

Armenia's Foreign Policy Options Within China's Belt and Road Initiative: A Small State Perspective

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Abstract

Within the intricate tapestry of global geopolitics, small states occupy a distinctive and nuanced position, encountering a myriad of unique challenges and opportunities. This article critically explores Armenia's complex engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through the lens of small state theory, accentuating the geopolitical consequences arising from potential border openings following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War. Integrating small-state theory, the analysis fills a scholarly gap, providing nuanced insights into how Armenia's foreign policy influences its BRI integration. Despite a decade since the launch of the Initiative, Armenia is not included in any BRI corridors and struggles to attract significant Chinese infrastructure investments compared to its neighbouring countries. The article concludes that Armenia's cautious approach, prioritising security over immediate economic gains, exemplifies the delicate equilibrium small states navigate in the pursuit of global initiatives. In other words, Armenia, as a small state, seeks to align its interests with China's mega-initiative while grappling with limitations on its participation.

Keywords

Armenia, Belt and Road Initiative, China, foreign policy, small states

Received: 21 August 2024; accepted: 15 April 2025

Introduction

In the field of International Relations (IR) research, the historical emphasis on the foreign policies and strategies of major global powers has undergone a significant transformation. This change, driven by the process of decolonization and the emergence of new states, has expanded the scope of the discipline to include a wider range of international actors. Although traditionally focused on major powers, recent global shifts—especially China's rise and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—have drawn scholarly and policy interest to small states on the international stage (Abo Lila, 2017; Mansour, 2020; Mações, 2018; Mushelenga & Van Wyk, 2017). Within this context, the participation of small states in the BRI has become a crucial area of inquiry, as it presents unique challenges and opportunities for these actors.

This article conducts an in-depth analysis of Armenia's engagement with the BRI. Most existing literature on

Armenia and the BRI assesses the potential benefits, risks, and prospects of incorporating Armenia's infrastructure into the Initiative (Atoyan et al., 2021; Sahakyan, 2018; Tevikyan, 2017). They argue that Armenia's participation in the BRI has the potential to foster economic growth and diversify its foreign policy options, but also poses challenges related to regional power dynamics and potential tensions with Russia. Moreover, some scholars have emphasised the need for Armenia to carefully balance its

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engagement with China within the broader context of its foreign policy priorities (Inan & Yayloyan, 2018; Khachatryan & Ashotyan, 2019; Ralph, 2022). The LUYF Foundation (2021) notes that engagement with China may help Armenia balance its foreign policy while avoiding traditional South Caucasus rivalries with the West, Türkiye, and Russia. Overall, the literature implies that Armenia's involvement in the BRI presents both opportunities and challenges for the country's foreign policy.

Despite growing interest in Armenia's BRI involvement, its role through the lens of small state theory remains understudied. As a small state located in the South Caucasus, Armenia faces unique challenges and opportunities in navigating its relations with larger powers such as China. Therefore, this article aims to address this gap by examining Armenia's participation in the BRI through the theory of the small state. The latter can provide valuable insights into the strategic choices and decision-making processes of small states in engaging with large-scale infrastructure projects implemented by bigger states. In doing so, this study seeks to contribute to the broader debate on the role of small states in IR (Fox, 1959; Gvalia et al., 2013; Hey, 2003; Keohane, 1969; Kuik, 2021; Novikova, 2022; Vital, 1967).

China's growing influence as a major geopolitical actor in the South Caucasus has driven regional countries to strengthen their ties with Beijing. The BRI is a central tool through which China amplifies its regional dominance by utilizing economic, political, and soft power strategies. Consequently, while Georgia and Azerbaijan actively participate in the BRI and are reaping its benefits, Armenia, despite its strategically advantageous position and potential as a key transit country along the China-Europe route, remains excluded from the BRI's designated routes and corridors. This exclusion underscores a discrepancy between Armenia's strategic potential and its current role in China's regional plans. Thus, the primary objective of this research is to conduct an in-depth examination of Sino-Armenian relations and Armenia's participation in the BRI to elucidate a comprehensive response to the following research question: As a small state, how has Armenian foreign policy been coping with China's BRI? The time frame spans from 2013 when the idea of BRI was first proposed by Chinese president Xi Jinping during his visit to Kazakhstan, until October 2023, which marked the 10th anniversary of the BRI and the convening of the 3rd Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing. This timeframe provides a clear view of how Armenia's foreign policy has evolved in relation to the BRI. The article will also examine how important events like the 2020 Artsakh war, the ongoing war in Ukraine, and recent changes in Armenia's relations with Russia have influenced these shifts. To that end, we have undertaken a qualitative study based on primary sources such as official reports, government documents, political speeches of leaders and high-level officials from both Armenia and China, official

information and data from their respective Ministries of Foreign Affairs and from the State Council Information Office. Additionally, to better complement the analysis, we have conducted email interviews with two prominent researchers¹ on the topics discussed here. As secondary sources, we have used scientific articles, research papers and books written by the most prominent scholars on the topics analysed.

