle Corridor, including shipments originating in China. The volume of cargo transportation along the Middle Corridor increased sharply, reaching 1.5 million tons in 2022, against the backdrop of a 34% decline in shipments along the Northern Route. The increase

[27] A number of Western companies expanded or began providing cargo services using the Trans-Caspian route in 2022, including Nurminen Logistics, Maersk, MSC, and others.

was sizable in TEUs (Twenty-Foot Equivalent Unit) too, compared to 2022, when the number of TEUs handled by the Middle Corridor stood at 25,000, the figure more than doubled in 2024, 55,000 TEUs.
Although traffic along the Northern Corridor has since largely resumed, China's interest in the Middle Corridor has persisted. Beijing now appears to view the route as an option for diversifying its access to Turkish and European markets[28]. This reassessment has been further reinforced by intermittent disruptions to maritime shipping routes, notably due to security incidents in the Red Sea, as well as occasional transport restrictions and closures along land routes in Eastern Europe, including Poland.

Figure 2: China-Europe Rail Freight (2017-2018)



Source: *railfreight.com*

Nevertheless, the level of interest remains limited. Despite gradual growth, the Middle Corridor still carries only a small share of China-Europe rail freight. In 2024, the China-Kazakhstan-Russia rail link handled approximately 380,000 TEUs, far exceeding the corresponding figure for the Middle Corridor, which stood at around 56,100 TEUs[29]. It is also important to note that the total capacity of the Middle Corridor is estimated at 80,000 TEUs, meaning that nearly 70% of its capacity is already utilized. Moreover, when compared to the overall capacity of maritime routes, the Middle Corridor accounts for only about 0.21% of the total capacity of maritime routes, while the Northern Corridor represents roughly 4.7%, underscoring the Middle Corridor's still-modest role relative to alternative transportation routes.

5.3 Comparative analysis of Chinese policy to South Caucasus

Analysis of bilateral relations shows that China's engagement with the three South Caucasus countries follows a clear-cut pattern. Economic ties provide the clearest illustration of Beijing's strategy. Over the past few years, China has gradually expanded bilateral trade and increased its involvement in infrastructure projects across the whole region. In doing so, its objectives have been twofold: securing alternative export

[28] A clear illustration of China's growing interest is its participation from November 2025 in a joint Azerbaijani-Georgian-Kazakh venture providing services along the Trans-Caspian Route. In addition, in November 2024, China, together with Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, signed an agreement on establishing an intermodal cargo terminal at the Port of Alat in Baku.
[29] In 2022, around 33,000 TEUs were shipped between China and Europe along the Middle Corridor, which is lower than the figure for the Northern Route, 410,500 TEUs. Moreover, the figure for the maritime route for the same year stood at 24.2 million TEUs.

markets while pursuing profitable business opportunities. In practice, this had translated into China prioritizing countries where potential returns are highest, with Azerbaijan taking the lead in recent years due to its energy resources and large-scale industrial and technological projects. It is followed by Georgia, which offers extensive road infrastructure projects, while Armenia ranks last in economic importance, although Chinese corporate engagement has been increasing over the past years. It is worth noting, however, that when compared to other neighboring countries and regions, such as Turkey or Central Asia, the Chinese economic presence in South Caucasus remains relatively modest.

Patterns of China's approach are also seen in its political signaling behavior, most notably through its practices surrounding bilateral agreements. Throughout most of the 2010s, Georgia appeared to be Beijing's priority in the region. In 2017, China signed a free trade agreement with Georgia, and economic ties, including investments, were more visible there than in the other two states. This was largely driven by Georgia's Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with the EU, which positioned the country as a convenient platform for intercontinental trade. However, since around 2024, Azerbaijan has gradually overtaken Georgia as China's key partner in the region. In April 2025, Beijing elevated its relations with Baku to a comprehensive partnership, less than a year after initially designating it an ordinary strategic partner status similar to Georgia. Two factors account for this shift: the growing importance of the Middle Corridor and the rising significance of Central Asia in Chinese foreign policy, which borders Azerbaijan and reinforces its role as a conduit linking Central Asia to the wider world. Armenia continues to hold relatively lower importance in this new constellation, as reflected by the fact that its declaration on strategic partnership with China was signed considerably later than those of its two neighbors, in August 2025.

Additionally, all three have continued to be exposed to Chinese "soft power" initiatives, including the expansion of Confucius Institutes, increased access to university scholarships, and a range of cultural and educational programs. Moreover, over the past four years, Chinese diplomats have intensified engagement with national media, frequently providing commentary and interpretations that promote Beijing's perspectives on global affairs, as well as its positions concerning Xinjiang and Taiwan. Importantly, these efforts have been reinforced by the three countries' own domestic and foreign policy agendas, which have increasingly favored greater political and economic openness toward Beijing.

