

WORKING PAPER 36 – **India-Armenia relationship: from cultural ties to strategic partnership**

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Abstract: This text analyses the India-Armenia relationship, namely its evolution from cultural ties to a potential strategic collaboration. Recent diplomatic dialogues and defence deals highlight a deepening convergence, yet questions arise about implications in a complex geopolitical landscape. Cultural exchanges dating back to the 16th century are explored, revealing intricate impacts. The narrative then evaluates India's response during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, emphasizing the necessity for a nuanced approach to post-war reconstruction support. We contend that the India-Armenia relationship requires pragmatic scrutiny amid geopolitical intricacies and regional dynamics. The conclusive ten-point roadmap acts as a critical guide, urging stakeholders to discern nuances and potential challenges in fostering a lasting strategic partnership.

Keywords: IndiaArmeniafriendship, Armenia, Caucasus, South Caucasus, NagornoKarabakh, Goeconomics, INSTC

List of Abbreviations:

1. AI : Artificial Intelligence
2. BSEC : Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization
3. DGFT : Directorate General of Foreign Trade
4. DRDO : Defense Research and Development Organization
5. EEZ : Exclusive Economic Zone
6. EU : European Union

7. FAL : UNECE Agreement on Facilitation of International Trade Procedures
8. ICCC : Indian Council for Cultural Relations
9. ICJ : International Court of Justice
10. INSTC : International North-South Transport Corridor
11. IoT : Internet of Things
12. IIT : Indian Institutes of Technology
13. IIM : Indian Institutes of Management
14. ISRO : Indian Space Research Organisation
15. IT : Information Technology
16. MoFA : Ministry of Foreign Affairs
17. MEDT : Ministry of Economic Development and Trade
18. NGO : Non-Governmental Organization
19. NITI Aayog: National Institution for Transforming India Aayog
20. PTI : Press Trust of India
21. SAARC : South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
22. UNDP : United Nations Development Programme
23. USD : United States Dollar
24. Govt : Government
25. WTO : World Trade Organization

Recent Momentum in Bilateral Relations

At the “Raisina Dialogue” conference in September, Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan and Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar engaged in multifaceted discussions (Armenia MoFA, 2023). They explored avenues for reinforcing bilateral political dialogue, amplifying the reciprocal flow of trade, nurturing business partnerships, elevating educational and technological exchanges, and fostering deeper connections through cultural interactions and parliamentary cooperation. The leaders also delved into regional security concerns and the humanitarian crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh, specifically addressing the Lachin corridor blockade imposed by Azerbaijan (Ochab, E.U., 2023). Emphasizing the imperative of adhering to the International Court of Justice’s decision on provisional measures (ICJ, 2023), they underscored the critical role of Azerbaijan’s compliance in effectively addressing and resolving the crisis.

Following this conference, a trilateral consultation involving India, Armenia, and Iran took place in Yerevan on April 20, 2023. Led by their respective Foreign Ministry representatives, the discussions focused on the long-pending International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). The multi-modal corridor project, aiming to improve freight transportation between India, Iran, and Russia, is nearing completion. However, it is currently hindered from becoming fully functional by the Western sanctions imposed on Iran and, more recently, on Russia as well (U.S. Department of State, 2023; Psaledakis & Baczynska, 2023; European Parliament, 2023). This corridor was reportedly utilized by India and Armenia for transporting military weapons, as revealed by Caliber.az, a Baku-based media outlet. This sparked significant media uproar (Sharma, 2023).

Last year, during the ‘8th India-Armenia IGC Conference’ a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the two nations. It focuses on High Impact Community Development Projects in Armenia; India commits generous financial and advanced technological support (Embassy of India, Yerevan, 2022).

These high-level meetings not only underscore the growing friendship between India and Armenia but also highlight the mutual commitment by the two countries

to enhance their bilateral relations through sustained and impactful initiatives. However, there also looms certain uncertainties, both external and internal, which could derail these friendly commitments and pursuits. The article critically assesses India-Armenia ties, noting advancements in politics, the economy, and culture amidst regional hurdles. It further explores the potential for the realization and sustenance of a strategic partnership, emphasizing the importance of sustained political alignment and enhanced economic cooperation.