This article begins by defining and then relating the concept of small state to the case of Armenia. In so doing, we argue that Armenia can be considered a small state due to its relatively small population, land area, economy as well as its location at the crossroads of major geopolitical forces. The following section assesses the Small State's Foreign Policy by offering a view on the Sino-Armenian Relations, so that section four provides specific examples on Armenia's involvement within the BRI. The conclusion summarizes the main findings of the research, elucidating Armenia's strategic balancing act as a small state in navigating geopolitical challenges and opportunities within China's BRI. It emphasises China's limited influence despite symbolic investments, and highlights post-2020 war opportunities for Armenia's inclusion in BRI corridors. Additionally, the study advocates for further research to comprehend the complexity of Sino-Armenian relations in light of the new shifting regional dynamics, urging policymakers and scholars to recognise the significance of Armenia's foreign policy choices within the broader BRI framework.

Small State Theory and the Case of Armenia

Small states hold a distinct place in global politics, facing unique challenges and opportunities in pursuing their foreign policy goals (Gvalia et al., 2013; Kuik, 2021). The concept of small states has been the subject of ongoing debate and controversy within the field of IR (Baldacchino & Wivel, 2020; Henrikson, 2001; Jaquet, 1971), despite lacking a precise definition that delineates the specific parameters that classify a state as small.

Historically, small states were regarded as those countries that were not great powers, in other words, too weak to make any difference in international order or change the rules of it (Archer et al., 2014). Nevertheless, in contemporary IR, where the principle of state equality holds paramount, the relevance of traditional criteria used to differentiate small states from larger ones has diminished.

Defining a small state is challenging due to subjective criteria and differing scholarly perspectives. In general, these differing approaches can be classified into three groups: quantitative, qualitative and complex (or comprehensive) (Galstyan, 2019). At the core of the quantitative approach are the criteria used to measure states, such as territorial size, population, GDP, and military personnel

(Maass, 2009). Among these factors, population is most commonly regarded as the primary variable for determining the size of a state. Many scholars categorize states as small if they have resident populations below certain thresholds, typically ranging from 10 to 15 million (Armstrong & Read, 2000; Ross, 1983; Vital, 1967). Others set much lower thresholds, with some considering populations as low as one million (Easterly & Kraay, 2000) or one and a half million (Butler & Morris, 2017). However, this approach has limitations, as it overlooks other factors that shape a state's power and influence on the global stage. For instance, some small states may possess significant economic resources or occupy strategic geographical positions, which can greatly influence their foreign policy options and interactions with larger states (Acharya, 2014; Fox, 1959). As Thorhallsson argues (2018), territory and economy, while important, are not the sole determinants of a state's power. Small states can wield significant influence through large populations, robust economies, and military capabilities, whereas extensive territory does not guarantee substantial power. Moreover, the author contends that while a small economy presents challenges, these are not insurmountable obstacles (Thorhallsson, 2018).

The qualitative approach, in turn, defines small states predominantly through qualitative factors, particularly focusing on the perceptions of a country's political elite. According to Keohane (1969), a state may be categorized as small if its elite perceives that it lacks significant influence when acting alone or within a small group. However, it is important to note that this definition inherently carries a degree of subjectivity, as it is based on perceptions and beliefs. Nonetheless, as observed by Thorhallsson and Wivel (2006), when considered alongside objective material factors, this approach can contribute to a more accurate characterisation of small states.

Both approaches, due to their narrow focus, fall short of capturing the full complexity of small states in international relations. In contrast, the third, more complex approach, which combines elements of both, is relatively free from these shortcomings. For instance, Archer and Nugent (2002) suggest integrating objective factors, such as the size of the diplomatic corps and GDP, with subjective factors, such as foreign governments' views of a state's size and capability and the domestic government's perception of its own state's size and capability. Additionally, Thorhallsson (2006) recommends six categories that influence the notion of a state's size and its international behaviour: fixed (the size of the territory and population), sovereignty (the ability to ensure internal sovereignty throughout the state and external sovereignty on the international stage), political (military and administrative capabilities, and unity in domestic and foreign affairs), economic (GDP size, market capacity, development success), perceptual (attitudes of the elites of the given state) and preference (ambitions of the ruling elite in the international arena).

