

# Understanding China-Georgia Strategic Partnership

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## Abstract

China's strategic partnership with Georgia reflects its expanding interest in the South Caucasus region and aligns with its broader global policy objectives. This paper examines the implications of this partnership for both countries and the South Caucasus as a whole. Through an analysis of China's priorities in the region, the significance of strategic partnerships, and the dynamics of bilateral relations, this study sheds light on the evolving geopolitical landscape. The findings suggest that while China's engagement primarily focuses on trade and economic cooperation, it holds the potential to influence regional dynamics and contribute to the diversification of Georgia's economy. However, Georgia must carefully navigate its relationships with major powers and pursue a balanced approach to maximize the benefits of its partnership with China.

**Keywords:** China, Georgia, strategic partnership, South Caucasus, Belt and Road Initiative, geopolitics, regional dynamics.

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## Introduction

Relations with the developing countries plays a major role in China's foreign affairs.<sup>1</sup> Given the growing confrontation with the West, connections with countries in the global South hold significant importance. China's identification with the "third world" goes back to the fifties of last century.<sup>2</sup> To this day, relations with developing countries is an indispensable element of its foreign policy. The idea of a multipolar world inherently implies a strategic alignment with the global South. Against the backdrop of ongoing conflict in Ukraine, China's activities in the South Caucasus region have intensified.

In this context, it is important to assess China's strategic partnership with Georgia and what it entails for the two countries as well as the South Caucasus as a whole. Does this indicate China's growing interest in the region, or is it just another step towards uniting the countries of the Global South around the Chinese orbit?

To answer this question, first, we will try to identify China's main priorities and interests in the region. Subsequently, we will delve into the significance of strategic partnership through Chinese discourse. Finally, we will try to assess its relevance for China, Georgia, and the South Caucasus in general.

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China's foreign interests in the South Caucasus are mainly focused on trade and economics. It refrains from involvement in the political processes in the region. China's influence is less felt in the political decisions of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. Simply put, it is not a priority for Beijing to participate in solving the security problems in the region. It tries not to complicate matters by focusing on specific areas of cooperation. Beijing has its rational reasons for such a position. First, the region is a high-risk zone. It is largely under the influence of Russia, and partly under the influence of the United States, compared to which China's narrative cannot play a significant role. In accordance with the IRI's survey of public opinion published in November 2023, only 6% of respondents consider China to be the most important political partners for Georgia (in comparison, 51% of respondents named the EU, and 32% named the US).<sup>3</sup> Even in the most significant area of bilateral cooperation, China was named the 7<sup>th</sup> most important economic partners of Georgia (12% of respondents).<sup>4</sup>

In addition, the internal politics of the South Caucasus countries are quite problematic and

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<sup>1</sup> China's New Type of International Relations is divided into four categories: major country diplomacy (大国外交), diplomacy of neighboring countries (周边外交), diplomacy of developing countries (发展中国家外交) and multilateralism (多边外交). See Yang, Jiechi. (2021, May 16). Foreign Affairs Work Since the Founding of The Communist Party of China: A Century of Glorious Achievements and A Future of Bright Prospects. Retrieved January 20, 2023, from <https://yizhiyoudao.kuaizhan.com/12/2/p829900770cb237>; China's Diplomacy in the New Era. (n.d.). 新型外交关系. Retrieved January 25, 2023, from [http://cn.chinadiplomacy.org.cn/node\\_8020221.shtml](http://cn.chinadiplomacy.org.cn/node_8020221.shtml)

<sup>2</sup> Shambaugh, D. (2020). *China & the World*. Oxford University Press. p. 7

<sup>3</sup> IRI. (2023). Georgian Survey of Public Opinion. Retrieved January, 31, 2024, from <https://www.iri.org/resources/georgian-survey-of-public-opinion-september-october-2023/>

