

## GEORGIA'S MULTI-VECTOR CHOICE: BALANCING BETWEEN CHINA AND THE WEST

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### ABSTRACT

This research examines the strategic dilemmas facing Georgia in its deepening cooperation with China within the context of global power competition and Western security architecture integration. As China's Belt and Road Initiative expands into the South Caucasus, small states like Georgia face a critical challenge: how to leverage economic opportunities from the East while maintaining security guarantees from the West. The study analyzes whether a balanced and institutionally strengthened strategic model of Georgia-China cooperation can simultaneously enhance economic benefits and ensure compatibility with Western security structures.

The research employs neorealist theoretical frameworks, particularly focusing on hedging strategies and multi-vector foreign policy approaches suitable for small states operating between competing great powers. Through comparative analysis of Vietnam, South Korea, and Estonia—countries that have successfully balanced economic engagement with China while maintaining Western security orientations—the study identifies key principles for managing asymmetric relationships without falling into structural dependence.

The analysis reveals three critical dimensions of Georgia-China relations: economic cooperation, which offers trade and infrastructure benefits but carries risks of debt dependency and political leverage; technological engagement, particularly concerning 5G infrastructure and cybersecurity, where Chinese involvement raises sovereignty and data security concerns incompatible with NATO and EU standards; and geopolitical implications, where deepening ties with Beijing could be perceived as strategic drift by Western partners upon whom Georgia depends for security guarantees against Russian aggression.

The research demonstrates that economic cooperation with China becomes beneficial only under conditions of robust institutional oversight, transparent governance, competitive procurement processes, and clear strategic boundaries that prevent economic ties from transforming into political influence channels. The study emphasizes that technological integration with Chinese companies operating under state control poses critical risks to Georgia's information sovereignty and long-term compatibility with Western security systems. Furthermore, analysis confirms that China cannot serve as a security counterweight to Russia in the South Caucasus, making Western security architecture indispensable for Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

The main conclusion supports the hypothesis that a balanced and institutionally strengthened strategic model—characterized by transparent governance, multi-vector partnerships, and clear "red lines" in sensitive sectors—can enable Georgia to derive economic benefits from China while preserving strategic autonomy and Western security alignment. However, this requires Georgia to implement strict institutional controls, particularly in critical infrastructure and technology sectors; maintain full synchronization with EU and

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NATO security standards; and adopt a hedging strategy that diversifies economic partnerships without compromising core security priorities.

The study recommends that Georgia: (1) institutionally separate economic cooperation with China from security policy, which must remain firmly anchored in Western architecture; (2) strengthen transparency and oversight mechanisms for all Chinese investment and infrastructure projects; (3) align technological policy fully with EU and US security standards, especially regarding 5G and critical infrastructure; and (4) deepen coordination with Western partners to ensure foreign policy positioning does not create strategic ambiguity. The research concludes that for small states in competitive geopolitical environments, survival depends not on choosing between great powers but on maintaining strategic autonomy through carefully calibrated balance—securing economic development opportunities while preserving sovereignty and security guarantees from reliable partners.

**Keywords:** Georgia-China relations, strategic hedging, small state security, Belt and Road Initiative, multi-vector foreign policy

## INTRODUCTION

The transformation of the international system in the 21st century has given particular significance to analyzing the behavior of states that are rapidly strengthening their economic, technological, and geopolitical capabilities. China's rise has radically altered the global distribution of power and significantly expanded its geographical sphere of influence, transcending regional boundaries to become a central factor in the global system. According to neorealist perspectives, rising powers consistently seek expansion and consolidation of their zones of influence, creating structural tensions with hegemonic powers.<sup>2</sup> Today, the relationship between China and the United States exists precisely in such a competitive configuration, which has gradually evolved into a systemic conflict.

China's role became particularly prominent in the Eurasian space following the launch of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative (hereafter "Belt and Road Initiative," BRI) in 2013. This project represents Beijing's long-term strategic concept aimed at establishing infrastructural, transit, investment, and technological connections linking Asia with Europe and other regions of the world. The initiative not only reshapes the architecture of global trade and transport but also substantially affects the foreign policy flexibility and strategic maneuvering capabilities of small and medium-sized states.

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<sup>2</sup> Waltz Kenneth, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979). No spacing between citations

For Georgia, this process has acquired particular significance because the country is located between Europe and Asia, along strategic transit routes, naturally making it a space where competing interests collide. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia chose a Western foreign policy course; however, the need for economic diversification and changes in the global economy have strengthened cooperation with China. Diplomatic relations between Georgia and China were established in 1992,<sup>3</sup> but intensive development of the relationship began precisely in the 2010s, proportional to the growth of China's economic expansion. In 2017, a free trade agreement with China entered into force, further deepening economic ties. Since then, China has become one of Georgia's largest trading partners; Chinese investments in Georgia have increased, particularly in infrastructure and construction sectors, including projects implemented by Sinohydro and Hualing Group.<sup>4</sup> The "Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership" signed on July 31, 2023, moved the relationship to a new stage. As Emil Avdaliani notes, the agreement is not merely a renewal of economic ties but deepens the structural dilemmas of Georgia's foreign policy, as the partnership was formalized in an extremely intensified environment of global competition.<sup>5</sup> The agreement covers economics, innovation, technology, the digital sphere, investments, logistics, energy, and humanitarian cooperation.