Given the absence of a universally accepted definition of small states, this article will adopt Thorhallsson's established criteria as the foundational framework for evaluating Armenia's status as a small state, meticulously analysing its alignment with these criteria.

Armenia is relatively small in terms of territory, with a land area of approximately 29,743 square kilometres. In terms of demographics, Armenia has a modest population, estimated to be around three million as of January 1, 2023. Thus, it meets the fixed size criteria.

Armenia has been able to maintain internal stability and sovereignty, while demonstrating its capacity to govern its territory without significant internal conflicts. However, occasional risks of a coup d'état have emerged in the country, often connected with the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Armenia actively participates in international organisations and maintains diplomatic relations with numerous countries, underscoring its external sovereignty. Nevertheless, regional and international powers consistently exert a moderate level of influence on Yerevan's foreign policy decisions.

Armenia's geopolitical location places it in a vulnerable position, sandwiched between regional powers with conflicting interests. Its access to vital regional markets and resources is restricted due to the closed borders with two of its neighbouring countries, Türkiye and Azerbaijan (Bertelsmann Transformation Index, 2022). Furthermore, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict further exacerbates Armenia's security concerns and external pressures. Given its limited economic and military capabilities, Armenia relies on diplomacy and alliances to advance its interests and ensure its security.

Yerevan has undergone substantial social, political, and economic disruptions in recent times. These events include the 2018 Velvet Revolution, the dual challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War (2020), as well as the 2023 Azerbaijani offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh, which have resulted in the influx of over 100,000 ethnic Armenians into Armenia's territory (Khulyan, 2023). Consequently, its military and administrative capacities remain constrained and of a moderate nature.

Notwithstanding the unexpectedly robust economic performance in 2022, characterised by a remarkable real GDP growth of 12.6% (World Bank, 2023), Armenia's economy remains significantly reliant on imports. Operating within a context of geopolitical turbulence and uncertainty, the nation faces formidable challenges, including low investment rates, limited attraction of foreign direct investment, constraints related to human capital development, connectivity challenges within Armenia and with other nations, as well as a restricted diversity in both its export base and destinations (World Bank, 2023).

Acknowledging Armenia's geographical smallness, former president Armen Sarkissian emphasised the

imperative for the country, as a small state, to compensate for its size through proactive foreign policy initiatives (Hetq, 2021). This shows that despite Armenia's occasional hosting of significant international events, such as the forum of the International Organisation of La Francophonie in 2018 and the World Conference on International Telecommunications (WCIT) in 2019, as well as its membership in international organisations like the United Nations and the Commonwealth of Independent States, the ruling elite recognises the necessity for an active foreign policy to navigate its limitations. This pragmatic approach underscores Armenia's efforts to carve out a meaningful role on the global stage. Hence, it is evident that Armenia fits into the category of small states.

The Small State's Foreign Policy: a View on Sino-Armenian Relations

Before analysing Armenia's involvement in the BRI, it is crucial to first examine the broader framework of its foreign policy and its relationship with China. Armenia's foreign policy is deeply influenced by its small-state status and unique geopolitical position, which require navigating complex regional dynamics while pursuing strategic partnerships. Understanding these factors, along with the foundation of Sino-Armenian relations, provides essential context for evaluating its engagement with the BRI.

Positioned at the confluence of Europe and Asia, Armenia faces the formidable challenge of preserving its sovereignty, security, and economic interests in a geopolitical landscape marked by the interests of both regional and global powers in the South Caucasus. Unsurprisingly, at the core of its foreign policy is a multi-vector approach, often referred to domestically as 'complementarity.'² According to former Armenian Minister of Foreign Affairs Vardan Oskanyan (2013), for a small country like Armenia it is vital not only to ensure security and territorial integrity, to seek a resolution of the conflicts, but also to attract investments, secure exportation, and implement big projects with different countries. This strategy embodies a form of hedging,³ an implicit principle within Armenia's foreign policy. For a country of its size, hedging is a strategic imperative, involving a delicate manoeuvring between diverse regional and global actors (Kuik, 2021; Martirosyan, 2004; Telci & Rakipoglu, 2021).