<sup>4</sup> In the case of Armenia, China's authority is relatively high. With the support of 33% and 43% of the respondents, China ranks 6th and 3rd among the most important political and economic partners of Armenia. See IRI. (2023). Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia. Retrieved January 31, 2024, from [https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Armenia\\_Final-Presentation\\_01.05.2023\\_Eng.pdf](https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Armenia_Final-Presentation_01.05.2023_Eng.pdf)

complex, which Beijing has neither leverage nor interest in solving at this stage. However, against the background of the ongoing processes in the region, China's political activity in the South Caucasus has relatively increased. This is evidenced by the declaration of strategic partnership between Georgia and China in July 2023<sup>5</sup> and frequent statements on the need to raise relations between Azerbaijan and China to the level of strategic partnership.<sup>6</sup>

Before delving into the meaning behind China's strategic partnership with Georgia, it is important to discuss China's partnerships in general. The People's Republic of China had established diplomatic relations with 183 countries by 2024.<sup>7</sup> China adheres to the policy of non-alignment. As they say, "partnership instead of alliances" (结伴不结盟). China has an alliance agreement only with North Korea. In relations with the rest of the world, it prefers other instruments of foreign policy. In order to protect its national interests and increase its international influence, China has formulated a partnership strategy based on the five principles of peaceful coexistence. It is pursuing a strategy of global expansion by improving bilateral relations. It has established strategic partnerships with more than 100 countries and more than 10 international organizations, although the levels of partnership differ.<sup>8</sup>

According to the level of bilateral relations and the degree of closeness, China has different types of partnerships. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China does not officially classify and there is no international standard for categorization. In fact, the content of the collaboration better demonstrates the importance of partnership. It should be noted that depending on the geopolitical situation, the degree of bilateral partnership also changes. For instance, in 1997 a strategic partnership was established between China and the United States, which was canceled in 2003, then reestablished in 2011, and canceled again two years later. Today, former partners are rivals. From the more recent past, we can cite the example of Lithuania, with which China no longer has friendly cooperation, least a strategic partnership since 2021. After Lithuania allowed Taiwan to open a representation, China downgraded diplomatic relations to the level of chargé d'affaires.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Government of Georgia. (2023, July 31). Joint Statement of the People's Republic of China and Georgia on Establishing a Strategic Partnership. Retrieved January 29, 2024, from [https://www.gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=ENG&sec\\_id=587&info\\_id=85068](https://www.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=587&info_id=85068)

<sup>6</sup> Azernews. (2023, September 30). Azerbaijani President sends congratulatory letter to Chinese President. Retrieved January 31, 2024, from <https://www.azernews.az/nation/215490.html>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2022, September 16). President Xi Jinping Meets with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev. Retrieved January 31, 2024, from [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx\\_662805/202209/t20220916\\_10766770.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202209/t20220916_10766770.html); apa. (2023, December 22). Strategic partnership being formed between Baku, Beijing— Azerbaijani MP. Retrieved January 31, 2024, from <https://en.apa.az/foreign-policy/strategic-partnership-being-formed-between-baku-beijing-azerbaijani-mp-420631>

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2024, February 6). Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference. Retrieved March 22, 2024 from [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/202402/t20240206\\_11241640.html#:~:text=One%20hun](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202402/t20240206_11241640.html#:~:text=One%20hun)

<sup>8</sup> Organisation for Research on China and Asia. (2023). China's "Partnerships" with the World. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <https://orcasia.org/article/347/chinas-partnerships-with-the-world>; Legarda, H. (2021, August 24). From marriage of convenience to strategic partnership: China-Russia relations and the fight for global influence. MERICS. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <https://merics.org/en/comment/marriage-convenience-strategic-partnership-china-russia-relations-and-fight-global>

<sup>9</sup> The Guardian. (2021, November 19). China condemns opening of Taiwan office in Lithuania as 'egregious act'. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/19/china-condemns-opening-of-taiwan-office-in-lithuania-as-egregious-act>

As mentioned earlier, besides Georgia, China has strategic partnerships with about a hundred other countries. In Chinese discourse, the term "strategic" means that there are no conflicts on essential issues in bilateral relations, and it expresses the desire for further development of stable relations and cooperation. In 2004, the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao said in a speech in Brussels that a "strategic" relationship means that it "transcends the differences in ideology and social system and is not subjected to the impacts of individual events that occur from time to time". And "partnership" means that "the cooperation should be equal-footed, mutually beneficial and win-win."<sup>10</sup>