Defense Diplomacy

The USD 250 million Pinaka deal with Armenia has generated significant interest within India's military and diplomatic communities (Krishnasai, 2022). Apart from the substantial financial aspect of the agreement, the focus is squarely on the Pinaka rocket launcher system, which showcases India's technological expertise. Developed entirely by the Defense Research and Development Organization (DRDO) under the purview of the Indian Ministry of Defence, this domestically engineered weaponry highlights India's autonomy in defense capabilities.

The specific pinaka version in consideration for this deal is capable of launching a salvo of 12 rockets in 44 seconds; it represents only a fraction of India's advanced missile arsenal. Notably, there are other homegrown, sophisticated missile systems, such as the upgraded Pinaka variant able to unleash 72 rockets in the same time frame, which present intriguing possibilities for future arms agreements with Armenia. This potential expansion seamlessly aligns with recent arms deals, exemplified by the USD 40 million accord inked in February 2020 for the delivery of four Swathi weapon-locating radars to Armenia, all of which were successfully delivered (Kumar, 2022).

These successive arms deals point to a deepening convergence in the strategic positions of both nations, responding to shared concerns on the unfolding geopolitical landscape. This alignment extends beyond their individual national territories to encompass regional and global arenas. India's heightened commitment to supporting Armenia gains added significance in the context of Pakistan's burgeoning political and military affiliations with Azerbaijan, a neighboring country staunchly positioned against Armenia (Uri, 2023; Latif, 2023).

In addition to arms deals, India and Armenia have strengthened their defense collaboration through military training, intelligence sharing and reconnaissance activities (Landgraf, W. & Seferian N. 2023; NewsBharati, 2023), thus fostering a robust partnership aimed at enhancing combined strategic capabilities and addressing shared security concerns in the region. This increased cooperation signifies a mutual commitment to fortify defense mechanisms and foster a deeper understanding of each other's military strategies and capabilities.

Continuing Cultural Exchange

There has been a robust connection between India and Armenia on the cultural front. Armenia became independent on 26 December 1991, and India established diplomatic ties on 31 August 1992. The centuries-old connection between India and Armenia on trade and cultural fronts is most significant. Armenians have been involved in maritime commerce with India since the early 16th century (Baibourtian, 2004). Armenian traders established their own settlements in a few Indian cities, such as Calcutta and Madras (now Chennai), where they constructed churches, created newspapers, and engaged in prominent businesses (Indian MoEA, 2013), thus becoming part of Indian society. Even during the Soviet era, Indian President Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi visited Soviet Armenia in 1964 and 1976 respectively (Tashjian, 2020), thereby reaffirming India's continuing affinity with Armenia.

In 2010, a milestone was reached as India and Armenia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) aimed at enhancing collaboration in the fields of culture, education, and science (Gupta, 2023). The cultural landscape of Armenia was influenced by the rich tapestry of Indian culture, and reciprocally, Indian culture also felt the impact of Armenian influences (Canepa, 2010).

Both nations actively promoted exchanges and interactions of a cultural nature. In 2018, Armenia played host to an elaborate, week-long festival celebrating Indian culture, encompassing vibrant displays of Indian music, dance performances, and a delectable array of Indian cuisine (Indian MoEA, 2018). The Indo-Armenian Friendship NGO, a non-profit organization registered in Armenia comprising

volunteer members from both countries, took active lead in organizing this event in three different cities in the country (Indo-Armenian Friendship, 2015). Similarly, India has seen the staging of Armenian cultural occasions at different venues (Embassy of Armenia in India, 2015), strategically designed to spotlight the charm of Armenian music, dance forms, and artistic expressions. All of this contributed to deepen cultural exchange between the two nations.