### **Research Problem**

The main problem lies in how Georgia can plan and implement economic and technological cooperation with China in a way that does not deepen structural dependence and does not compromise the country's alignment with Western security standards.

### **Relevance of the Research Topic**

The deepening of Georgia-China cooperation becomes particularly relevant against the backdrop of global power competition, technological transformation, and intensive development of Western security structures. Georgia, as a small state, must establish a

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<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, "Relations between Georgia and the People's Republic of China," accessed November 30, 2025.

<sup>4</sup> Transparency International Georgia, *Increasing Chinese Influence in Georgia*, May 22, 2025.

<sup>5</sup> Emil Avdaliani, "What's Behind China's Strategic Partnership with Georgia?" *Carnegie*

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strategic balance between China's economic capabilities and Western security architecture to avoid structural dependence on any major power. This creates a need to assess how a balanced and institutionally strengthened policy can simultaneously ensure the country's economic benefits and security stability.

**Research Subject** - Georgia-China relations and their interaction with Georgia's Western security and foreign policy architecture.

**Research Object**- Georgia's strategic balancing policy in cooperation with China and compatibility with Western security structures.

### **Purpose and Objectives**

**Purpose:** The research aims to determine how a balanced and institutionally strengthened strategic model of Georgia-China cooperation can effectively reduce structural dependence risks, facilitate the realization of the country's economic development opportunities, and simultaneously ensure sustainable compatibility of Georgia's foreign policy course with Western security architecture.

### **Objectives:**

1. To assess the structural dependence risks that may arise from deepening economic, investment, and technological cooperation with China, particularly under the specific conditions of a small state.
2. To investigate the essence and characteristics of a "balanced and institutionally strengthened strategic model" as an intervening variable and determine its impact on increasing economic benefits and reducing security risks.

**Research Question** - How does a balanced and institutionally strengthened strategic model of Georgia-China cooperation affect the country's economic benefits and compatibility with Western security architecture?

**Hypothesis**- The hypothesis states that a balanced and institutionally strengthened strategic model of Georgia-China cooperation can simultaneously strengthen Georgia's economic benefits and ensure the country's compatibility with Western security architecture,

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because transparent governance and a multi-vector strategy reduce a small state's risk of structural dependence on any major power.

**Independent Variable:** Georgia-China cooperation.

**Intervening Variable:** A balanced and institutionally strengthened strategic model of cooperation.

**Dependent Variable:** Strengthening Georgia's economic benefits and the country's compatibility with Western security architecture.

### Theoretical Framework

Scientific analysis of foreign policy and security issues requires not only the study of empirical material but also the formation of a clear theoretical framework that defines the research's logical architecture and points of interpretation. Analysis of cooperation between Georgia and China is particularly important against the backdrop of global power redistribution, the classic dilemma of regional security, and parameters of economic interdependence.

### Neorealism and Structural Constraints

Neorealist theory, particularly Kenneth Waltz's approach, argues that the international system is anarchic and state behavior is primarily determined by the structural environment and distribution of power.<sup>6</sup> Small states with limited strategic resources are forced to constantly balance between external actors.

Small states in the anarchic environment of the international system employ various behavioral models to ensure security and strategic maneuver (see Comparative Table No. 1 of strategies). Such models include: **balancing**, aimed at containing threatening powers and restoring the balance of power; **bandwagoning** with a strong state, based on the hope of receiving security guarantees; and **hedging/strategic insurance**—a mixed strategy that combines simultaneous cooperation with great powers and taking precautionary measures so that the country maintains flexibility and avoids excessive dependence on any actor.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," *International Security* 25, no. 1 (2000): 5–41.

<sup>7</sup> Živilė M. Vaicekauskaitė, "Security Strategies of Small States in a Changing World," *Journal on Baltic Security* 3, no. 2 (2017): 7–15.

Some small states also pursue **multi-vector foreign policy**, which gives them the opportunity to simultaneously strengthen ties with various partners and maintain strategic maneuvering space. The choice among these strategies is determined by the distribution of power, the degree of external pressure, and the state's own vulnerability.

Considering Georgia's geopolitical environment, security challenges, and economic capabilities, the most optimal strategy may be **hedging**. It allows the country, on the one hand, to maintain a strategic course based on Western security architecture, and on the other hand, to use opportunities for economic cooperation with China and other actors without forming one-partner dependence.

The hedging model creates flexible maneuvering space, reduces vulnerability to external shocks, and allows Georgia to protect strategic autonomy—particularly important for a small state in a competitive environment between great powers.

