

## **THE ECONOMIC TRIANGULATION BEIJING-YEREVAN-NEW DELHI: COOPERATION OR COMPETITION?\***

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### **Abstract**

Since it is no longer part of the Soviet Union, Armenia has found itself in the position of being able to choose its partners independently. This was largely determined by proximity relations, by historical ones with Russia, and by the places where the emigration of Armenia's own people took place. Beyond that, it is placed in conditions of choice between cooperation with some actors rather than others. In this sense, Armenia has started dialogue and trade relations with two Asian giants, China and India. The article proposes to recap the relations between these countries, paying attention to the factors that could allow a triangular cooperation rather than a competition.

**Keywords:** Beijing, New Delhi, Yerevan, India, China, Armenia, cooperation, competition, export, trade, political relations.

### **1. Armenia in the global sea: between diplomatic relations and business**

The Armenian Republic is relatively young. It was born as a Soviet federal republic within the USSR in 1936, although in the recent and contemporary history of the Armenian people there was another state formation, between 1918 and 1920. In any case, despite the formal autonomy, it was rather difficult to have an independent foreign policy and diplomacy within the Soviet Union. As Yuri Arutyunyan rightly points out, in fact, the political and identitarian “loyalty” of the Soviet Armenians was directed both to the capital Yerevan and thus their own national history, and to Moscow [1]. Yet, in the latter case, it was difficult to distinguish between Soviet politics in a political-idealistic sense and Russian national identity [4], two elements that often overlapped, even in involuntary psychological terms.

With the end of the Cold War and the implosion of the Soviet political entity, Armenia found itself overnight sailing in the sea of international relations and the global market. As in any similar case, this at the same time offers opportunities and creates dangers of an economic nature or safety-related ones. It became necessary, from one moment to the next, to establish one's role in the region, to discriminate between potential allies and competitors, to weave a web of relations between peoples and nations that led Armenia to have negotiations, right from the beginning of this process, also with the States United, with whom they established public relations in 1991.

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\* The article was submitted on October 11, 2022. The article was reviewed on October 22, 2022.

Obviously, no state in the world lives in conditions of absolute autonomy, since its decisions in political terms are determined by the reactions of the other actors and by the scenario in which it is inserted. In this sense, it is evident that Armenia could only maintain a certain type of relations with the former Russian motherland, as well as preserve certain political-diplomatic lines developed in the times of the Soviet Union [17: 1].

One of the most immediate effects of the collapse of the USSR and the opening of Armenia to the world was, among others, the reopening to Armenian emigration. This had already been advocated by the USSR, which saw socialist Armenia as the hub of Armenian identity in the world<sup>1</sup>. This phenomenon, however, assumed even greater significance with the conclusion of the bipolar conflict [17: 2].

Reunification with the world of emigration has been a key vehicle for Armenian diplomacy; it has built a channel of dialogue between communities around the world, the Motherland and Governments. One of the most excellent cases, apart from the Russian one highlighted by Arutyunyan [1], is undoubtedly that of the USA.

Despite this type of dialogue that has been formed on the cultural proximity engendered by mutual knowledge between peoples born of emigration and coexistence, there are many other reasons for the development of bilateral relations between Armenia and other countries, which do not necessarily include this element. Indeed, if on the one hand we have seen two elements that almost seem to “determine” Armenian foreign policy, namely international “friendships” and political relations established in Soviet times, and the necessary relationship with the host States of his emigration, there are also other elements of a perhaps more “volatile” nature (in the sense that they do not have a long ancestry in contemporary history) that characterize its choices and options.