The classical Indian dance style Bharatanatyam has witnessed a surge of popularity in Armenia in recent times. In 2017, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) sent a group of accomplished Bharatanatyam dancers to Armenia to partake in the Yerevan International Dance Festival (India MoEA, 2017). The event underscored the resonance of Bharatanatyam and exemplified the commitment to cultural exchanges by the two countries. The realm of Indian cinema has also contributed to strengthening mutual cultural knowledge and understanding. Indian cinematic productions have garnered noteworthy traction among Armenian audiences (PTI, 2017, Lalwani, 2021), paralleled by the Armenian film industry which carved a distinct niche in how Indians appreciate foreign movies (Malik, 2009; Armenian Orthodox Church in Georgia, n.d.).

India's Nagorno-Karabakh (Post)-War Challenges

The India-Armenia relationship hit a considerable low during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, which concluded with a Russian-brokered ceasefire, resulting in Armenia ceding territory both within and around Nagorno-Karabakh (Al Jazeera and News Agencies, 2021). While this is not widely known among Indian experts and policy circles, Armenians felt betrayed and deeply saddened by India's reluctance to politically lend support or come in with defense/ strategic help at the war front.

Given India's historical non-alignment policy, there was no expectation for India to side with Armenia against Azerbaijan, with whom India maintains an equally strong bilateral relationship (Indian MoEA, 2021; Chhibber, 2022; Chakrabarty, 2022). However, in the aftermath of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which recently resulted in the dissolution of Nagorno-Karabakh, geopolitical complexities emerged – with implications for India-Armenia relations. Armenia's accusations of

“ethnic cleansing” by Azerbaijan in the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh (Quell, 2023), as well as India’s continuing silence, pose challenges for India-Armenia relations that could further strain bilateral ties. The Armenian government will keep tabs on whether India vouches its support (and in what ways) to hold Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev accountable for keeping his promises of “peaceful reintegration” – and transforming the region of Nagorno Karabakh into a “paradise” (News Watch Artsakh, 2023; Vincent, 2023).

Lately, global powers such as the US and France have been increasingly attentive to the emerging post-war dynamics in Nagorno-Karabakh, while closely monitoring Azerbaijan’s actions in the region (Agence France-Presse, 2023). France has underscored its support for the International Court of Justice’s binding order on Nagorno-Karabakh, urging Azerbaijan to enable safe returns for those (citizens residing in the region) who left post-September 19, 2023, and to prevent the use of force or intimidation in the region (Ghazanchyan, 2023). Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev, in retaliation, has accused France of fomenting conditions for a new regional conflict by arming Armenia, asserting that France’s support for separatist tendencies in the South Caucasus destabilizes the region (Arab News, 2023). In essence, external risks, both direct and indirect, are significantly influencing regional dynamics, adding complexity to the situation both in Nagorno-Karabakh and in the broader South Caucasus.

In such circumstances, India’s choices regarding active engagement or neutrality in the Nagorno-Karabakh post-war reconstruction, as well as the continuing military excesses by either or both belligerent parties, will greatly influence Indian ties with both Armenia and Azerbaijan – and the overall dynamics in the South Caucasus. This is particularly significant in the aftermath of the dissolution of Nagorno-Karabakh’s breakaway government, backed by Armenia and mandated by Azerbaijan through a signed decree, which will lead to the unrecognized republic’s cessation by 2024 (Sauer, 2023). However, it might take up arms again in the near future if Azerbaijani military excesses grow – and if it is able to get the support of a larger state power. India must navigate the intricacies of this evolving geopolitical landscape, maintaining a delicate balance between historical connections, strategic concerns, and the principles of non-alignment.

Armenia's Role in Fostering Connectivity

Armenia's strategic positioning at a crossroads between Europe and Asia has established its pivotal role in both regional and inter-regional connectivity initiatives. The country has been actively involved in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a comprehensive multimodal project aiming to link India, Iran, and Russia, in terms of both policy coordination and on-the-ground construction. Furthermore, it is developing transportation connections with its neighboring nations, including Georgia and Azerbaijan (Gawliczek & Iskandarov 2023; ARKA, 2021).