Comparative Table No. 1: Strategies (Balancing – Bandwagoning – Hedging – Multi-vector Policy)

Strategy	Main Purpose	Behavioral Mechanism	Risk	Benefit
Balancing	Reducing threat from a strong actor	Military-political opposition; seeking partners	Escalation of conflict	Strengthening security; maintaining independence
Bandwagoning	Receiving security from the strong	Alignment with a strong state; following its agenda	Loss of strategic autonomy	Short-term increase in security
Hedging	Strategic insurance and maintaining flexibility	Cooperation + precautionary measures simultaneously; diversifying relationships	Difficulty of excessive balance; external distrust	Maneuvering capability; risk distribution; maintaining autonomy
Multi-vector Policy	Reducing dependence and expanding the circle of partners	Parallel relationships with several actors	Difficulty managing conflicting agendas	Maximizing economic and political benefits; strategic flexibility

## Research Methodology

Analysis of the security dimension of Georgia-China strategic partnership requires a multifaceted, integrated research approach encompassing both theoretical and empirical

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methods. The research methodology is based on qualitative analysis tools that correspond to international relations research standards.

## MAIN PART

Understanding Georgia-China strategic partnership requires comprehensive analysis of historical, economic, technological, and geopolitical factors. According to Georgia's strategic documents, the country is considered one of the most significant transit links in the direction of Turkey and Central Asia, while China uses these transport corridors as integrated components in its global initiatives. The contemporary phase of this relationship was significantly shaped by the expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative, which gave small states the opportunity to participate in a broad economic network while simultaneously creating new security and geopolitical challenges.

According to Carnegie Endowment assessments, the formalization of strategic partnership between Georgia and China in 2023 was conditioned by both regional and global strategic environment changes. Beijing's main motivation was the growing importance of the "Middle Corridor"—a route that allows China to use Georgia for connection with Europe, bypassing Iran and Russia, as a relatively safe and politically less risky transit space. For Georgia, the agreement represented a pragmatic response to global competition and geoeconomic uncertainty: Tbilisi seeks to strengthen its transit function, activate infrastructure projects, and diversify economic partnerships without damaging its European integration priority. The process gains additional significance from the tense US-China relations in 2023, making Georgia's choice even more sensitive and strategically distinctive. According to Carnegie's assessment, the signing represents the result of interests intersecting in a multi-layered structural environment and is based on pragmatic calculations rather than a reorientation of Georgia's foreign policy.<sup>8</sup>

Strategic documents pay particular attention to deepening Georgia-China economic cooperation, though the political dimension of this relationship is no less significant. China

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<sup>8</sup> Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "What's Behind China's Strategic Partnership With Georgia?" August 17, 2023.

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views Georgia as a regional partner whose geographical location and transit route potential create strategic value for Beijing, while for Georgia, China represents a significant source of economic resources and investments.

However, activating economic cooperation cannot be considered without impact on Western security architecture—particularly when technological, financial, and infrastructure projects can become mechanisms of political influence.<sup>9</sup> Studies conducted in Western countries indicate that Chinese infrastructure and technological initiatives may be perceived as a competitive model compared to European Union standards, affecting the level of trust toward Georgia.<sup>10</sup> This situation creates a typical "security dilemma" for small states: Georgia seeks to receive economic benefits from the East while security guarantees come from the West, limiting its foreign policy maneuvering space. This dilemma is intensified by the fact that in the long-term perspective, the country cannot choose a sharp priority in either direction at the expense of the other, as such a case might result in losing either economic development opportunities or security guarantees. Several regional analysts drew attention to this pattern even in the twentieth century, noting that Georgia's geopolitical position does not allow for a sharply antagonistic choice.<sup>11</sup>

For Georgia's security architecture, it is critically important that strategic partnership with China represents an additional resource rather than a replacement for Western security mechanisms. This approach particularly relies on the doctrine that small states cannot rely on one actor's military-political umbrella in great power competition; **instead, they need multi-vector, balanced, and structurally strengthened policy.**

Based on the above circumstances, it is important to examine Georgia-China relations in three main directions that form the foundation for comprehensive assessment of the partnership. First, economic cooperation shows both the growth of trade and infrastructure capabilities and those institutional and financial risks that still represent a significant challenge for small states. The second dimension includes technological and cybersecurity

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<sup>9</sup> Nadège Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century?* (Washington: NBR Press, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> European Commission, "EU-China: A Strategic Outlook," Joint Communication, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard* (Basic Books, 1997).

issues: Chinese involvement within the framework of the "Digital Silk Road" and 5G infrastructure simultaneously determines opportunities and raises critical security risks. The third direction is related to geopolitical consequences—expanding relations with China is economically beneficial, but its strategic interpretations may affect Georgia's Western integration trajectory. Precisely this comprehensive analysis of these three perspectives ensures a complete assessment of the partnership's essence, structural challenges, and long-term impacts.