The above-mentioned levels are undoubtedly that of security and economic relations, but in this paper, we would like to focus in particular on the second aspect. The economy of Armenia is the economy of a country, as we have anticipated, that is quite young. The Armenian economy has been undergoing constant modernization since the end of the Soviet era (during which, however, there was a

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<sup>1</sup> “After World War II Soviet authorities tried to consolidate Soviet Armenia as the homeland for all Armenians in the world. Hence, the Soviet government started a campaign to facilitate the repatriation of people of Armenian origin - dispersed around the world due to the 1915 genocide and the collapse of the Russian Empire. To foster the process, Soviet authorities issued a decree which allowed repatriated Armenians to build private housing in the territory of Soviet Armenia - with 50 per cent of the cost being paid by Soviet authorities. By the 1946 decree, persons of Armenian nationality that returned from abroad into Soviet Armenia were declared Soviet citizens as soon as they had arrived in the Soviet Union. Turkey forbade the repatriation of 30,000 Armenians from Turkey. Nevertheless, during 1946-1947 around 60,000-80,000 Armenians were able to repatriate into Soviet Armenia from Lebanon, Syria, Greece, Egypt, France, Bulgaria, Romania and Iran. Another wave of returns occurred in the mid 1960s.” See [17:4].

rapid industrialization of the territory). According to the World Bank, it is important for Armenia to prevent any kind of political uncertainty and geopolitical risk in order to continue developing its economy and the entire country [28]. To this end as well, Armenia is building its network of international relations.

In this sense, Armenia has begun to navigate in the sea of international relations and the global economy, in an increasingly interconnected world in which the factor of geographical proximity has become less incumbent [11] (but not non-existent, considering the factor of the geopolitical risks as referred to by the World Bank [28]).

This type of position, a very specific one, has made it develop relations with two countries, entailing commercial exchanges. These two countries are both Asian demographic giants, with particular economic competitiveness - China and India. What unites them is also belonging to the BRICS (which, according to the acronym, also includes Brazil, Russia and South Africa), a club of countries with rampant economies and with common international projects.

## **2. Armenia and India**

As for relations between Armenia and India, we should reiterate that there has been no large Armenian immigration in India. Relationships have developed over time, but they come from very far away, and have roots in the common elements of the history of the two peoples [13]. It seems that Armenia and India have had a history of relations favored by the existence of the Macedonian Empire, which, having collapsed, also split the two peoples; however, it should be remembered that some Armenian communities went to live in Indian territory as early as the Middle Ages, but at the end of the British rule over the country, many members of these groups preferred to move to Australia [5: 2].

Even in the Armenian territories, in ancient times there were Hindu villages, a fact proven by both the chronicles and the ethnographic findings. Conversely, the ancient presence of Armenians is also attested in the Indian subcontinent [19: 64-87]. Already at the time the relations between the two peoples assumed decisive nuances of an economic nature.

It therefore appears also that economic relations between the Indian and Armenian people have existed for a very long time. According to Mkrtchyan, the first Armenians who went to live in India already enjoyed an excellent reputation with the political and social institutions of that country. This would be due, again according to Mkrtchyan, to the connection these peoples had had for commercial and mercantile reasons determined by the very particular geographical position of Armenia as a gateway and connection between the western and eastern world of the Eurasian continent. Mkrtchyan notes that already in Armenian historian Agathangelos's work, *History of Armenia*, it is written that the kings of Armenia adorned their crowns with precious stones of Indian origin, and that they had Indian styles of decoration used for their royal palaces. Mkrtchyan equally points out that fourth-

century historian Pavstos Buzand and sixth-century historian Movses Kaghan-katvatsi also spoke of these relationships in their works [19: 64,71].

As in the case of the United States, relations between India and the Armenian state began with the end of the Cold War and the opening of Armenian foreign policy. As noted, “a new quality of cooperation between [Indian and Armenian people emerged] in the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of the establishment of official ties between the newly independent Republic of Armenia and India on August 31, 1992”.

These relations, which were clearly expressed on the cultural level as well as on the diplomatic level, however, have had important developments in the economic field [5: 2]. According to data from the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, trade between the two countries increased after the Soviet Union fell, and this can be seen in figures from \$ 16.5 million in 2005 to \$ 71.72 million in 2011 [9; 5: 2]. Again, according to the same Ministry, India's exports to Armenia were quantifiable, at 19.1 million dollars in 2016, while imports were 1.8 million [10].