This multi-vector approach is evident in Armenia's strategic partnerships with a range of global and regional powers, including Russia, NATO, EU, and the US. Armenia heavily relies on Russia for its security, evidenced by the presence of the Russian 102nd Military Base in Gyumri. Furthermore, Armenia is a member of the Russia-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). At the same time, Armenia has cultivated strong ties with NATO, having

joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council in 1992 and participating in the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme since 1994. Armenia's active contributions to NATO-led operations, notably in Kosovo, underscore this cooperation. The United States also plays a vital role in Armenia, providing significant financial aid and technical expertise to support democratic reforms, economic growth, and regional stability. Furthermore, Armenia has deepened its partnership with the EU by signing the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2017, laying the groundwork for closer political and economic collaboration. Negotiations for a new Partnership Agenda are underway, and since February 2023, the EU has deployed the Civilian Mission in Armenia (EUMA) under its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

However, despite the centrality of complementarity in Armenia's foreign policy, this approach has faced challenges and undergone significant changes, making it increasingly important to reassess its effectiveness (Kopalyan, 2021). One of the most notable shifts occurred in 2013, when Armenia opted not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU, instead choosing to join the Russia-led Customs Union (Gardner, 2014), which later evolved into the EAEU. This move raised questions about the continued relevance of complementarity, as Armenia seemed to shift its priorities, at least in part, away from the West and towards a closer alignment with Russia (Socor, 2013; Vasilyan, 2014). Nevertheless, as Moscow proved unable to maintain peace in Nagorno-Karabakh and protect the thousands of ethnic Armenians forced to flee the region, the current Armenian government under Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan is undergoing a significant foreign policy shift (Le, 2023), which has also led the country to reassess its complementary policy, which Pashinyan described as a catastrophic mistake for Armenia (The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 2023).

Amidst this shift, the deepening ties between Armenia and China offer an alternative trajectory, which could open new opportunities for Armenia. The 30th anniversary in 2022 marked three decades since China recognised Armenia's independence and established diplomatic relations. This anniversary reflected the resilience and steady evolution of Sino-Armenian relations over the past three decades, as noted by President Xi Jinping in his congratulatory message (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2022). Furthermore, China's Ambassador to Armenia, Fan Yong, emphasised in his article *Generation-to-Generation Friendship between China and Armenia* that, despite the geographical distance, the two countries have shared a long history of friendly relations, underscoring the depth and continuity of their partnership (Yong, 2022).

The deepening of Sino-Armenian relations became particularly evident in recent years, with an increasing frequency of high-level engagements between the two countries. In 2019, Prime Minister Pashinyan visited China

to participate in the “Dialogue of Asian Civilizations Forum.” During his visit, he met with President Xi Jinping and reached several agreements ([The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 2019a](#)). Soon after, State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Armenia as part of his regional tour and met with Pashinyan ([The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 2019b](#)). During their meeting, Wang Yi emphasised the growing cooperation between the two countries, highlighting that it is based on mutual respect and has been steadily developing since the establishment of diplomatic relations. Further solidifying this momentum, Armenian Deputy Foreign Minister Mnatsakan Safaryan visited China and met with Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu, emphasising progress in trade, cultural exchange, and local cooperation ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2023](#)).

It is worth mentioning that, consistent with its diplomatic principles, China has maintained a delicate balance in addressing the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, in line with its diplomatic principles, emphasising peaceful conflict resolution ([National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia, 2021](#)). Armenia, for its part, recognises China’s territorial integrity and adheres to the ‘One China’ policy ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2004](#)). Li Xing (2023), a Professor at Aalborg University, noted in our interview that China’s proactive role in global conflict resolution—such as improving relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and mediating between Russia and Ukraine—raises the possibility of China playing a role in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict when deemed appropriate.

From an economic perspective, although bilateral trade with China continues to grow, making it Armenia’s second-largest trade partner after Russia, the trade relationship is marked by a significant imbalance. In 2023, Armenia’s exports to China totaled \$425,350.6, while imports reached \$1,676,979.7 ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, 2023](#)). This imbalance is part of a broader challenge, as noted in the International Republican Institute report (2022), which analysed China’s relations with 12 countries. The report points out that Chinese investments in Armenia are limited by factors such as high transportation costs, Armenia’s distance from central BRI corridors, regional instability due to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, and strained ties with Türkiye. Furthermore, the report underscores the disparity in trade turnover, noting that China’s trade volumes with Georgia and Azerbaijan far surpass those with Armenia, reflecting the latter’s limited engagement with the BRI ([International Republican Institute, 2022](#)).

Another notable aspect that sets Armenia apart from its neighbouring countries Azerbaijan and Georgia is also its non-membership in the AIIB, which poses a significant limitation to its engagement within the BRI. Unlike Armenia, both Georgia, Azerbaijan and Iran are full-fledged participants in both the BRI and the AIIB, enjoying the benefits of deeper involvement and access to financial

resources for infrastructure development ([Schulz, 2022](#)). However, it is worth mentioning that in 2017, the AIIB approved Armenia’s application, designating it as a prospective regional member ([AIIB, 2017](#)), which indicates the potential for future collaboration and increased participation within the AIIB framework.