### **Economic Cooperation: Benefits, Risks, and Systemic Characteristics**

Economic cooperation between Georgia and China has been steadily growing over the past decade. The free trade agreement created a significant market for Georgian products, particularly wine and agricultural products. Moreover, China has become one of Georgia's largest trading partners. According to international organizations' assessments, access to China's market gives Georgia a competitive advantage in the region.<sup>12</sup> However, economic cooperation cannot be assessed only by positive indicators. First, Georgia's trade balance with China remains negative, indicating that China remains a strong importer for Georgia, while Georgia's exports do not reach scales that would form a relatively equal structure in both directions. A significant part of international research emphasizes that China's economic activity abroad can become a source of political influence, especially in countries where asymmetric relationships exist. Examples often cited include Montenegro, Laos, and several African countries' infrastructure debts to China, which significantly strengthened China's political influence.

The systemic risks of cooperation with Chinese state companies are particularly symbolized by Montenegro's case, which has become a classic example of the widely discussed "debt trap" in international research. Montenegro turned to China Exim Bank loans to finance the Bar-Boljare highway worth over \$1 billion, followed by unexpectedly

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<sup>12</sup> Nino Javakhishvili, "The Impact of China–Georgia Free Trade Agreement on China Georgia Import and Export Trade" (2024).

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high debt, infrastructure delays, and project quality problems; as a result, the country was forced to turn to the European Union for assistance to avoid possible economic collapse.<sup>13</sup>

### **Comparative Analysis: Serbia, Hungary, Montenegro, Kazakhstan**

In comparative analysis, the examples of Serbia, Hungary, Montenegro, and Kazakhstan demonstrate that China's economic, technological, and financial projects in small and medium-sized states often become sources of political influence. In the case of the Western Balkans, according to European Union research service data, Chinese investments in the region exceeded €32 billion between 2009-2021, of which €10.3 billion was implemented in Serbia alone; investments are particularly concentrated in transport, energy, and communications/IT sectors, creating structural dependence and "debt trap" risks for small economies.<sup>14</sup> In Serbia and Hungary, the growth of Chinese capital and technological cooperation often coincides with pro-Chinese rhetoric of political elites and willingness to soften critical positions toward Beijing within the European Union, giving economic cooperation an additional dimension of political influence.<sup>15</sup> Montenegro's case is particularly illustrative with the Bar-Boljare highway project, for which Chinese loans significantly increased the country's debt burden and became a classic example of a small state falling into a "debt trap" in international debates.<sup>16</sup> In Kazakhstan, China's influence is related to BRI transit corridors and infrastructure investments: according to World Bank and other studies, the country is forming as one of the main platforms for China-Europe transport corridors, accompanied by both trade and investment benefits and growing dependence on infrastructure and logistics.<sup>17</sup>

Comparison of these four cases shows (see additionally Table No. 2: **Comparative Analysis**) that China's economic involvement in small and medium-sized states is rarely

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Branislav Stanicek, "China's Strategic Interests in the Western Balkans," European Parliamentary Research Service Briefing, June 24, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Erik Brattberg et al., "China's Influence in Southeastern, Central, and Eastern Europe: Vulnerabilities and Resilience in Four Countries," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 13, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Lola Deron, "Montenegro, China, and the Media: A Highway to Misperceptions," SAIS-CARI Briefing Paper no. 7, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> World Bank, "South Caucasus and Central Asia: The Belt and Road Initiative – Kazakhstan Country Case Study," 2020.

purely economic in nature: in the long-term perspective, it often transforms into channels of political influence, especially when institutional sustainability is weak and foreign policy balancing is challenging—making the risk of similar asymmetric dependence a relevant issue in Georgia's case as well.

**Table No. 2: Comparative Analysis of Small and Medium-Sized States by Dependence on China**

Country	Main Chinese Involvement	Main Benefit	Risks/Forms of Dependence
Serbia	Large infrastructure projects (Belgrade-Budapest railway), energy, "Safe City" surveillance system (Huawei), foreign direct investment	Fast capital, infrastructure renewal, political support on the international arena	Asymmetric economic dependence; technological dependence; growth of political influence ("17+1" format)
Hungary	Investment and technology projects (CATL, BYD), transport infrastructure, university cooperation, Huawei regional hub	Job creation, high-volume investments, technological cooperation	Pro-China positioning in the EU; political convergence; risk of blocking critical EU decisions
Montenegro	Bar-Boljare highway, high-volume state loans from Chinese banks	Infrastructure benefit in a short time; transport system improvement	"Debt trap" risk; structural debt growth; excessive financial dependence on one partner
Kazakhstan	BRI transit corridors, logistics corridors, energy, transport infrastructure	Growth of transit revenues; economic diversification; regional hub function	Structural dependence on infrastructure and logistics; risk of forced choice in changing security environment; cautious hedging between Russia and China

This example is particularly relevant for Georgia, as it shows that excessive optimism toward Chinese investments may cause economic and political dependence that small states cannot quickly escape. This case underlines the main hypothesis of the work: for small and medium-sized states, the benefits of China's economic projects are real but only if risks are strictly controlled and the state has a strong institutional framework ensuring transparency, competition, and protection of strategic interests. Although Georgia's case is still different, assessment in this direction is still necessary.