Beyond its transportation contributions, Armenia serves as a crucial hub for energy and communication infrastructure (Harutyunyan (ed.), 2019; Gawliczek & Iskandarov, 2023; News.Am, 2023). The country hosts several hydroelectric power plants and serves as a transit point for natural gas pipelines such as the Iran–Armenia gas pipeline (Hergnyan, 2023). Armenia is also a member of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSEC), which is dedicated to fostering regional cooperation in trade, transport, and energy sectors.

Armenia's dedication to enhancing regional connectivity is prominently demonstrated through its involvement in international initiatives. The nation endorsed the UNECE Agreement on Facilitation of International Trade Procedures (FAL) and is actively working on its implementation. Armenia also became a member of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2003 and has since complied with the regulations and standards set forth by the organisation.

These endeavours aimed at bolstering regional connectivity have brought significant economic benefits to Armenia. The INSTC, in particular, is anticipated to yield substantial economic advantages, running into billions of dollars, not only for Armenia but also for its neighbouring countries and India. However, according to EBD estimates, the corridor project will require a further investment of over \$26 billion for completion, and presently the member parties have not committed to raising/ investing that amount. In the case of Armenia, it is interesting to note that the infrastructure investment in INSTC, involving the construction of the Express

Motorway and totalling USD 1.85 billion, is entirely funded by non-governmental sources — which is not the case for other member countries (Vinokurov et al., 2022). Additionally, Armenia’s improved transportation infrastructure has steadfastly attracted foreign investments, and is likely to stimulate increased trade activities in the near future (Gavin, 2023; ICC, 2023).

Beyond their existing trade framework, the two countries must explore new sectors to drive future growth. Such collaboration can bolster bilateral ties and elevate both nations’ global influence. Together, the two ‘civilization-states’ can reshape both regional and international dynamics, marking a significant milestone in their shared journey toward progress and prosperity. However, there is a chance that this evolving strategic relationship may falter, primarily due to India’s reluctance to take a strong position on global/regional security issues and unconditionally support its political allies such as Armenia.

At this point, countries such as the US and the UK, as well as the EU, which are friends with both India and Armenia, need to engage with both in constructive ways. This multi-stakeholder diplomatic collaboration can contribute to fostering deeper understanding, meaningful dialogue, and mutually beneficial initiatives for regional stability and global cooperation – perhaps most especially as Armenia is attempting to exit Russia’s orbit of influence.

Prevailing Reality:

The contemporary situation of Indo-Armenian relations reveals an economic imbalance, with a need for more diversified trade interactions. India’s Trade Portal figures reveals that India’s economic ties with Armenia are concentrated in a few key sectors in both trade and imports. Precious stones and metals dominate India’s imports from Armenia, while pharmaceuticals form the bulk of India’s exports. This reliance on Armenia for precious resources presents a potential risk in the event of supply disruptions. However, there are opportunities for diversification.

India’s competitive edge in pharmaceuticals, machinery, and vehicles provides avenues for further export growth. To mitigate risks and broaden trade relationships, India can try scaling up trade in critical yet relatively less explored

sectors such as organic chemicals, electrical machinery, rubber and plastic products, iron and steel, textiles, and gems and jewelry (Indian DoC, 2023).

Armenia can strategically benefit by focusing on sectors where India holds significant import shares, such as precious stones and metals, machinery, pharmaceuticals, and mineral products, to diversify its export base and enhance economic competitiveness. Strengthening economic ties calls for strategic promotion and collaboration between Indian and Armenian companies in these sectors.

Table 1: Distribution of India's share in Armenia's exports and imports across various commodities and sectoral trade balances.

Factor	India's Share in Armenia's Exports	India's Share in Armenia's Imports
Precious stones and metals	-	3%
Machinery	-	8%
Electrical equipment	-	13%
Optical, photographic, cinematographic goods	-	6%
Mineral products	40%	5%
Vehicles	-	7%
Organic chemicals	-	2%
Rubber and plastic products	-	2%
Gems and jewellery	10%	-
Animals, vegetable fats and oils	4%	-
Pharmaceuticals	2%	3%
Textiles and clothing	-	4%
Iron and steel	-	7%
Food and agricultural products	-	6%

Note: Data compiled by the author from Directorate General of Foreign Trade

(DGFT), Department of Commerce, Govt. of India, “Top 25 Commodities Imported by Armenia”. (2023).