In addition to the political and economic dimensions, culture also plays an important role in Sino-Armenian relations. It is worth mentioning that the first Confucius Institute in the South Caucasus was established in Armenia at Yerevan State University in 2008 ([Guliyev, 2023](#)). This has sparked a growing interest among Armenian youth in the Chinese language and culture, with an increasing number choosing to pursue their studies in China, supported by scholarships provided by Beijing ([Sahakyan, 2021](#)). Moreover, in 2019, the mutual abolition of visa requirements for citizens of both countries marked a significant step in strengthening people-to-people relations ([Cricchio, 2020](#)). Furthermore, China’s construction of a 40,000-square-meter embassy complex in Yerevan in 2020, now the second-largest Chinese embassy in the Eurasian region, signals China’s commitment to elevating Sino-Armenian relations ([Azatutyun, 2020](#); [Musaelyan, 2017](#)).

In conclusion, Armenia’s foreign policy, shaped by its small size, seeks to navigate between regional powers and global actors. Recent critiques from Prime Minister Pashinyan signal a shift in this approach. In the midst of these changes, the growing ties between Armenia and China offer a different path forward to diversify its economic partnerships. However, challenges such as high transportation costs, geographical distance, and regional instability still limit economic cooperation. The background provided above on Sino-Armenian relations is indispensable for a better understanding of Armenia’s participation in the BRI as the following section analyses. It thus starts by delving into the historical and geopolitical context of the region.

Armenia’s Involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative

In 2013, during a landmark speech in Kazakhstan, Chinese President Xi Jinping introduced the ambitious One Belt, One Road Initiative (OBOR), later rebranded as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This transformative project aimed to connect China with regions across Asia, Europe, and Africa, fostering stronger trade and investment flows. Since its inception, the BRI has evolved into a global framework for cooperation, linking the majority of the world’s countries and becoming a cornerstone of China’s foreign policy. On October 18, 2023, Beijing hosted the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation to mark its 10th anniversary and highlight its achievements. According to the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, by June 2023, China had signed more than 200 BRI cooperation agreements with over 150 countries and 30 international organisations across five continents, with a cumulative trade

value of 19.1 trillion US dollars between China and BRI partner countries ([The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2023](#)).

Despite this extensive reach, Armenia remains excluded from this Initiative. While it officially became a BRI partner in 2015 by signing the Memorandum on Promotion of Cooperation in Building the Silk Road Economic Belt ([Ralph, 2022](#)), none of the BRI corridors or routes pass through its territory. Consequently, the country has not attracted significant Chinese investments within the BRI framework ([World Bank, 2020](#)). As a result, Armenia lacks access to BRI-related infrastructure projects and remains the only South Caucasus country without major Chinese investments. However, this situation could change, driven by China's growing interest in the region and Armenia's proactive efforts in regional infrastructure development, opening doors for the country to pursue full inclusion in the BRI and secure a more prominent role.

In the past decade, the South Caucasus, traditionally a geographically distant and low-priority region for Beijing, has gained greater relevance — especially following the launch of the BRI and the war in Ukraine ([Pipinashvili, 2011](#)). This is underscored by a substantial increase in trade, with the trade turnover between Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and China rising by 85% from approximately \$2 billion in 2016 to \$3.7 billion by 2021 ([Luys Foundation, 2021](#)).

The war in Ukraine prompted China to reassess its overland BRI routes. Prior to the conflict, China had relied heavily on two major corridors that traversed Russian territory: the China-Mongolia-Russia corridor and the New Eurasian Land Bridge. However, the war disrupted regional stability and raised significant concerns regarding the reliability of these routes. In response, China has increasingly recognised the need to diversify its infrastructure networks to establish more secure connections with European markets, thereby bypassing Russian territory. This strategic shift may elevate the South Caucasus' importance for China, particularly as the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCAWECC), one of the alternative BRI routes, passes through the region. However, like other BRI corridors, the CCAWECC does not pass through Armenia's territory.

These shifts may offer Armenia a chance to gain a stronger role in the Initiative. However, Armenia continues to face several challenges, including closed borders with Azerbaijan and Türkiye, regional instability, and underdeveloped national infrastructure, all of which could hinder its efforts to fully integrate into the BRI framework.