Our analysis here also clearly shows that economic cooperation is beneficial for Georgia only under conditions when strong institutional oversight exists. Economic risks always

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make small states more vulnerable, especially when the volume of investments significantly exceeds the country's economic scale.

### Technological and Cybersecurity Risks in the Context of Georgia-China Strategic Cooperation

The technological sphere is one of the most sensitive directions in Georgia-China cooperation, as it is directly related to the country's critical infrastructure, data security, and long-term strategic independence. In the contemporary international security environment, technological integration is perceived not only as an opportunity for economic innovation but also as an instrument of influence and dependence. Precisely from this perspective, China's technological expansion is assessed by many states worldwide, particularly evident in 5G infrastructure, video surveillance systems, and data processing platforms.<sup>18</sup>

The EU's coordinated security assessments of 5G networks emphasize that "high-risk suppliers" may include companies operating under state control conditions and potentially subject to direct or indirect interference by a third country's government.<sup>19</sup> Although the document developed by the European Union does not name a specific country, according to expert assessments, these criteria particularly apply to Chinese telecommunications companies, which China's digital security legislation obliges to cooperate with state structures. Precisely this legal framework creates suspicion that for Chinese technology companies, ensuring complete operational independence on foreign territory may be limited, considered in EU assessments as a threat to critical infrastructure security.

According to Strand Consult's 2024 report, one of the significant challenges for 5G infrastructure security is the use of technology suppliers operating under strong state influence or control conditions.<sup>20</sup> The study emphasizes that Chinese telecommunications

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<sup>18</sup> Erik Baark, "China's New Digital Infrastructure: Expanding 5G Mobile Communications," *East Asian Policy* 14, no. 2 (2022): 124–136.

<sup>19</sup> European Commission and ENISA, *Report on EU-Wide Coordinated Risk Assessment of 5G Networks Security*, October 9, 2019, p. 26.

<sup>20</sup> Strand Consult, "Eight Risks for the 5G Supply Chain from Suppliers under the Influence of Adversarial Countries like China," December 10, 2024.

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companies, according to China's national security legislation, are obligated to cooperate with state structures when necessary, questioning their operational independence in foreign countries. As a result, the report notes that such legal circumstances increase geopolitical and cybersecurity risks for states using Chinese technologies in 5G networks.

According to Transparency International Georgia's 2025 assessment, Chinese technological involvement in Georgia is not yet large-scale, but is already evident in several critical directions—particularly video surveillance systems, telecommunications equipment, and network infrastructure. According to the study, a large part of state agencies use Chinese-made cameras and software, while Huawei technologies occupy a significant share in local telecommunications networks. Experts warn that such concentration may create technological dependence in the long-term perspective and deepen critical infrastructure security risks.<sup>21</sup>

It is also noteworthy that Western partners' approaches significantly affect Georgia's security strategic decisions. The positions of the USA and the European Union on technological security issues have sharply converged in recent years; both sides openly warn partners about the risks of state-controlled Chinese technological infrastructure.<sup>22</sup> Such warnings also affect Georgia's political choice, as the country needs appropriate integration with Western security systems, particularly in cybersecurity, intelligence cooperation, and critical infrastructure protection directions.

In summary, the technological and cybersecurity direction in Georgia-China relations represents one of the most sensitive and strategic spheres, as it is directly related to the country's critical infrastructure sustainability and data security. International practice demonstrates that contemporary technological integration is already perceived not only as economic development but also as an instrument of geopolitical influence, especially when technology suppliers operate under strong state influence conditions. The EU's coordinated 5G security assessment and Strand Consult's 2024 analysis unanimously indicate that state-

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<sup>21</sup> Transparency International Georgia, "Increasing Chinese Influence in Georgia," May 22, 2025.

<sup>22</sup> U.S. State Department, "Clean Network Program," 2020.

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controlled companies' participation in 5G networks increases cybersecurity and political penetration risks—a criterion directly relevant to Chinese technology companies' cases.

For Georgia, this issue takes on even more significant contours, as according to Transparency International Georgia's data, Chinese technological infrastructure is already present in video surveillance, telecommunications, and network systems, which may grow into technological dependence in the future and weaken the country's information sovereignty. At the same time, Western partners' strict position on risks related to Chinese technological infrastructure directly affects Georgia's strategic choice, as the country's security architecture is primarily based on cooperation with the European Union and NATO. Accordingly, Georgia finds itself in a structurally difficult situation: on the one hand, it needs technological development and accessible infrastructure, while on the other hand, compliance with Western security standards is necessary. Precisely this dilemma presents the technological-cybersecurity sphere as one of the defining factors for Georgia's foreign policy maneuver and long-term strategic security.