And in the period which followed immediately this was the picture:

“India’s exports to Armenia were USD 19.8 million in 2017 and imports in the same period were USD 2.8 million. Indian exports to Armenia consist of bovine meat, agricultural products, electrical equipment, cut and polished diamonds, optical equipment, plastics, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, garments, chemical goods and cars, while Armenia's exports include nonferrous metals and raw-rubber. Indian Group “Kalpataru Power Transmission Limited,” Gandhinagar (Gujarat) won a World Bank financed contract (approximately US\$ 22 million) in November 2012 for designing, supplying and installation of high voltage transmission towers in Armenia. The project has since been completed [2: 3-4].”

The Indian and Armenian populations often travel from one country to the other to invest, as documented. Small-scale migrant/ investor cooperation indicated that bigger non-topological Trans-Asian cooperation might be established. Overcoming the element of geographical proximity in economic relations is a factor which, as we have already noted, assumes great importance today and will probably increase again in the future, especially due to the intensification of technological development in the area of communications and travel. This factor, of course, not only affects economic relations with India, but could greatly increase a trade that already exists, and one which some define below as its real potential [3].

The two countries are therefore taking steps forward in the intensification of exchanges [18], as for example a series of agreements that have been signed for economic and technological cooperation, especially in the agricultural field as well as in the pharmaceutical one. The two countries have also promoted the opening of a special air corridor for commercial purposes [3]. In addition to this, together with the Russian Federation and Iran India has launched an infrastructural and commer-

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<sup>2</sup> Armen Martirosyan, Foreword, in [15].

cial project called “North-South Corridor”, and among the observers of which are Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Syria, Ukraine, Belarus, Turkey, Kyrgyzstan, Oman, Bulgaria, as well as Armenia [27]. This project which includes ports, roads and maritime and land corridors is reminiscent in many ways of the Chinese one of the “Belt and Road” which also touches upon Armenia and which we will discuss later.

Due to the complex geopolitical situation in which Armenia is immersed, India has signed an agreement with Armenia for the sale of different types of armaments, given the direction that the Indian economy is taking on the export of defense systems [24].

### **3. Armenia and China**

On the other hand, there is a slightly more intense recent history between China and Armenia as regards the reception of the immigration flow. In fact, many of Armenians moved to China, also with the intention to migrate from there to Australia [21], as in the case of the communities in India [5: 2].

In this case as well cultural relations between the two peoples have existed for a long time. As put by an Armenian government source,

“Armenians were first mentioned in China during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century as merchants exporting silk and other goods. Small Armenian communities were established after the first Mongol invasion (at the beginning of the 13th century) when a part of the thousands of captive Armenians was settled in the northern regions of China. Later they settled in coastal cities, especially in Canton (present-day Guangzhou), where they built a church in 1307.

The first Armenian communities were formed over time. There were 30 families living in Canton in the middle of the 17th century [21].”

It must be said that the volume of business between China and Armenia is much more impressive than that with India. The importance of the Chinese economic presence in Armenia is such that it has made the Far Eastern country the country’s second economic partner, after Russia:

“According to the Armenian statistical service, the trade turnover between Armenia and the PRC in 2018 amounted to \$771.1 million with an annual growth of 29.3%, of which 107.2 million fell to Armenia’s exports with an annual decline of 9.5% import share of 663.9 million with an annual growth of 39%. Moreover, according to the data of the same statistical service, in 2018, China’s share in the total volume of Armenia’s foreign trade was 8.9%. Now, China is the second trade and economic partner of Armenia after Russia [8].”

And then:

“Statistics provided by China’s General Administration of Customs shows that the volume of trade between the two economies totaled US \$994 million in 2020, of which US \$222 million was Armenia’s export to China and US \$772 was its import from that country [26].”

This type of trade is of vital importance to the Armenian economy and is increasing in intensity, proceeding according to the Chinese investment philosophy and the good bilateral relations between the two national entities<sup>3</sup>.