Recognizing these constraints, the Armenian government has sought to enhance its strategic relevance through various initiatives in recent years, including the 'Crossroads of Peace' initiative proposed in October 2023. This ambitious transport project aims to integrate regional infrastructures, including roads, railways, airways, pipelines, cables, and

electricity lines, with the broader goal of fostering long-term peace in the region ([The Government of the Republic of Armenia, 2023](#)). The project envisions creating an interconnected network that facilitates trade, communication, and cooperation across the South Caucasus, ultimately fostering stability through economic interdependence.

A critical component of this project involves reopening borders and re-establishing relations with Türkiye and Azerbaijan, a priority high on the current government's agenda. To make this initiative viable, Armenia must modernise and expand its infrastructure, as many interstate highways and railways have been inactive or require significant repairs after decades of closed borders. One of the cornerstone projects in this effort is the North-South Road Corridor (NSRC). Stretching from Armenia's northern border to its southern border, this highway aims to enhance the country's access to its neighbours and foster regional economic integration. The project envisions the reconstruction of the 556 km Meghri-Yerevan-Bavra road, which is expected to significantly reduce transport times between Armenia's borders with Iran and Georgia ([European Investment Bank, 2013](#)). Construction of the NSRC began in 2009 with an initial completion target set for 2019, but the project has encountered significant delays, and its full completion remains uncertain ([Mgdesyan, 2023](#)).

However, if completed, the NSRC could offer China a strategic alternative to the Azerbaijan–Georgia–Türkiye route by creating a transit link through Iran, Armenia, and Georgia. This would allow Beijing to reduce its dependence on Ankara and Baku and maintain a more balanced relationship with them.

The heightened interest and statements from high-level Chinese officials underscore the corridor's growing importance within China's broader regional strategy. Notably, during a May 2019 meeting between Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing, China expressed its readiness to participate in the construction of the North-South highway and other infrastructure projects in Armenia ([The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 2019a](#)). Later that month, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi reaffirmed China's strong commitment to supporting the NSRC project, highlighting its relevance within the BRI and its potential to promote regional development and stability ([The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 2019b](#)). In turn, Prime Minister Pashinyan emphasised that the Armenian government views this project not merely as infrastructure enhancement, "*but also as an opportunity to create a communication corridor that can be an important link under the Belt and Road Initiative*" ([The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 2019b](#)).

The Armenian government is not only enhancing its national infrastructure system but also showing interest in international transport routes that can connect Armenia to global trade networks, including the Persian Gulf-Black Sea

Corridor, a transport and transit route proposed by Iran in 2016. This project aims to connect Tehran with Europe via Yerevan and Tbilisi, enhancing the transit capabilities of the countries involved (Kaleji, 2021). Although it has not yet produced concrete results, the project has garnered renewed interest from potential participating countries, including Armenia. In April 2022, Armenia signed the ‘Persian Gulf-Black Sea’ International Transport Corridor protocol, a move that led to increased high-level mutual visits between Armenia and Iran, emphasising their commitment to the corridor’s importance. In October 2022, during a meeting between Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian and Armenian counterpart Mirzoyan, the latter emphasised Armenia’s significant interest in implementing the corridor (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, 2022). Additionally, in July 2023, Minister Mirzoyan visited Iran and reiterated the significance of the North-South Road Corridor and the Persian Gulf-Black Sea transport route initiatives (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, 2023a).

Armenia has also been active in securing the interest and participation of other countries in this corridor, including India. Notably, in March 2023, during a visit to India, Minister Mirzoyan proposed the Persian Gulf-Black Sea corridor as a means to link India with Russia and Europe (Chaudhury, 2023). It is no coincidence that just a month later, in April 2023, the first trilateral political consultations between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, Iran, and India took place in Yerevan, focusing on economic issues and regional communication channels (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, 2023b).

Nonetheless, despite the potential of these initiatives, their realisation remains challenging. For instance, the realisation of the ‘Crossroads of Peace’ and NSRC projects is hindered by several significant obstacles. Foremost among these challenges are financial constraints driven by Armenia’s mountainous terrain, as the development and modernization of outdated Soviet-era systems, including the non-functioning Armenia-Iran railway, require substantial investment in infrastructure. Beyond these infrastructural issues, varying transport standards, regional instability, and political constraints further complicate the situation. Furthermore, the complexity and interconnection of Türkiye-Armenia relations with Armenia-Azerbaijan relations create a political dynamic that makes progress on regional cooperation more difficult.