### **Geopolitical Consequences and the Trajectory of Relations with the West**

The geopolitical significance of Georgia-China strategic partnership cannot be assessed without considering the Western direction. Georgia's foreign policy fundamental priority remains integration into the European Union and NATO, repeatedly recorded both in strategic documents and official communications with international partners. Against this backdrop, deepening relations with China creates a complex diplomatic balance, as in the West's view, China's global policy is often considered as a form of structural competitor and systemic challenge.<sup>23</sup> US State Department assessments have repeatedly emphasized that China's expansive economic formats in some cases increase geopolitical asymmetries among small states, potentially affecting their foreign policy sovereignty.<sup>24</sup> The European Union has also developed a strict strategic framework regarding China, where it is defined

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<sup>23</sup> European Commission, "EU-China Relations Factsheet," 2022.

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Department of State, "2023 Investment Climate Statement: Georgia," 2023.

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as a "competitor," "partner," and "systemic rival" simultaneously<sup>25</sup>—demonstrating that the European approach is complex and varies according to partner state dependence. For Georgia, the main challenge lies precisely in correct positioning among these three different dimensions. The state needs, on the one hand, economic partnership with China, while on the other hand, strengthening security guarantees in Western institutional systems.

This structural difficulty is seen even more profoundly in regional analytical centers' assessments, including Rondeli Foundation. According to their analysis, for Georgia, it is critically important that economic and trade cooperation with China not be followed by deepening political influence, especially in the security sphere, where protecting autonomy is the highest priority for a small state.<sup>26</sup> Such assessments emphasize the importance of the circumstance that economic relations should not transform into a form of political leverage, potentially undermining Georgia's foreign policy orientation.

The geopolitical picture becomes even more complex considering the Russia factor. China cooperates with Russia in the region within the framework of strategic partnership, while Russia still represents the main military and security challenge for Georgia. A broad consensus of international researchers indicates that China does not act against Russia's interests in the South Caucasus and, accordingly, in cases of Georgia's security crises, Beijing is not considered a real balancing force.<sup>27</sup> In this circumstance, it becomes clear that economic ties and infrastructure cooperation cannot fulfill the function of security guarantee in a military-political context.

From this, we can assume that for Georgia, China's growing economic and political participation can be stable only when it clearly and in advance defines a strategic boundary—that critical point whose crossing is unacceptable and which excludes

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<sup>25</sup> European Parliament, "EU-China relations: De-risking or de-coupling – the future of the EU strategy towards China," Study PE 754.446 (Brussels: European Parliament, March 2024).

<sup>26</sup> Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS), "Georgia's Dangerous Partnership with China," October 26, 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Rasmus G. D. Hardt and Anders Streubel-Kristensen, "Perspectives: Georgia to Be Disappointed if It Expects Security Guarantees from China," *Eurasianet*, June 28, 2024

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compromise on political or security issues. Precisely such institutionally defined "red lines" are a necessary defense mechanism for small states to protect their sovereignty, Western course, and security interests in a competitive geopolitical environment.

For Georgia, strategic cooperation with China is significantly related to economic and infrastructure capabilities, though its geopolitical interpretation requires particular caution. The converging assessment of the European Union, regional analytical centers, and international research indicates that for Georgia's security architecture, it is crucial to unwaveringly maintain the Western strategic direction, as economic ties with China cannot replace those security guarantees provided by the European Union and NATO formats. Accordingly, for Georgia, a stable and sustainable cooperation model is based on a clearly defined strategic boundary: economic interaction with China is possible and advisable, though the country's positioning in political and security directions must remain in full compliance with Western standards and partnership obligations.

### **Practical Models of Strategic Balance in Small and Medium-Sized States**

#### **(Examples of Vietnam, South Korea, and Estonia)**

In international relations, growing power competition forces small and medium-sized states to constantly revise their own foreign policy configurations to simultaneously ensure both the use of economic opportunities and maintenance of security guarantees. In this dynamic, the strategic balance model becomes particularly important, allowing a small state to avoid becoming dependent on any great power, maintain structural autonomy, and have flexible foreign policy maneuvering space. To assess the effectiveness of this model, it is important to analyze countries that have successfully balanced cooperation with China and compatibility with Western security architecture in practice.

Below we examine Vietnam, South Korea, and Estonia (see additionally analytical comparative Table No. 3) as three different but conceptually interconnected examples that clearly show how small states can maintain structural autonomy under conditions of deepened cooperation with China.

Their experience is particularly relevant for Georgia because these countries' examples clearly show that small and medium-sized states can simultaneously use economic relations with China as a development resource and still maintain clear orientation toward Western architecture in the security sphere. This model is based precisely on that kind of institutionally strengthened strategic balance that is also critical in Georgia's case: balance that ensures receiving economic benefits under conditions of cooperation with China and simultaneously excludes dependence on any great power. For precisely this reason, the experience of Vietnam, South Korea, and Estonia provides a significant analytical foundation for understanding how Georgia, similar to these countries, can maintain multi-vector, security- and economy-convergent foreign policy stability. From this, it can be said that an institutionally strengthened strategic balance can simultaneously strengthen economic benefits and ensure compatibility with Western security architecture.