Here, too, we have the example of a country that began direct diplomatic relations with the ex-Soviet country as early as in 1992, and that has since signed several bilateral agreements with it in the commercial field [8]. Finally, Armenia and China also move jointly in the domain of security, but this is happening on a very different level from the simple arms trade that has been taking place this year with India.

This type of relationship can be explained more easily with the visit of the Armenian Defense Minister Sargsyan to China, where he met the Chinese Defense Minister Chang Wanquan, agreeing on an estimated \$ 1.5 million military assistance from the Far Eastern country to Armenia. In this diplomatic visit, the Armenian Defense Minister also met the leadership of one of the most important corporations of the Chinese military industry, the Poly Group, and in that juncture the parties expressed their willingness to cooperate and have a dialogue in the near future [8].

In addition to this, however, there remains another point to discuss, which is of capital importance when it comes to economic relations between the two countries, namely the Chinese project of the Belt and Road Initiative [25] with which China proposes the construction of a commercial and (above all) infrastructural network that extends especially over the Eurasian continental mass. Within this project, of course, Armenia is also included, which among other phenomena assumes the role of guaranteeing alternative routes to the project [8]; the latter depends on the will of many different countries. As Mher Sahakyan rightly writes, the Belt and Road would first of all lead to the growth of the Armenian economy, as an effect of economic traffic and the opening of connections for primarily commercial purposes, but also and above all the establishment requires good neighborly relations with Iran, Turkey and Azerbaijan [26]. In addition, the implementation of the Belt and Road itself should create the necessary conditions for implementing regional security in the best possible way [29].

Although already very advantageous, economic exchanges between Armenia and China can only increase in a context of renewed regional security and trust among the actors cooperating in the great Belt and Road project.

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<sup>3</sup> “Russian and EU markets are saturated, and Armenia needs to explore new markets for exporting its products. In this context, fostering economic relations with China may play a crucial role in boosting the Armenian economy. The development of Armenia-China economic relations is entirely in line with the win-win international cooperation philosophy, put forward by the Chinese President and General - Secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee Xi Jinping. As an ancient Chinese saying goes, “Those who only seek comfort for themselves will ultimately be rejected, and those who sacrifice their own interests for the success of others will be supported”. It is also in line with China's "dual circulation" strategy elaborated in 2020 and the new 14th Five - Year Plan for 2021 - 2025.” in [23].

#### 4. China and India in Yerevan: Conclusions

To understand, therefore, how Armenia, once again charged with the responsibility of an autonomous foreign policy, can find itself “trapped” between various choices having to make the most convenient ones in a world where the boundaries of alliances and partnerships are mobile and mutually influential, we should think about the relations - also and above all economic - that it seeks to develop with India and China.

India and China are notoriously considered competitors from different points of view, not least the economic one. Being certainly particular competitors, given that they cooperate within the BRICS club we have already written about, even in the last period, they have experienced diplomatic ups and downs. Often this type of competition is promoted by an interested third party, as in the case of the United States which, at this historical moment, would prefer Indian economic growth to the detriment of the People's Republic of China<sup>4</sup>.

In this regard, therefore, it should first be understood whether these two economic realities, China and India, could compete in Armenia, and, if so, to what extent. One of the problems that could arise, should these projects be carried out quickly, is that of the North-South Corridor “against” the Belt and Road.

“Geopolitically and geo-economically, the INSTC [i.e. the International North-South Transport Corridor] is also being seen as New Delhi’s counterweight strategy to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China is India’s competitor in the region. The corridor is going to leave a deep impact on India’s engagement with Eurasia, as India-the fifth-largest economy in the world-looks forward to fostering deeper and stronger ties in the region. INSTC also serves another one of India’s geopolitical interests as it bypasses archrival Pakistan and strengthens its cooperation with Russia and other members of the project.

Iran plays an important role as a transit hub in this project. To connect Eurasia to the Indian Ocean, India agreed to invest up to \$635 million to develop the Iranian deep-sea port of Chabahar on the Gulf of Oman which is only 300 kilometers from Gwadar, the major Pakistani trade hub port heavily invested in by China [27].”