Establishing a strategic partnership between Georgia and China is a logical continuation of the results achieved in bilateral relations in recent years. The two countries have been actively cooperating within the framework of the BRI since its initiation. Georgia was one of the first to join the initiative. On March 9, 2015, Georgia and China signed a "Memorandum on Cooperation for the Development of the Silk Road Economic Belt". At the same time, Georgia joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as a founding member. The bilateral trade turnover has been dynamically increasing, which surpassed \$1 billion after the FTA between China and Georgia came into force in 2018. According to the initial statistical data, the bilateral trade turnover in goods amounted to \$1,639.9 billion in 2023 and China ranked fourth among Georgia's leading trade partners.<sup>11</sup> Even though there has not been a major investor from China apart from Hualing Group, which invested over \$600 million in projects varying from youth Olympic village, hotel, and residential housing development to FIZ, banking and aviation spheres, China was still among Georgia's top 10 major investors in 2022.<sup>12</sup> On January 1, 2018, the Free Trade Agreement entered into force, which is one of the most important documents signed between the two countries in the last decade. The Agreement aims to strengthen economic partnership and further liberalize bilateral trade, to promote investment to bring economic and social benefits, to create new opportunities for employment, and to improve the living standards of their peoples.<sup>13</sup> To this end, it removes barriers to trade in goods and services and exempts the exported Georgian goods from the customs taxes by almost 94%.<sup>14</sup> In September 2023, Georgia canceled the visa regime for Chinese citizens. In response, in February 2024, the Chinese side decided to introduce a visa-free regime for Georgian citizens, which is likely to enter into force soon. This will be an additional incentive to strengthen business contacts between the two countries.

To return to the question raised above, we believe that China's strategic partnership with Georgia indicates both China's growing interest in the region and its role in its global policy.

<sup>10</sup> Mission of the People's Republic of China to the European Union. (2004, May 12). Speech by H.E. Wen Jiabao, Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China. Retrieved March 22, 2024, from [http://eu.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/more/Topics/200405/t20040512\\_8303627.htm](http://eu.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/more/Topics/200405/t20040512_8303627.htm)

<sup>11</sup> National Statistics Office of Georgia (n.d.). External Merchandise Trade. Retrieved January 29, 2024, from <https://www.geostat.ge/ka/modules/categories/765/sakonlit-sagareo-vachroba>

<sup>12</sup> National Statistics Office of Georgia. (2023). Foreign Direct Investments in Georgia 2022. Retrieved January 29, 2024, from <https://www.geostat.ge/media/57902/FDI---%E1%83%9E%E1%83%A3%E1%83%91%E1%83%9A%E1%83%98%E1%83%99%E1%83%90%E1%83%AA%E1%83%98%E1%83%90---2022.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Legislative Herald of Georgia. (2017). Free Trade Agreement between the Government of Georgia and the Government of the People's Republic of China. Retrieved January 29, 2024, from <https://www.matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/3897182?publication=0>

<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia. (2017, May 13). Georgia-China Free Trade Agreement Signed. Retrieved January 29, 2024, from <https://www.economy.ge/?page=news&nw=180&s=sagartvelosa-da-chinets-shoris-tavisufali-vachrobis-shesaxe-b-xelshekruleba-gaformdeba&lang=en>

Currently, China's main interest in the South Caucasus is related to the BRI. Russia's aggression in Ukraine has had a negative impact on transport routes connecting Eurasia. After 2022, the so-called southern corridor (China-Central Asia-West Asia) of the Silk Road Economic Belt has become particularly interesting for China. Additionally, the ongoing conflict in the Middle East and attacks on ships by the Houthis in the Red Sea have emphasized the need to develop landroutes along with sea routes. This explains China's support for the Middle Corridor. Through the Trans-Caspian and South Caucasus international transport route, an additional branch is emerging to connect China to the European market. The region, with its port infrastructure in the Caspian and Black Seas, Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, and highways, is strategically important for China's foreign trade, as one of the fastest and safest routes connecting it to Europe passes through here.<sup>15</sup>

At the opening of the 3rd BRI International Forum held in October 2023 President Xi Jinping announced the so-called eight-point plan. The first point states that China will build a multidimensional connectivity network, in which the importance of the Trans-Caspian transportation corridor is also emphasized.<sup>16</sup> This can explain the grand welcome that the Chinese side extended to the Prime Minister of Georgia last year.