### 1. Vietnam: The Strategic Architecture of "Bamboo Diplomacy"

Vietnam represents a significant example of how a small state can maintain strategic autonomy despite forced geopolitical proximity to China. The country's main foreign policy architect was considered Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong (2011-2024), whose formulated "Bamboo Diplomacy" term defines diplomatic strategy: strong roots (sovereignty), resilient stem (stable party governance), and flexible branches (multi-alignment partnerships), ultimately implying principled protection of national interests and flexibility in relations with great powers.<sup>28</sup>

During Trong's period, Vietnam maintained close economic ties with China, recorded cooperation at the party level, and tried to reduce maritime tension risks, particularly within the 2011 maritime agreement framework. However, in parallel, it deepened relations with the USA and its Asian allies. In 2013, the countries signed a partnership, and in 2023—a comprehensive strategic partnership at the highest political level. Such

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<sup>28</sup> Phan Xuan Dung, "Nguyen Phu Trong's Strategic Nous in Shaping Hanoi's Relations with the Great Powers," Fulcrum, 2024.

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diplomatic strategy is simultaneously based on using economic cooperation and strengthening relations with the USA and Japan in the security sphere.<sup>29</sup>

Vietnam's experience demonstrates that close economic relations with China do not automatically transform into structural dependence if the state ensures institutional control, multi-partner structure, and strategic diversification.

## 2. South Korea: The Institutional Model of Hedging Against the Backdrop of US-China Competition

South Korea's experience represents one of the most prominent examples of how a small and medium power can maintain balanced policy parallel to economic integration with China. According to Foreign Policy's 2025 analysis, China remains South Korea's largest trading partner, though Seoul timely implements diversification—redistribution of investments, entry into new markets, and strengthening strategic alliance with the USA in the security sphere.<sup>30</sup>

This imbalance is resolved by Korea through several instruments:

- Full synchronization with the USA in the security sphere (anti-missile architecture, intelligence, cooperation with AUKUS and QUAD);
- Economic integration with China under strict state oversight conditions;
- Protection of the technology sector and 5G core from high-risk suppliers (Huawei exclusion from the core network since 2019).

In Ezgi Kılıçarslan's research, Korea's foreign policy is clearly defined as hedging—a strategy aimed at maximizing economic benefits and maintaining security with minimal risk.<sup>31</sup>

South Korea's example is particularly relevant for Georgia: it shows that economic integration with China is possible if the state ensures institutional control and full synchronization with the West in the security sphere.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ramon Pacheco Pardo, "South Korea's China Ties Don't Amount to Dependence," *Foreign Policy*, February 10, 2025.

<sup>31</sup> Ezgi Kılıçarslan Gül, "South Korea's Foreign Policy: The Hedging Strategy" (master's thesis, Middle East Technical University, 2023).

### 3. Estonia: The European Standard Model of Technological Security

Estonia represents a high-tech small state example that clearly defined security priorities and thereby avoided technological and infrastructure dependence on China.

Estonia was among the first in the European Union to begin restricting high-risk suppliers from 5G infrastructure. The EU's official 5G Toolbox defines that high-risk suppliers—particularly companies subject to third-country state control—should not be allowed in core networks.<sup>32</sup>

Based on this framework, Estonia prepared legislation that restricts suppliers in complex technological infrastructure who are not from NATO and EU member states or do not meet high security standards. According to ERR's 2020 report, Huawei officially requested review of the law, confirming that the regulation directly affected Chinese companies.<sup>33</sup>

Estonia's model creates an example whereby strict institutional policy on technological security allows a small state to receive economic benefits from global relations but not become vulnerable in critical infrastructure.

**Analytical Comparative Table No. 3 (Vietnam – South Korea – Estonia)**

Criterion	Vietnam	South Korea	Estonia
Geopolitical Profile	Small/medium state; China's immediate neighbor; constant strategic pressure at sea	Medium power; USA's solid security ally; Asian economic hub	Small state; EU and NATO member; high security standards
Economic Relationship with China	High integration; significant trade and industrial ties	Very high trade dependence, but diversified structure	Moderate trade, but restrictions in critical sectors
Security Strategic Model	Neutral "Four Nos" doctrine; equal distance	Clear security alliance with USA	Full integration in Western security systems (NATO, EU)
Strategy Toward China	Bamboo diplomacy—flexible balancing	"Dual-track approach"—economy with China, security with USA	"Strategic distancing"—technological and security restrictions
Institutional Control in Critical Sectors	High; state controls technological infrastructure	High; strict screening and restrictions in 5G sphere	Very high; "secure supplier" model

<sup>32</sup> European Union, *Cybersecurity of 5G Networks: EU Toolbox of Risk Mitigating Measures*, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> "Huawei Asks Government to Review Communications Networks Regulation," ERR News, October 16, 2020.

			excludes Chinese technologies
Compatibility with Western Structures	Growing security cooperation with USA	Full security integration with the West	Full political, economic, and military compatibility
Strategic Balance Result	Economic benefit + maintaining strategic autonomy	Economic benefit + stable security guarantees	Technological sovereignty + high security standards
How It Supports Our Hypothesis	Institutional control + balance reduces structural dependence	Economic integration with China is fully compatible with Western security	Clear regulations ensure independence and sovereignty

All three examples—Vietnam, South Korea, and Estonia—present a unified logical conclusion: **A small state can engage in economic or technological cooperation with China without structural dependence if this process is managed with an institutionally strengthened and multi-vector strategic balance.**

This experience directly supports the work's hypothesis, according to which a balanced and transparent model can simultaneously strengthen economic benefits and ensure compatibility with Western security architecture.