The Persian Gulf-Black Sea Corridor faces its own set of significant hurdles, including resolving Iran’s nuclear issues, addressing disputes between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and stabilizing security in the Black Sea in the aftermath of the war in Ukraine (Dadparvar & Kaleji, 2023). Moreover, the evolving economic and political partnership between India and Armenia adds another layer of complexity, as Armenia must navigate these challenges while balancing its interests with major powers amid the ongoing competition between

China and India over international transport routes, requiring caution in cooperating with both.

Ultimately, Armenia’s ambition to become a regional transit hub remains unfeasible as long as its borders remain closed and the regional security situation remains unstable. However, recent developments suggest a potential shift. Since the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, following Azerbaijan’s offensive in September 2020 and the subsequent trilateral statement between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia in November 2020, discussions about opening borders and initiating infrastructure development have gained momentum (De Waal, 2021; Gawliczek & Iskandarov, 2023; Sahakyan, 2021). This statement includes a commitment to unblocking all economic and transport links in the region (The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 2020).

Leveraging the aftermath of the war, Azerbaijan has actively promoted the so-called ‘Zangezur Corridor’ project. This initiative envisions a transport corridor linking Azerbaijan to the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, a western exclave separated from the rest of the country by Armenia’s territory (Ohanyan, 2023). Beyond local implications, the proposed ‘Zangezur corridor’ is embedded in a broader transportation scheme connecting Baku to Istanbul, serving as a geopolitical endeavour to establish a link between Europe, Central Asia, and China through Azerbaijan and Türkiye. In their analyses of the economic viability of opening the ‘Zangezur corridor,’ Gawliczek and Iskandarov (2023) assert that the rejection of this option by Armenia would undoubtedly compromise the prospects of enduring peace in the region, and even potentially prompt Azerbaijan to take military action. This brings therefore important security concerns with regard to Armenia’s territorial integrity.

The Armenian government’s cautious approach to regional connectivity reflects a delicate geopolitical balancing act. Although Armenia supports regional connectivity, it firmly opposes extraterritorial corridors. In contrast, Armenia’s counter proposal focuses on *de jure* border openings and the reconstruction of Soviet-era cross-border transportation networks, more specifically Baku-Yerevan railway (Ohanyan, 2023). ‘The Zangezur Corridor’ project has sparked concerns also in Iran, with apprehensions about its potential to block the Iran-Armenia border and suspicions that it may be linked to NATO’s ‘Turan corridor,’ allegedly backed by Israel and NATO to foment ethnic unrest in Iranian regions with Turkic populations (Shokri, 2022). Therefore, Armenia’s approach to regional connectivity remains shaped by its need to balance security concerns with economic interests, navigating complex geopolitical dynamics that involve not only its immediate neighbours but also broader international powers, especially as the BRI extends beyond land routes into the digital sphere.

The growing importance of digital infrastructure within the BRI has brought the South Caucasus into the spotlight, as the region increasingly finds itself at the crossroads of the

technological rivalry between the United States and China (Avdaliani, 2021). Armenia, with its rapidly developing IT sector, seeks to cooperate more with China and seeks to position itself as a key player in China's Digital Silk Road (Poghosyan, 2021). Notably, Prime Minister Pashinyan, during the meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, reaffirmed Armenia's commitment to expanding its cooperation with China in the IT sector and invited Chinese companies to participate in the World Congress of Information Technologies (WCIT) in Armenia (The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 2019b). Furthermore, in 2017, Armenia signed a memorandum with Huawei to develop a 'Smart City' project in Yerevan (News.am, 2017). In our interview with Hei Sing, convenor of the Society for Advanced Study of International Relations, he noted that Armenia is the foremost pioneer in information technology among Eurasian countries and emphasised China's possible interest in making Armenia a "silicon valley" for the entire BRI region. However, digital cooperation alone cannot compensate for Armenia's broader exclusion from BRI's major corridors and projects, as discussed throughout this chapter.

The disconnect between Armenia's potential as a partner and its limited engagement in the broader BRI framework restricts its ability to capitalize on the full range of opportunities offered by the initiative. Despite advancements in bilateral relations and opportunities created during the first decade of the Initiative, Armenia's exclusion from key BRI projects stems from the absence of a meaningful roadmap for strengthening its economic cooperation with China within the BRI framework (Sahakyan, 2023). This is further compounded by Armenia's low-level representation at major BRI forums (Sahakyan, 2017, 2019, 2023). Notably, at the 2nd Belt and Road Forum in 2019, Armenia was represented by a delegation led by the Minister of Environment, while neighbouring countries like Azerbaijan and Georgia were represented at higher levels, with Azerbaijan's president and Georgia's deputy prime minister in attendance (Luys Foundation, 2021). This disparity underscores missed opportunities for Armenia to position itself more effectively within the BRI framework and attract Chinese investments.