On the other hand, as has already been mentioned, a strategic partnership is an important tool of China's foreign policy, which helps increase its regional and global influence. However, it should be noted that this is not a formal agreement or alliance. The actual results this partnership will bring for Georgia will depend on the content of the cooperation. We will gain better insight into this after the bilateral cooperation action plan within the BRI, signed between the two governments, is made public.

From the Georgian perspective, the reasons behind China's decision to establish strategic partnership might not be as significant as some would like to portray. "The geopolitical situation of a small country dictates the search for stable points of equilibrium and balance of power. It's too much of a luxury to have a one-way orientation".<sup>17</sup> These words belong to Georgia's former President Eduard Shevardnadze, who intended them towards Russia. But we believe that they still apply to Georgia's foreign challenges today. The geographical distance and threats from the northern neighbor make the "China threat" theory, even if confirmed, irrelevant for Georgia. On the contrary, China's growing interests may have a positive effect on the security of the region.<sup>18</sup>

The dynamics of trade and economic relations in recent years allows us to assume that cooperation between the two countries in the areas of trade, transport corridors, infrastructure, and logistics will become more active. This will help Georgia to diversify its economy and implement a pragmatic and multi-dimensional foreign policy. Russia's hegemonic aspirations push Georgia to strengthen its relations with other major actors. China's involvement potentially

<sup>15</sup> Government of Georgia. (2023, July 31). Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili meets Li Qiang, Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China. Retrieved January 29, 2024, from [https://www.gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=ENG&sec\\_id=587&info\\_id=85066](https://www.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=587&info_id=85066)

<sup>16</sup> The State Council of the People's Republic of China. (2023, October 18). Xi announces major steps to support high-quality Belt and Road cooperation. Retrieved March 10, 2024, from [https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202310/18/content\\_WS652f65e6c6d0868f4e8e05bd.html](https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202310/18/content_WS652f65e6c6d0868f4e8e05bd.html)

<sup>17</sup> Shevardnadze, E. (2006). ფიქრი წარსულსა და მომავალზე (*Thoughts about the Past and Future*). Palitra L, Tbilisi. p. 316

<sup>18</sup> Larsen, J. (2017). Georgia-China Relations: The Geopolitics of The Belt and Road. Georgian Institute of Politics. Retrieved March 22, 2024, from [https://gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Chineti%20Saqartvelo%20Eng\\_Ydit.pdf](https://gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Chineti%20Saqartvelo%20Eng_Ydit.pdf)

gives it leverage to counterbalance Russian influence. However, Georgia should act carefully to fulfill the aspirations of the Euro-Atlantic integration on the one hand and becoming a connecting hub between Europe and Asia on the other hand. It is necessary that one does not happen at the expense of the other.

So far, it is difficult to predict whether China's interests in the region will extend beyond the geo-economic sphere as a result of the strategic partnership between China and Georgia. Moving forward, Georgia will face the most challenges in balancing the political and military interests with the US and the economic interests with China. While the US remains Georgia's strategic partner in the political, military, and diplomatic arenas, China is an important economic partner. Therefore, Georgia's partnership with China should not be questioned but rather utilized as a means to balance the interests of all major powers in the region to its advantage.

In any case, Georgia should be more careful and take into account the nuances of China's relations with other leading actors - the United States, the European Union and Russia - and pursue a pragmatic and balanced policy based on its own national interests.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, China's strategic partnership with Georgia signifies both its growing interest in the region and its broader global policy objectives. While China's primary focus in the South Caucasus lies in trade and economics, its engagement with Georgia is part of a larger strategy to enhance its regional influence, particularly through initiatives like the BRI. Georgia stands to benefit from increased cooperation, especially in economic sectors such as trade, transport, and infrastructure. However, Georgia must carefully navigate its relationships with major powers like the US and China, ensuring a balanced approach that serves its own national interests while leveraging opportunities for economic growth and geopolitical stability.

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