For Georgia, these cases reflect three main practical lessons:

1. Economic relations with China can be beneficial if separated from the security sphere (Vietnam);
2. Full convergence with the West in the security sphere is possible parallel to economic diversification (South Korea);
3. Technological protection of critical infrastructure is a prerequisite for structural autonomy (Estonia).

Therefore, in Georgia's case, strategic balance policy is not only desirable but a necessary instrument under conditions of global competition.

## CONCLUSION

Multi-layered analysis of Georgia-China relations demonstrates that strategic cooperation creates both significant economic opportunities and systemic security challenges for the country. Georgia's geopolitical location, small states' security specifics,

and Western integration-based foreign policy present a complex dilemma whose management requires consistent, long-term, and structurally strengthened political steps.

Research shows that deepened economic ties with China can become an additional source of development, particularly in trade, transit, and investment directions. However, experience accumulated in many countries and Georgia's internal institutional weaknesses indicate that such cooperation contains risks related to the possibility of transforming economic influence into political leverage. In this context, contract transparency, standard compliance, competitive environment, and strong state oversight institutions have particular importance for Georgia.

Technological cooperation represents the most sensitive sphere, as it can directly affect the country's critical infrastructure and digital security architecture. International experience shows that Chinese technology companies are sometimes subject to obligations defined by state-imposed legislation, creating security concerns in other countries. For small states like Georgia, technological dependence may grow into long-term strategic vulnerability, directly contradicting the country's security principles.

From a geopolitical perspective, Georgia finds itself between Western security systems vital to Georgia and China's economic capabilities. The country's declared priorities toward European Union and NATO integration simultaneously oblige it to maintain political convergence with Western partners on strategic issues, including technological security and critical infrastructure protection. Deepening relations with China cannot become an alternative to these directions, as China does not represent a security strengthening instrument under Russia's aggressive policy conditions.

As a result, the work concludes that for Georgia's long-term stable development, a model is necessary that balances economic interests and security needs. Such a model requires a clear political framework, standard compliance, threat definition, and oversight of national interests. Georgia needs to form a policy capable of maintaining equilibrium between economic interests and security priorities. Precisely from this stems the need for

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recommendations that ensure responsible and risk-oriented management of strategic partnership.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Institutional Strengthening of Multi-Vector Foreign Policy

Cooperation with China should remain in economic and commercial format, clearly separated from the security sphere. Political leadership should define strategic "red lines" whose crossing is unacceptable, to avoid creating a perspective where economic cooperation transforms into a security or political influence channel.

### 2. Strengthening Institutional Transparency and Oversight

All infrastructure, transport, and investment projects related to Chinese companies should be subject to transparent tenders, state and public monitoring mechanisms, and clear accountability, to reduce the risk of using economic influence as political leverage.

### 3. Strengthening Technological Security Structures

Georgia's technology policy should be in full convergence with EU and US security standards, particularly in 5G infrastructure, data protection, and critical systems security spheres. This is necessary for the country to avoid strategic technological dependence that threatens its sovereignty.

### 4. Deepening Coordination with Western Partners

Georgia's security policy should be based on constant coordination with NATO, the European Union, and relevant US structures. This ensures that the country's foreign policy positioning does not move into a zone that may be perceived by Western partners as a strategic deviation.

It should also be noted that considering Georgia's geopolitical location and structural vulnerabilities, the hedging strategy represents an optimal model for the country, as it simultaneously ensures maintaining a course based on Western security architecture and diversifying economic cooperation without losing strategic autonomy. The hedging mechanism allows Georgia to use economic resources offered by various global actors while

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maintaining clear priorities in the security sphere and avoiding dependence that would reduce its foreign policy maneuvering space.

Ultimately, research has shown that Georgia-China strategic cooperation creates both significant economic growth opportunities and complex security challenges, particularly evident under conditions of global power competition and the country's geopolitical vulnerability. Involvement in Chinese economic and technological formats can be a source of benefit only if Georgia implements effective institutional control, strengthens democratic governance, and maintains a foreign policy line convergent with Western security architecture. Otherwise, cooperation may grow into strategic dependence, limiting the country's sovereign choice and foreign policy maneuvering space. Accordingly, Georgia's stability is based on pragmatic, multi-vector, and risk-oriented policy aimed at containing external asymmetric influences and protecting national interests under competitive international environment conditions.

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