In conclusion, while initiatives such as the 'Crossroads of Peace,' the NSRC, and the Persian Gulf-Black Sea Corridor present significant opportunities, Armenia's limited connectivity and ongoing regional challenges remain major obstacles to its full integration into the BRI. To enhance its prospects, strategic planning, active diplomacy, and infrastructure modernization are crucial for Armenia to leverage China's growing interest in the South Caucasus and secure a more prominent role within the BRI framework. If successfully realised, these initiatives could greatly improve Armenia's connectivity with neighboring countries and provide substantial economic benefits. However, as a small state, Armenia must continue to carefully balance these opportunities with the imperative to safeguard its

sovereignty and long-term security, considering the potential risks of prioritising short-term economic gains.

Conclusion

Drawing on small state theory, this article has attempted to offer a comprehensive study of Armenia's foreign policy options, as a small state vis-à-vis China's BRI, thereby answering the previously mentioned research question: As a small state, how has Armenian foreign policy been coping with China's BRI? Through an in-depth analysis of Armenia's foreign policy, the hindrances and contributions shaping its BRI involvement, and China's limited economic and political influence in the South Caucasus, this research provides key insights into the complex dynamics of Sino-Armenian relations and presents several significant findings.

As the first finding reveals, Armenia is a small state that strategically aims to balance and maximise its interests between regional and global powers in order to navigate its geopolitical vulnerabilities. Faced with closed borders, regional conflicts, and limited resources, Armenia adopts a pragmatic approach, relying on diplomacy and strategic alliances, particularly with Russia, the EU, and the US. The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war has reshaped these relationships, leading to a recalibration of ties with Russia and a shift toward diversification, including closer ties with China.

The second finding reveals that while China has made symbolic investments in Armenia, its economic and political influence remains limited. The establishment of the second-largest Chinese embassy in the post-Soviet space, along with Confucius Institutes in Armenia's leading universities, underscores China's efforts to exert soft power. However, Armenia's position in China's foreign policy remains marginal, with limited engagement beyond symbolic gestures.

The third finding reveals that despite its historical distance from China, the South Caucasus has grown in importance as China revises its global routes, particularly due to the war in Ukraine. This shift has brought Armenia into focus as a potential key player in connecting East and West, bypassing Russian territory. The conflict's resolution, as outlined in the November 2020 ceasefire agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, opens prospects for unblocking the region and potentially involving Armenia in global infrastructure routes. Nonetheless, Armenia faces several obstacles, including underdeveloped infrastructure, regional instability, and the challenge of opening borders with Azerbaijan and Türkiye. Furthermore, Armenia's cautious approach to projects like the 'Zangezur Corridor' underscores its concern for sovereignty and security, particularly given the region's complex geopolitical dynamics. Thus, Armenia faces a small state dilemma, torn between prioritising security and opening borders to maximize its economic benefits within the BRI framework.

In turn, our fourth finding underscores, that while officially a BRI partner since 2015, Armenia has had limited, if any, integration into the Initiative, as no BRI corridors or routes pass through its territory. This exclusion restricts its access to the economic benefits that other regional players have gained. However, Armenia is actively pursuing alternative projects such as the ‘Crossroads of Peace,’ the North-South Road Corridor, and increased involvement in the Persian Gulf-Black Sea Corridor to enhance regional connectivity and leverage China’s interest in the South Caucasus, despite geopolitical and infrastructural challenges.

Finally, this article attempted to show the complexity of Sino-Armenian relations and the need for further research to comprehensively understand the opportunities and challenges presented by Armenia’s involvement in the BRI. Based on this investigation, we find it important for policymakers and scholars to recognise the significance of Armenia’s foreign policy choices within the overarching framework of the BRI. Moreover, we note the limited research conducted by Armenian scholars on Sino-Armenian relations and Armenia’s involvement in the BRI. This scarcity of academic interest hinders a comprehensive understanding of the potential opportunities and challenges that arise from Armenia’s engagement with China in a shifting regional and global geopolitical landscape.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Li Xing, Professor at Aalborg University, Denmark, and Honorary Distinguished Professor at several Chinese universities (interviewed on March 27, 2023). Hei Sing Tso, expert in Traditional Chinese Strategy at the Society for Advanced Study of International Relations, Hong Kong (interviewed on March 26, 2023).
2. A concept coined by Armenia’s Foreign Minister from 1998 to 2008, Vartan Oskanian.
3. In practice, hedging occurs when a small country cooperates simultaneously with two great powers, resulting in the balance of power (Wang, 2021).

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