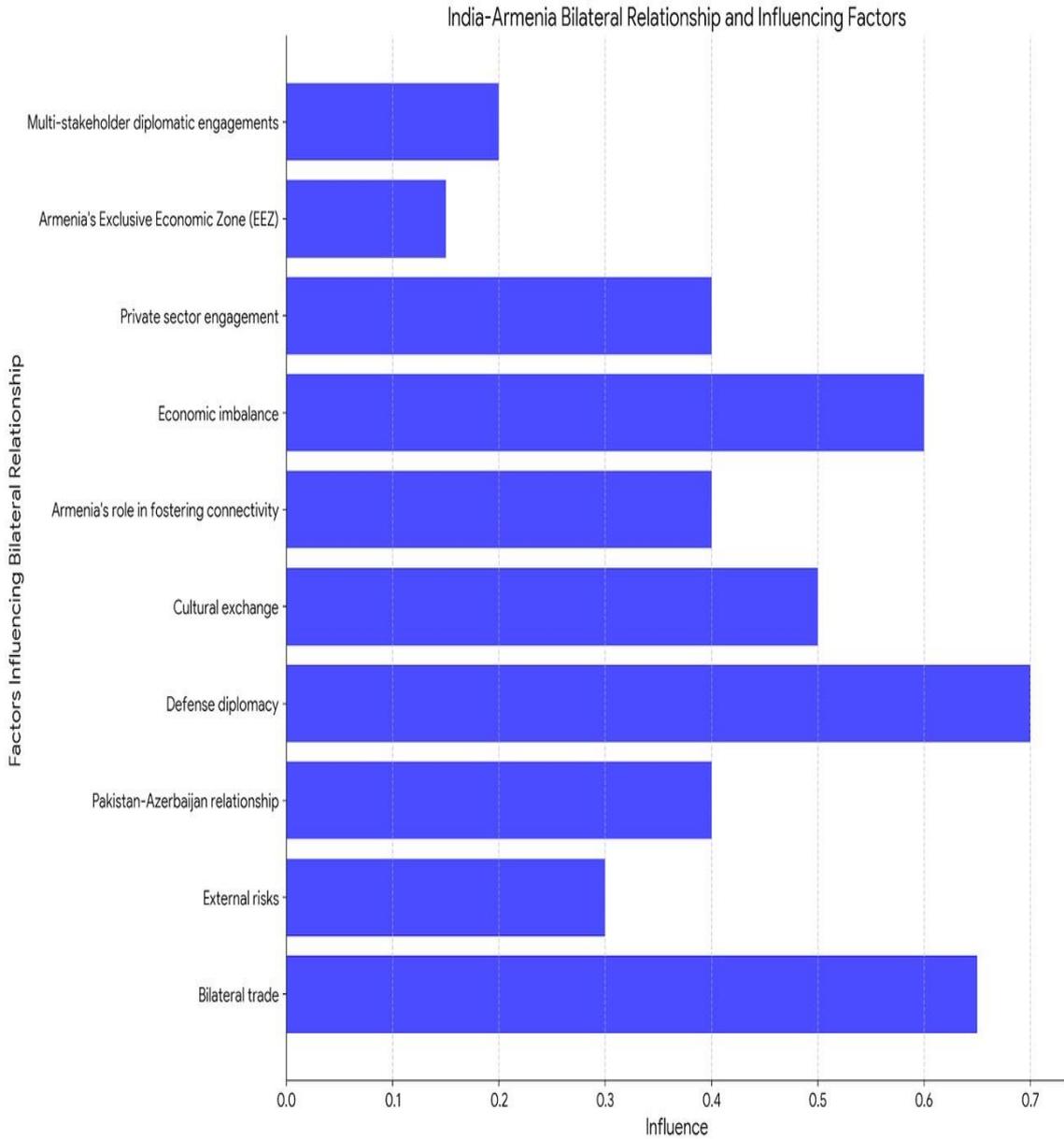
<https://www.indiantradeportal.in/vs.jsp?lang=0&id=0,25,45,916,26638,27168>

As of 2022, India exported goods and services worth US\$50.91 million to Armenia, while its imports were valued at US\$98.99 million (Trade Economics, 2023). This demonstrates a nearly 2:1 ratio favouring Armenian exports to India. It’s important to note that these figures do not account for military trade, such as the notable USD 250 million Pinaka deal (Krishnasai, 2022). If we were to account for such strategic defence agreements, India’s exports would vastly outweigh Armenia’s. However, the consideration of trade only in war machinery might raise ethical and dependency issues in the long-term economic interactions between the two countries.

At this moment, financial investments lack substantial commitment from major businesses in both countries. According to Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MoEA, 2023), there are currently no significant Indian corporations operating in Armenia, and vice versa. While political alignment is a catalyst to encourage business interactions (Devirupa Mitra, 2022), the lack of private sector engagement impedes more robust and sustainable bilateral relationship. Despite the existence of a bilateral double taxation avoidance agreement (Indian Ministry of Finance, 2004), the majority of private companies willing to engage in bilateral business have yet to meet the stipulated criteria for qualified status.

As a matter of fact, Indian companies can strategically leverage both the double taxation avoidance agreement and Armenia’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), mainly “Alliance” in Yerevan, and “Meridian” in Yerevan, for streamlined trade expansion, enabling a strategic entry into the EU market through Armenia (Armenian Ministry of Economy, 2013; Repat Armenia, 20). Armenia’s EEZ, with potential trade agreements and advantageous regulations, serves as a pivotal gateway for Indian businesses, providing proximity to EU markets and established trade relations.

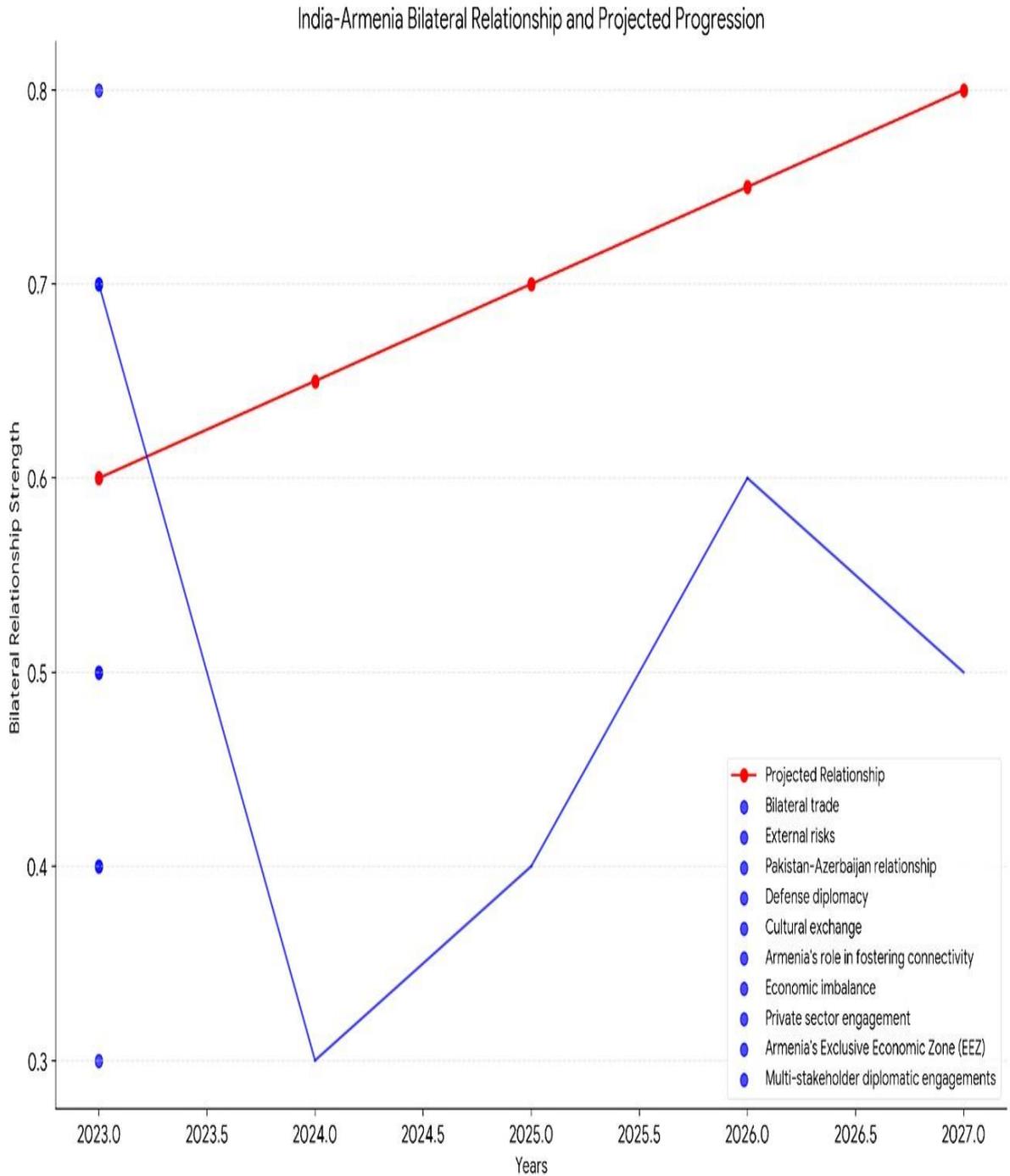
Image 1: The present state of India-Armenian bilateral ties



Note 1: The graph was generated through predictive modelling techniques employed by AI tools: Bard, Google AI. (2023, December 07) India-Armenia Bilateral Relationship and Influencing Factors. <https://bard.google.com/chat>

Note 2: The graph describes the factors that have influenced and pushed the India-Armenia bilateral relationship to evolve as it stands at present.

Image 2: The following graph presents a comparison between the present state of the bilateral relationship and the desired trajectory.



Note 1: The graph was created using predictive modelling techniques by AI tools: Bard, Google AI. (2023, December 07) India-Armenia Bilateral Relationship and Influencing Factors. <https://bard.google.com/chat>

Note 2: illustrates the current trajectory of progression of events in the India-

Armenia relationship in comparison to the expected ideal course of the bilateral relationship (Bard, 2023).

The Way Forward:

Moving beyond the prevailing reality viz. the skewed economic ties and risks associated with sectoral concentration, the way forward lies in transforming the India-Armenia association into a lasting strategic partnership. In order to accomplish this, the countries need to reinforce their political alignment and move towards a more balanced and interdependent economic cooperation.

Ongoing initiatives like the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) project play a pivotal role (ARKA News Agency, 2022). However, to spur substantial economic growth, both nations need to explore private sector collaboration and create business opportunities in emerging sectors, such as fintech, advanced technology, digital payments and renewable energy. These sectors are burgeoning areas of interest in both countries, with quite significant investment values (NITI Aayog, 2023; PwC India, 2023; Invest India 2023; UNDP, 2021; PwC Armenia, 2020), hence convergence of partnerships from both sides will yield great mutual benefits.

In this evolving global landscape, both countries must also consider initiating multidisciplinary exchanges and collaborations in education, research, and cultural exchange (Gupta, 2023). These initiatives can help promote a greater understanding between the two nations and could spearhead joint ventures in science and technology and even in the space sector (ISRO, 2023).

Moreover, there's an imperative for countries like the US, the UK and the EU, who are friends with both, to facilitate greater cooperation between India and Armenia (Cherian, 2023). Their multi-stakeholder diplomatic collaborations can help stabilize the situation in the South Caucasus region, especially as Armenia is attempting to diversify its alliances (Jain, 2023; BBC, 2023).

Through unwavering political alignment, balanced economic cooperation, and multi-stakeholder engagement, India and Armenia have all the elements to transform their relationship into a lasting strategic partnership, bringing prosperity

to both nations.

Ten Point Roadmap for Building Bilateral Lasting Strategic Partnership

1. **Promote Dialogue at All Levels:** Encourage regular interactions and consultations across academic institutions, startups, think tanks, and developmental agencies. Examples include partnership efforts between the Enterprise Incubator Foundation (Armenia) and Startup India, along with influential think tanks like the Economic Development and Research Center in Armenia and the NITI Aayog in India.
2. **Diversify Trade Ties:** Expand bilateral trade beyond the current sectors, tapping into potentials like organic chemicals, machinery, textiles, gems, and jewelry, which accounted for a major share of their \$150 million trade in 2023 [Trade Economics, 2023].
3. **Boost Private Sector Participation:** Facilitate private sector collaboration in bilateral trade by utilizing the double taxation avoidance agreement and easing trade regulations. Special focus sectors can be fintech, advanced technology, and renewable energy, where both nations have invested significantly in recent years.
4. **Enhance Cultural & Educational Exchanges:** Incentivize initiatives like student exchange programs and joint research projects. For instance, agreements between Armenia's top universities such as Yerevan State University (YSU)/ Armenian State University of Economics (ASUE) and counterparts in India such as Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs)/ Indian Institutes of Management (IIM) could spur more innovative collaborations.
5. **Encourage Multi-stakeholder Diplomatic Engagements:** Promote cooperation with influential third-party countries like the US, the UK, and the EU. Their diplomatic support can effectively help enrich the India-Armenia relationship and stabilize the South Caucasus region.

6. **Navigating Geopolitical Issues:** Wading through geopolitical challenges, like the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, through high-level (political) coordination and actively adhering to the rulings of the International Court of Justice and other international bodies. This approach can foster an environment of mutual trust and contributes significantly to nurturing a sustainable strategic partnership.
7. **Harnessing the Potential of Armenia's Strategic Position:** Both India and the multilateral organizations where India holds a prominent position, such as the SAARC, need to utilize Armenia's geographic advantage as a bridge between Europe and Asia. This could reinforce connectivity initiatives, benefiting sectors like transport, energy, and telecommunications.
8. **Foster R&D Collaboration:** Leverage robust intellectual infrastructures for collaborative ventures in mutually beneficial areas such as IT, pharmaceuticals, biotechnology, and renewable energy, which have seen an exponential rise in terms of percentage in combined investment in India and Armenia in recent years compared to a decade ago (DoC, 2023; MoEA 2012, MoEA, 2013).
9. **Deepening Defence Cooperation:** Strengthen the strategic alliance by intensifying collaboration and fostering innovation within the defence sector. Facilitate the exchange of cutting-edge technologies and intelligence insights, creating a robust framework for joint military exercises and research initiatives. This enhanced partnership, underscored by insights from various defence reports and reviews, can play a pivotal role in fortifying national security for both countries, while also taking into account the actions of enemy countries.
10. **Exploit Technological Synergies:** Utilize the potential of Armenia's rapidly growing tech industry and India's established ICT sector. Joint initiatives in emerging areas like AI, IoT, and blockchain technology

can create opportunities for mutual benefits.

Conclusion

The India-Armenia relationship has seen significant strides, with recent high-level discussions showcasing a multifaceted engagement. However, challenges persist, notably concerning India's stance post-Nagorno-Karabakh and the need for sustained political alignment amid regional complexities. Defence deals and cultural exchanges underline growing ties, yet there's a trade imbalance necessitating diversified economic collaboration.

A lasting strategic partnership hinges on unwavering political alignment and balanced economic cooperation. Diplomatic collaboration involving stakeholders like the US, the UK, and the EU becomes crucial for stability amid Armenia's quest to diversify alliances. The evolving relationship stands at a pivotal juncture, offering the potential to reshape dynamics or falter without a firm commitment to shared progress and prosperity.

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