In addition, Chinese embassies have intensified their access-building efforts in all three countries, systematically engaging with state authorities and ruling parties to consolidate influence within the existing power structures. In Armenia, however, this engagement also extends to various opposition actors, suggesting that there is a deliberate strategy to diversify contacts beyond the ruling party. Combined, China's cultural and political efforts have aimed to build popular and elite support for China's global initiatives, including the BRI, as well as to present Beijing as a reliable and low-risk partner.[30]

China also appears increasingly focused on transit routes running through the region. This is reflected in Beijing's growing support to the Middle Corridor following the 2022 invasion, as well as the participation of Chinese companies in road, railway, and port infrastructure projects in Azerbaijan and Georgia. Armenia, which has been sidelined from these transit frameworks, has carried relatively lower significance, but with the prospective opening of borders, and the development of transport infrastructure with Azerbaijan and Turkey, renewed Chinese interest may emerge in the country.

Notably, Chinese policy to the region has also been characterized by a cautious diplomatic stance. In line with this approach, Beijing has adopted a largely neutral position regarding the Georgian-Russian and Armenian-Azerbaijani conflicts. It has also treated the Russia factor with care, refraining from areas it considers Moscow's domain, such as military affairs, although some minor adjustments have been

[30] Chinese embassies have consistently presented Beijing as a defender of multilateral institutions and as a state that respects the sovereignty of other nations while pursuing "win-win" cooperation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they further criticized the West for alleged "vaccine nationalism," accusing Western countries of restricting vaccine access to developing nations.

observed in the post-2022 period, as demonstrated by increased weapons sales to the region. It is important to note, however, that while this caution is primarily driven by China's special relationship with Russia, it is also influenced by Beijing's limited leverage to shape developments on the ground. Moreover, China has generally avoided openly challenging the West, with the exception of diplomatic messaging around Georgia, which it frequently cites in reference to alleged Western interference in domestic affairs.

6. Conclusion

Analysis of China's post-2022 engagement suggests that Beijing's policy toward South Caucasus has indeed undergone some changes. Two structural changes stand out in particular. First, disruptions to the Northern Route of the China-Europe transit have increased the geopolitical relevance of the Middle Corridor, which passes through Georgia and Azerbaijan, prompting Beijing to engage more actively with the region. Second, regional capitals have gained greater room for maneuver, using the shifting geopolitical landscape to diversify their foreign policy alignments through expanded ties with China. In the Georgian case, the realignment has also been influenced by the ruling party's authoritarian turn.

Nevertheless, these changes have been far from fundamental, driven largely by China's own reticence to commit more actively to the region. Beijing has indeed reciprocated diplomatically to pivots from South Caucasus capitals, including by signing declarations of strategic partnerships, but these engagements have lacked substance and have failed to produce tangible political outcomes. Similarly, growth in bilateral trade has not been matched by commensurate Chinese investments, which the three capitals had sought and expected to come. Additionally, although the Middle Corridor gained more attention as a transit corridor, capacity constraints have made it more of a backchannel option than a viable alternative.

Beijing has also continued to refrain from engaging in sensitive regional issues, maintaining a low profile as a geopolitical actor and instead focusing on expanding its footprint through "soft power" instruments. Chinese officials have also been considerably more restrained in their messaging than their peers in South Caucasus. Although they consistently emphasize the region's strategic geographic location, and welcome the support for China's global initiatives, Beijing's rhetoric about prospects of cooperation has generally been measured compared to the ambitious language employed by the authorities in the three states.

Taken together, these developments suggest that while South Caucasus has formally moved up in Beijing's foreign policy agenda, substantive interest and commitment from China remains absent. Beijing continues to view the South Caucasus region as an export market and a source of revenue, as well as a node in its connectivity projects, but in strategic terms, the region remains peripheral and low-priority.

Looking ahead, China's approach to the countries of South Caucasus is unlikely to undergo fundamental changes. The prospect of Beijing taking a more active role in the region will depend on the evolving dynamics of its engagement with Central Asia and, more broadly, on the nature of its relations with Russia and the West. But at any rate, Beijing's policy to the region will likely remain as a component of its broader strategic objectives, rather than having a region-specific focus or an autonomous agenda.

About the author:

Tornike Zurabashvili is a researcher from Tbilisi, Georgia, specializing on political, social, and security affairs in Georgia and the wider Black Sea region. Over the years, he has contributed his research to leading think tanks and media outlets, both in Georgia and internationally. Tornike also brings extensive experience in designing, managing, and implementing multi-component development programs across Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. He holds a bachelor's degree in International Affairs from Tbilisi State University, and master's degrees in Public Administration from Ilia State University and in Political Science from Trinity College Dublin. In 2023, he earned a Ph.D. in Political Science from Tbilisi State University.