Nonetheless, the international scenario is in motion, and despite some apparent constants in contemporary history, there are significant changes at the level of diplomacy. Despite the economic competition, the two countries are increasingly beginning to be conceived as true symbionts, even at the level of the large corporate apparatuses; the specializations of the two countries are done respectively [12]. Beyond that, the business between the two countries (which hit \$ 125 billion in 2021 [14]) is of considerable magnitude. This depends on their worldview and how these two countries see the future of international relations and the global distribution of power [16: 154]. The international crises of the last period have seen,

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<sup>4</sup> A summary of this thought is in [20]. “The US views India as a natural competitor of China which is not interested in growing Chinese influence in the region” [22].

in 2022, a political rapprochement between the two Asian countries [14; 7]. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Indian Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar met in Indonesia on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2022, reiterating the importance of rapprochement in the face of the current political scenario and common interests in terms of international politics, based on multilateralism and democratic participation in common development [14].

Furthermore, economic cooperation would appear to be in the interests of both actors. One of the predictions made by an analyst regarding the possible medium-term cooperation between China and India is as follows: “the many business synergies between these two neighboring nations come to the fore. The combination of China’s manufacturing might and India’s software and service prowess provides across-the-board value-chain capabilities. The United States remains heavily reliant on both nations, whose market sizes dwarf that of America, giving Chinese and Indian companies colossal economies of scale and leading to large bilateral trade deficits for the United States with both nations. These dynamics ultimately result in world-leading Chinese and Indian universities, companies, and research institutes [20]”.

The future of the Armenian country fits into this scenario, given its position within the economic projects of these two giants. It is important to understand how projects such as the North-South Corridor and the Belt and Road Initiative will interact in the next period, bearing in mind that this will greatly depend on the international scenario that will be formed, as well as on the subsequent relations between China and India. The Armenian variable will then be of a political-decisional nature, as well as entrepreneurial, and this is seen in relation to its choices to confirm the adherence to the great Asian integration projects, or to prefer one over the other. However - and we reiterate this - it will strongly depend on the capacity for dialogue and cooperation that the countries in question will be able to put in place.

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ՀԱՄԱԳՈՐԾԱԿՑՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ ԹԵ՝ ՄՐՑԱԿՑՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ**

*Օրացիո Մարիա Գնեռե*

**Բանալի բառեր՝** Պեկին, Նյու Դելի, Երևան, Հնդկաստան, Չինաստան, Հայաստան, համագործակցություն, մրցակցություն, արտահանում, առևտուր, քաղաքական հարաբերություններ:

1991 թ.-ից հետո Հայաստանի Հանրապետությունը սկսեց ինքնուրույն վարել իր արտաքին քաղաքականությունը և ընտրել իր արտաքին գործընկերներին: Արտաքին քաղաքականության մեջ Հայաստանի Հանրապետությունը ի սկզբանե ուշադրությունը սևեռեց Ռուսաստանի Դաշնության և այն երկրների վրա, որտեղ գոյություն ունեին հայկական համայնքներ: Բացի այդ, Հայաստանի համար առաջնահերթություններից մեկն էր համագործակցել Ասիայի երկու տերությունների՝ Չինաստանի և Հնդկաստանի հետ: Արտաքին քաղաքականության ձևավորման հարցում էական նշանակություն ունի նաև Չինաստանի և Հնդկաստանի կողմից առաջ մղվող տնտեսական ծրագրերում Հայաստանի ընդգրկման հարցը: Հոդվածում ուսումնասիրության առարկա է դարձել Հայաստանի հարաբերությունները այդ երկրների հետ՝ հաշվի առնելով նաև այն հակասությունները, որ առկա են Չինաստանի և Հնդկաստանի միջև: Հոդվածում փորձ է արվում վերլուծել տնտեսական, քաղաքական փոխառնչությունների հիմնահարցերը, որոնք ունեն նաև տարածաշրջամային նշանակություն: