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Kazakhstan at the Crossroads: Balancing Foreign Policy between China and Russia

An analysis through Political Discourse

Estudiante: Clara Santos Blázquez
Director: Dr. Galyna Solovei

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Abstract

Since its Independence in 1991 from the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan has undergone a profound process of nation and identity building, aiming to define its place in the world. Additionally, Kazakhstan's strategic location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, along with its abundant natural resources, has shaped the development of its foreign policy. Known as multi-vector diplomacy, this approach primarily focuses on balancing its relationships with both Russia and China. This research examines how Kazakhstan's evolving national identity shapes its differentiated approach toward these two powers. Using a constructivist framework and discourse analysis of political speeches, media narratives, and responses to the Russian war against Ukraine (2014–2024), the study reveals that Kazakhstan is not merely reacting to external pressures but actively constructing an independent foreign policy. Findings show a cautious distancing from Russia, increasingly framed around sovereignty and neutrality, and a pragmatic alignment with China based on development and non-interference principles. While historical ties with Russia persist, China's economic engagement and Kazakhstan's identity-driven diplomacy suggest an emerging rebalancing of its foreign relations.

Key words: Kazakhstan, Russia, China, multi-vector policy, identity, discourse analysis

Resumen

Desde su independencia de la Unión Soviética en 1991, Kazajistán ha atravesado un profundo proceso de construcción nacional e identitaria, con el objetivo de definir su lugar en el mundo. Además, su ubicación estratégica en el cruce entre Europa y Asia, junto con sus abundantes recursos naturales, ha moldeado el desarrollo de su política exterior. Esta estrategia, conocida como diplomacia multivectorial, se centra principalmente en equilibrar sus relaciones tanto con Rusia como con China. Esta investigación analiza cómo la evolución de la identidad nacional kazaja influye en su enfoque diferenciado hacia estas dos potencias. Utilizando un marco teórico constructivista y un análisis discursivo de discursos políticos, narrativas mediáticas y respuestas a la guerra de Rusia contra Ucrania (2014–2024), el estudio revela que Kazajistán no solo reacciona ante presiones externas, sino que construye activamente una política exterior independiente. Los resultados muestran un distanciamiento cauteloso de Rusia, cada vez más enmarcado en torno a la soberanía y la neutralidad, y un alineamiento pragmático con China basado en el desarrollo y en el principio de no injerencia. Aunque persisten los vínculos históricos con Rusia, el compromiso económico con China y la diplomacia kazaja basada en la identidad sugieren un reequilibrio emergente en sus relaciones exteriores.

Palabras clave: *Kazajistán, Rusia, China, diplomacia multivectorial, identidad, análisis del discurso*

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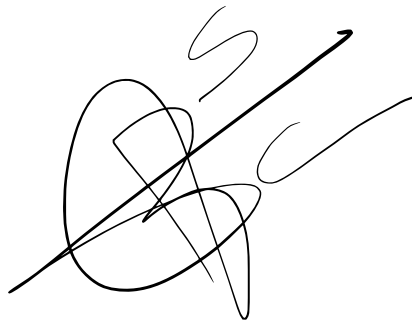
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3. **Análisis del discurso:** Para identificar temas específicos en los discursos más extensos.

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List of abbreviations

BRI: Belt and Road Initiative

BRIC: Brasil, Russia, India, China

CCP: Chinese Communist Party

CDA: Critical Discourse Analysis

CSTO: Collective Security Treaty Organization

EAEU: Eurasian Economic Union

GSI: Global Security Initiative

MDA: Media Discourse Analysis

PDA: Political Discourse Analysis

PRC: People's Republic of China

RSF: Reportiers Sans Frontières

SCO: Shanghai Cooperation Organization

UN: United Nations

UNGA: United Nations General Assembly

USSR: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

WWII: World War II

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1. Introduction

Kazakhstan was the *last* Soviet country to declare independence in December 1991. After a long history of invasions and attempts to gain full sovereignty, the Republic of Kazakhstan finally took form at the end of the 20th century, and it did so under the rule of Nursultan Nazarbayev (Hambly and Smith, 2025). In the contemporary era, Kazakhstan's geopolitical position at the heart of Eurasia has defined its role as a strategic bridge between the East and the West. Its vast natural resources, significant economic potential, and political continuity have made it a key player in Central Asia and a point of interest for contesting regional powers. Moreover, Kazakhstan has become an interesting topic of research due to its particular "multi-vector diplomacy" as its foreign policy *modus operandi*, which has operated since Nazarbayev took office at the end of the last century, and opting for balancing between great powers, instead of practicing *bandwagoning*. Beyond economic and strategic considerations, this strategy is also deeply influenced by its evolving national identity, historical legacies, and narratives constructed by its own leaders and influenced by major geopolitical partners.

This paper explores how Kazakhstan's national identity shapes its foreign policy orientation, particularly its differential approach toward China and Russia. Such a topic is relevant for two reasons. First, Kazakhstan's foreign policy decisions are usually portrayed as a balance exclusively influenced by external forces, ignoring so, the weight of Kazakhstan's own national interests and narratives. Second, China and Russia are usually placed on the "same team" when talking about the *balance of power* and influence in regions such as Central Asia. Nonetheless, this last decade and its main events have brought these two countries to differ in matters of importance, such as the Russian War against Ukraine, where Kazakhstan has had to carefully balance its responses to avoid alienating key partners. Moreover, as China has been trying to define its position in the world, it has also occupied spaces that were formerly and exclusively under Russia's sphere of influence, such as the case of Kazakhstan. In this picture, Kazakhstan finds itself on the one hand thriving by the opportunities for diversification, while still maintaining cultural ties with Russia – which also contains its large ethnic Russian population – while also opening the borders to Chinese investment and partnership. On the other hand, though, the Central Asian giants find themselves at the crossroads of competing narratives and strategic imperatives. For this reason, as mentioned, the country's commitment to multi-vector diplomacy, a strategy that seeks to maintain positive relations with multiple global actors,

has so far allowed it to navigate complex regional tensions. Still, this multi-vector diplomacy has traditionally been studied and constructed by Kazakh narratives as a bridge between East and West. Therefore, this new angle on confronting Russia and China instead of putting them on the same sack, might shed light on the wrecks of such multi-vector policy.

Kazakhstan's relationship with Russia is deeply rooted in a shared past, which translates into linguistic, cultural, and economic ties that date back to the Tsarist and Soviet periods. Even after gaining independence in 1991, Kazakhstan retained strong connections with Russia, remaining a key member of Russian-led initiatives such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Moscow's strategic interest in maintaining its influence over Kazakhstan is evident in its media presence, the use of Russian as a second official language, and the geopolitical narratives that emphasize historical unity. China, on the other hand, has emerged as an indispensable economic partner for Kazakhstan. The BRI has facilitated extensive Chinese investment in Kazakhstan's infrastructure, energy, and trade sectors, positioning the country as a key transit hub between China and Europe. Unlike Russia, China does not emphasize historical ties but instead promotes a vision of economic modernization and mutual development. However, public perceptions of China in Kazakhstan remain mixed, with concerns over economic dependency, land acquisitions, and Beijing's long-term strategic intentions (Gallo, 2021).

In this context, the research question guiding this study is: How does the construction of Kazakh national identity influence the orientation of its foreign policy and its differential approach toward Russia and China? The research objectives are threefold: first, to unveil how Kazakhstan's international goals are not solely based on strategic calculations but are also shaped by national identity, historical perceptions, and social norms; second, to analyze how Russia and China compete not only in geopolitical terms but also in the realm of narratives, with Russia leveraging shared historical memory and China promoting economic development; and third, to assess how Kazakhstan's foreign policy may evolve in response to shifting geopolitical pressures and internal nation-building efforts.

To meet the complexity of such a topic, the paper established the following objectives. First, do an extensive literature review in which the current status of Kazakhstan is

overviewed, as well as its relationships with China and Russia. Second, the study of the topic through the lenses of the theory of constructivism, widely defended by Alexander Wendt. This international relations theory allows for a deeper understanding of the topic, further than the materialistic interests of Kazakhstan, and the game of power from the regional powers. Third, analyze the case using Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) and Media Discourse Analysis (MDA) following the manuals of Teun Van Dijk as the main methodology, along with a case study on the Russian War against Ukraine. This methodology analyzes narratives that present concepts that shed light on the intentions of each power in the relationship with each other. The discourses of two presidents of the People's Republic of China, one of Russia, and two of Kazakhstan will be analyzed, along with articles from the main state media of the three countries. This procedure seeks to unveil how Kazakhstan, despite its cultural, historical, and former economic ties with Russia, is trying to move from its sphere of influence, also conditioned by a real fear of losing sovereignty to the former USSR. One path of diversification has been establishing ties with China, which does not perceive that much of a security threat, but fear of establishing economic dependence. This "fear" is not established by national leaders, but usually the outcome of "Sinophobia" and stereotypes over China's intervention and current position in the world.

Moving further than the purpose of the essay, the findings will offer insights into the broader dynamics of Central Asian geopolitics and the evolving balance of power in the region. Moreover, it would contribute to the study of international relations through the constructivist lens, which attends to contemporary challenges, like populism, the power narratives, the role of media, and its influence on public opinion. Also, Kazakhstan's diplomatic balancing act underscores the complexity of current international relations, where national identity, historical memory, and strategic imperatives intersect. Looking ahead, Kazakhstan's ability to sustain its multi-vector diplomacy will be tested by emerging geopolitical challenges. The ongoing offense to Ukraine by Russia heightened U.S.-China tensions, and shifting global economic trends all influence Kazakhstan's external environment. Whether Kazakhstan can continue to balance its relationships with Russia and China while expanding its engagement with Western partners remains an open question. The outcome of this balancing act will be crucial in determining Kazakhstan's long-term foreign policy direction and its place in the evolving global order.

1.1. State of the art

In May 1992, Nazarbayev, at the front of a newly independent Kazakhstan, published a policy article named “Strategy for the Formation and Development of Kazakhstan as a Foreign State”. In such article, Nazarbayev outlined the desire of Kazakhstan to implement a foreign policy that ensured Kazakhstan's security through strategic partnerships with neighboring countries, such as Russia and China, as well as other Central Asian states, Turkey, Pakistan, and India (Nazarbayev, 1992). In 2007, during the annual “Message from the President to the people of Kazakhstan”, Nazarbayev stated: “the main attention should be focused on the markets of Russia, China, Central Asia, the Caspian, and Black Sea regions” (Nazarbayev, 2007). Since then, Kazakhstan’s foreign policy has been shaped by what scholars define as multi-vector diplomacy. While the definitions given by academics share similar words and concepts, when it comes to the reasons behind the adoption of such a policy, there are more nuances.

Gleason (2010) describes Kazakhstan’s multi-vector foreign policy as “a sophisticated and pragmatic strategy aimed at maintaining balanced relations with multiple global and regional actors while minimizing ideological commitments”. He stresses that the policy is primarily pragmatic rather than ideological, ensuring that Kazakhstan’s national interests are preserved while engaging in cooperative international partnerships. Hanks (2009) further refines this perspective by arguing that Kazakhstan’s foreign policy is based on a risk-benefit calculation, in which the country continuously evaluates the advantages and potential dangers of aligning too closely with any single power. This aligns multi-vector diplomacy with neorealist thought, which views state behavior as a calculated response to shifting power balances and national security concerns. Cohen (2008) expands on the implementation of multi-vector diplomacy, highlighting that since independence, Kazakhstan has systematically constructed bilateral and multilateral relationships with major geopolitical players, ensuring that no single alliance dominates its foreign policy. This strategy allows Kazakhstan to use each vector as a counterbalance to the others, preventing any external power from exerting excessive influence over the country’s political and economic decision-making. Nyshanbayev et al. (2024) emphasize that Kazakhstan’s geographical positioning — a landlocked state between two global powers, Russia and China —has made multi-vector diplomacy an essential tool for survival. With 70% of its total exports consisting of petroleum products and 40% of its national budget dependent on raw material exports, Kazakhstan relies heavily on open

trade routes. Since it lacks direct access to the sea, it must engage with Russia and China as primary conduits for economic activity (Goble 2019).

All these perspectives focus primarily on realist, neorealist, and functionalist perspectives, in which Kazakhstan is seen as a “black box” that is merely trying to survive in the international arena and to do so, must balance its foreign policy between great powers. These perspectives obviate a crucial aspect usually overlooked by such currents, the national dynamics of Kazakhstan. Its identity, its Soviet past, and its current socio-economic situation, among others, conditionate not only Kazakh leaders, but also Kazakh people, in a bilateral influential relation, and in the last instance move the country towards one big power or another. Supporting this perspective, Nyshanbayev et al. (2024) use internal factors – the personality of leaders – to describe Kazakhstan’s international position. The scholar notes that with the transition from former Kazakh president Nazarbayev to actual President Tokayev diplomacy has shifted from being “a leader-driven policy to a more institutionalized approach”. While Nazarbayev personally steered Kazakhstan’s foreign relations, Tokayev has worked toward embedding multi-vectorism into the country’s strategic framework, ensuring that it remains a consistent and long-term policy rather than a flexible tool shaped by individual leaders (Nyshanbayev et al., 2024).

Another constant of Kazakhstan’s foreign policy since its independence is its intention to become a “geopolitical bridge between the East and the West” (Nyshanbayev et al., 2014). Deyermond (2009) points out this aspect as an exception within its neighbors – or other post-Soviet countries. While some neighboring states have chosen to align more closely with either Russia or the West, Kazakhstan has sought to avoid geopolitical entanglements, prioritizing flexibility over rigid alliances, and trying to maintain neutrality in major conflicts. Hanks (2009) takes another stance and refers to this policy as “opportunistic multi-alignment,” a strategy in which Kazakhstan exploits rivalries among great powers to its advantage. By doing so, Kazakhstan ensures that it can extract economic benefits from both China and Russia while simultaneously maintaining constructive diplomatic ties with the West. Nonetheless, Nyshanbayev et al. (2024) argue that this “bridging” role means the country is inevitably affected by conflicts between major powers. Kazakhstan has actively engaged in conflict mediation, including efforts

to facilitate diplomatic solutions in Ukraine and Syria, making its neutral position stagger at times.

These scholars focus essentially on how Kazakhstan balances its foreign policy between “East” and “West,” consequently introducing China and Russia into the same bloc. Nonetheless, in the last decade, the global landscape has evolved, and China and Russia are not always playing on the same team. As Nyshanbayev et al. mentioned, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, China has been advocating for “peaceful resolutions” as Chinese readouts show of Foreign Minister Wang Yi in a meeting with Germany’s Foreign Minister in December 2024 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC, 2024). Moreover, Russia’s economic interest in the region is clear, making up 26.54% of Kazakhstan’s imports (Harvard, 2023). At the same time, Chinese economic interests in the Central Asian region are growing, becoming a crucial part of several projects including the Belt and Road Initiative, which now challenges Russia with 23.39% of the country’s imports (Harvard, 2023). Goble (2019) highlights that Kazakhstan’s economic dependence on Russian and Chinese trade routes forces it to engage in careful diplomacy, preventing either power from gaining a decisive strategic advantage. Kembayev (2020) describes how Kazakhstan’s balancing act is particularly evident in its efforts to prevent friction between the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Instead of favoring one over the other, Kazakhstan promotes regional cooperation, aiming to integrate the two frameworks rather than allowing them to compete. The Ukrainian conflict and the economic situation pose two arguments for why it is crucial to separate China and Russia when studying Kazakhstan’s multi-vector foreign policy.

Going further than economics, discarding a functionalist approach, Russia’s influence on Kazakhstan goes beyond economical relations. Kazakhstan’s identity is greatly influenced by its soviet past, linking the country to Russia not only as an international partner but also as the reflection of a great proportion of the country. The relationship between the two countries dates back to the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, during which Kazakhstan was deeply integrated into Moscow’s political and economic structures. Even after the collapse of the USSR, these connections have remained strong, shaping Kazakhstan’s foreign policy calculations and internal political dynamics (Ayagan & Satanov, 2020).

Isaac (2020) emphasizes that Kazakhstan's leadership, under Nazarbayev and now Tokayev, has always prioritized stable relations with Russia. This strategic approach ensures Kazakhstan's own security and economic stability, given that it shares a 7,644 km border with Russia — the longest continuous land border in the world — as well as the presence of four million ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan. In a study made by Dina Sharipova in 2020 about Kazakhstan's National Identity, some respondents admitted that not knowing Russian as a language is widely considered as “being uneducated”. Moreover, 59% of respondents speak Kazakh fluently, while 71% speak Russian fluently. Kazakhstan is part of Russian-led security structures such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), in which Kazakhstan benefits from Russian military guarantees. Gallo (2021) suggests that while CSTO membership provides Kazakhstan with a security umbrella, it also increases Moscow's leverage over Kazakhstan's military and strategic decision-making. Economically, Kazakhstan is heavily intertwined with Russia through the EAEU. The EAEU, founded in 2014, includes Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan, and aims to create a single economic market. Kazakhstan's membership subjects the country to Moscow's dominant economic policies, which sometimes conflict with Kazakhstan's national interests (Isaacs, 2020). Furthermore, Sagsen & Turan (2021) argue that although Kazakhstan possesses vast energy resources, it remains dependent on Russian export routes for oil transportation. Historically, Kazakh oil has been shipped through Russian pipelines, making Kazakhstan reliant on Moscow's infrastructure and transit agreements.

On the other hand, Russia exerts influence through soft power mechanisms, including Russian-language media, educational institutions, and cultural exchanges (Gallo, 2021). Russian remains an official language in Kazakhstan since the middle of the 20th century, when Kazakhs changed from a new Latin alphabet to the Cyrillic alphabet (Guangzhen & Zhurableba, 2015). Despite “Kazakhization policies”, Russian cultural dominance persists in urban centers. Cooperation and exchange in the fields of education, science, and culture between the two, in which Russia greatly contributes to Kazakhstan, are supported by an intergovernmental agreement of 1994. Cultural events are also promoted, in which the Russian World and the Rossontrudnichesvo office act as key providers of such activities (Guangzhen & Zhurableba, 2015). Isaacs (2020) notes that Russian media and state-controlled narratives still play a crucial role in shaping public opinion in Kazakhstan, often promoting pro-Russian sentiments while discouraging pro-Western

alignments. Kuyanshbek (2019) highlights that Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 caused serious concerns within Kazakhstan's foreign policy circles. Given Kazakhstan's large ethnic Russian population concentrated in the north, there were fears that Russia might attempt a similar intervention in Kazakhstan under the pretext of "protecting ethnic Russian citizens".

Considering these factors, what is really the perception and/or position that Kazakhs have towards Russia? Most literature analyzes Kazakhstan as a "passive actor", moved by external forces and controlled by greater powers. Still, this thesis seeks to move further and start from within Kazakhstan. In doing so not only Russian leverage is considered, but also the mix of Kazakhstani culture and interests with those factors coming from its "older brother". Matuszkiewicz (2010) highlights how the process of Kazakhization has led to tensions between ethnic Russians and ethnic Kazakhs. The main indicators for Kazakhstan's efforts to distance more from Russia and its former Soviet influence are seen in actions and words to strengthen its sovereignty, diversify its economy, and develop alternative trade routes.

Turning now to the other contesting power in the region, China's influence in Kazakhstan has grown dramatically in recent decades, particularly in the economic and political spheres. While Russia's dominance in Kazakhstan is largely rooted in history, culture, and security, China's role has been strategic and economic. Still, the PRC is well aware that its main economic activities should have a cultural and soft power plan (Farwa, 2018), to ensure that society also takes part in the expansion of China as a global power. In the region of Central Asia, this expansion is in some way to the detriment of Russia, which, as seen, has always been the power of reference for the region. Schoen and Kaylan (2014) and Clarke (2011) argue that since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Beijing has sought to expand its economic and political footprint in Central Asia, recognizing Kazakhstan as a key partner in its regional and global ambitions.

Peyrouse (2008) and Lee (2020) highlight that China has gradually surpassed Russia as Kazakhstan's most important trade partner, particularly in energy, infrastructure, and transportation. Since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has invested billions of dollars in Kazakhstan's infrastructure, railways, and pipelines. Nabiyeva (2019) describes China's dependence on Kazakh oil and gas, emphasizing that China has become an importer of energy resources due to its growing domestic demand. Back to the

indicators mentioned of the rupture between Russian dominance of Kazakhstan, China is offering an alternative route for its energy, further than Russian pipelines. China has deployed an energy diplomacy in Central Asia, in Beijing's efforts to secure stable energy supplies (Liao 2019).

China is not only growing in the economic field but also is making its way through the security of the region. Pradhan & Mohanty (2021) emphasize the role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in shaping China-Kazakhstan relations. The SCO was founded in June 2001 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, and in the last two decades, India, Pakistan, and Iran also joined the club of "the Shanghai Five". Even though Russia is also a member of the Organization, the platform greatly aligns with the BRI's goals. Rozanov (2013) argues that Kazakhstan views the SCO as a diplomatic mechanism to engage with China while maintaining its strategic independence.

Over the past 20 years, bilateral visits between China and Kazakhstan, at the Presidential and Ministerial levels have become more frequent. Also, cooperation in the field of education is officialized and carried out by the Agreement between the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan (RK), and the Ministry of Education of the PRC of 2003; and the Agreement between the governments of the SCO member states on cooperation with the field of education. Exchanges of Kazakh and Chinese students have been frequent in the last decades, highlighting the dissemination of the Chinese language in Kazakh institutions. (Guangzhen & Zhurabaleba, 2015). Despite China's efforts to create a solid cooperation based on soft power, public perception of China in Kazakhstan is mixed, with some viewing China as an essential economic partner, while others fear Beijing's growing influence (Burkhanov, 2017). This negative perception is fed both by a "real" threat of China's growing influence – such as the incidents in rural areas of Kazakhstan for Chinese agricultural investments – but also rooted in China and the Chinese, as well as Sinophobia. These trends are pervasive in private Kazakh language newspapers, but also in private Russian newspapers, which even though have a more nuanced view of China, also show a hidden inclination toward being critical of that country and its people. (Burkhanov, 2017). For this reason, Kumenov (2022) challenges the narrative of China's economic dominance, arguing that while

Chinese investments in Kazakhstan were once significant, they have declined in recent years.

In summary, the main objectives of Kazakhstan now are to diversify its foreign policy, reinforce its sovereignty, and implement alternative trade routes to the traditional ones, all this while maintaining a multi-ethnic society that is constantly balancing between its Soviet past and its Kazakh identity. While Kazakhstan's relationship with Russia is shaped by history and security concerns, its relationship with China is defined by economic strategy and regional connectivity. Concerns towards Russia arise from real security concerns such as the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and Russian war in Ukraine in 2022, along with the widespread control of Russian news outlets on disseminated information in Kazakhstan. On the other hand, the reluctance towards China is rooted on stereotypes, and the fear of being economically dependent on the East Asian power.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

As mentioned, the existing literature on Kazakhstan's foreign policy and geopolitical positioning is largely dominated by realist and neorealist perspectives, defended by scholars such as Gleason (2010), Hanks (2009), and Cohen (2008), which frame Kazakhstan's multi-vector diplomacy as a pragmatic balancing act between major powers. The key gap in the literature on Kazakhstan's balancing act between Russia and China is not solely dictated by rational power calculations but also by historical narratives, national identity concerns, and constructed perceptions of belonging. This study argues and will analyze how Kazakhstan's national trends and goals impact the country aligning more towards China or Russia. A constructivist approach provides a valuable alternative, as it allows for an analysis that goes beyond material capabilities and power balancing.

Constructivism according to Alexander Wendt explains that "the structures of international politics are social rather than purely material and that these structures shape the identities and interests of states rather than simply constraining their behavior" (Wendt, 1995). Constructivists argue that material factors only acquire meaning through shared knowledge and identity perceptions, contrary to neorealists' assumptions which define the international system in terms of material capability. Also, neorealists affirm that anarchy leads to self-help, meaning that states naturally compete for security and power in an anarchic system. Constructivists, on the other hand, assert that anarchy is

what states make of it — suggesting in this case that Kazakhstan’s foreign policy is shaped by social interactions rather than just power restrictions (Wendt, 1992). These key features applied to the matter of study in this paper, suggest that Kazakhstan’s identity as a post-Soviet state, its aspirations for regional leadership, and its engagement with multilateral institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) are shaped by shared understandings and evolving norms, rather than purely material constraints.

Additionally, constructivists challenge the realist assumption that states act based on fixed national interests. Instead, they argue that national interests are socially constructed and shaped by interactions, historical experiences, and identity formation. Constructivism allows us to point out how Kazakhstan’s leaders have actively shaped a national narrative that positions Kazakhstan as a distinct Central Asian country while adapting to the necessities of the country internally and externally. This process includes Kazakhization (Aitymbetov et al., 2015) policies that promote the Kazakh language and culture, selective use of historical narratives to emphasize Kazakhstan’s independent path, and strategic participation in multilateral organizations to reinforce the country’s international agency. Kazakhstan’s multi-vector diplomacy exemplifies how international interests sometimes move further than pure self-help. Rather than aligning itself rigidly with one power bloc, Kazakhstan has continuously developed a narrative of itself as a mediator and a bridge between East and West. Kazakhstan’s position as a “neutral” country that does not bandwagon with one power or the other but rather hedges between them is part of their national identity, further than materialist realms.

In their paper “The Republic of Kazakhstan’s multi-vector foreign policy: Re-evaluation under president Tokayev”, Nyshanbayev et al. show how despite shared lines in both presidencies –Nazarbayev and Tokayev– since Kazakhstan’s independence in 1991, times change, and the new President is trying to construct a position for Kazakhstan in the region with the current circumstances. While Nazarbayev had a more individualistic approach to foreign policy, Tokayev has institutionalized this *modus operandi*. This identity construction allows Kazakhstan to engage in economic and security cooperation with both Russia and China while avoiding subordination to either. The SCO is the perfect example of how Kazakhstan is committed to this role by engaging with China and Russia within a multilateral framework. The SCO is not just an instrument of power politics but

a space where Kazakhstan constructs and projects its identity as a stable and influential actor in Eurasia.

A constructivist perspective on Kazakhstan-Russia relations is crucial to understand its dynamics. The historical Soviet legacy continues to influence Kazakhstan's engagement with Russia, especially through the presence of four million ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan and the continued use of Russian as a lingua franca. Despite national policies aimed at strengthening Kazakh identity, Russian cultural influence persists, particularly in urban centers where Russian-language media and education remain prevalent (Gallo, 2021). While Kazakhstan seeks to maintain its diplomatic ties attending to its Soviet past and therefore its cultural ties, also avoids openly stating Russia's power and influence over its sovereignty. Kazakhstan's response to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 further illustrates the role of identity in shaping foreign policy. Kazakhstan did not openly condemn Russia's actions, but it reinforced its own narrative of sovereignty and territorial integrity through diplomatic messaging and multilateral engagement (Roberts, 2015). This also aligns with another key feature of constructivism, intersubjective knowledge (Wendt, 1995). The annexation of a former Soviet territory does not pose the same threat to Kazakhstan, as to another country that did not live in such a past. The cautious response of Kazakhstan to the invasion was not solely a strategic balance-of-power move but also a reflection of Kazakhstan's aim to be loyal to its national and international constructed identity as a neutral and independent actor in regional politics.

In contrast, Kazakhstan's relationship with China is often framed in economic terms, particularly in relation to Beijing's growing investments in Central Asia. While realists frame Kazakhstan's interest in China as a self-interest move, emphasizing Kazakhstan's economic dependence on China and the strategic importance of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a constructivist approach can focus on how Kazakhstan's leadership frames this relationship with China and consequently how Kazakh people perceive this partnership. Along with the economic benefits of the bilateral relationship, Nazarbayev and later Tokayev have framed Kazakhstan's engagement with China within a broader narrative of modernization and regional connectivity (Lee et al., 2020). The Kazakh government has actively promoted the image of China as a development partner rather than a hegemonic power, constructing a discourse that emphasizes economic opportunities rather than geopolitical threats. However, public perceptions of China in

Kazakhstan remain ambivalent. These perceptions are not solely based on material factors but are shaped by historical experiences, narratives of Chinese expansion, and contemporary political discourse. Unlike Russia, which shares a cultural and linguistic space with Kazakhstan, China is often viewed as an external actor whose growing influence is met with both optimism and skepticism.

A constructivist approach thus fills an important gap in the literature by demonstrating that Kazakhstan's foreign policy is not just a response to external pressures but an active process of identity construction. Following Alexander Wendt's principles presented in his work as a constructivist analyst allows us to study the case of Kazakhstan from another perspective that highlights and focuses on its national-building identity. Much of the literature pivots around realist realms such as material constraints and security calculations. Therefore, this perspective will provide a rich and more nuanced understanding of Kazakhstan's place in the international system — one that acknowledges the power of social structures, narratives, and identity formations in shaping the country's geopolitical trajectory.

1.3. Methodology

This study employs Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) and Media Discourse Analysis (MDA) following Teun Van Dijk manuals respectively, as complementary methodologies to examine Kazakhstan's narratives in foreign policy underlined by its national identity and how the latter tip the balance between China and Russia. By analyzing the discourse of key political figures, Vladimir Putin, Hu Jintao, Jiang Zemin, Xi Jinping, Nursultan Nazarbayev, and Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, as well as media outlets such as *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, *Moscow Times*, and *Xinhua*, this research seeks to uncover what are the narrative patterns of the players involved and how that reinforces political strategies and ideologies in the region and towards each other. By employing PDA and MDA, this study will contextualize political discourse within Kazakhstan's geopolitical landscape, to better understand the influence of identity-building on foreign policy. To do so, it is necessary to adopt parameters and/or concepts that shed light over Kazakhstan's intentions. These indicators might be: *sovereignty, historical ties, non-interference, alignment, economic cooperation and cultural ties*. These concepts, if found in common among the different discourses and news, might indicate a wider alignment of Kazakhstan with China, Russia, both or neither.

PDA, as a multidisciplinary approach, conceptualizes political discourse as both a form of action and a means of enacting political processes. The analysis focuses on defining political discourse beyond the mere participation of political actors, emphasizing its performative nature in governance, legislation, protest, and diplomatic negotiations (Van Dijk, 2006). The foundational assumptions of Van Dijk's PDA are (1) discourse is socially situated, meaning that discourse cannot be studied from its sociopolitical context, and that language reflects and reproduces powers structures, ideologies, and group relations. (2) Van Dijk considers discourse as an action that legitimizes, persuades excludes and/or dominates. And (3) the cognitive interface, emphasizing the role of mental representation in the production and comprehension of the discourse. (Van Dijk, 1997). Moreover, this analysis aligns with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which defends how discourse shapes public perception and policymaking, exposing underlying power dynamics between Kazakhstan, Russia, and China. The speeches chosen to be analyzed are the following. First, the intervention of the Chinese Foreign Secretary during the 14th Assembly of the UN in 1992. Second, the First Address to the Kazakh Nation of Nursultan Nazarbayev in 1997. Third, the discourse of Russian President Dmitri Medvedev during the 10th Anniversary of Astana in 2008. Fourth, the address of Xi Jinping in Nazarbayev University to present the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013. Fifth, Vladimir Putin's statement at the 5th Caspian Summit in 2018. Sixth, the inaugural speech of newly President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in 2019. Seventh, Xi Jinping's letter to Kazakhstan previous to his state visit in 2024. Eighth, the discourse of President Tokayev at the SCO Summit in 2024. And lastly, Putin's article for Kazakh newspaper, *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* in 2024.

To analyze a discourse adequately, Van Dijk puts the focus on four key domains of analysis. First, the context, analyzing the 5Ws (who, to whom, when, where and why) and the situational, institutional and sociopolitical dimensions. Second, the participants and role, understanding the positioning of politicians, media, public, and opponents. Third, the goals and functions, which can be as mentioned, persuading, legitimizing, attacking and/or mobilizing. Fourth and last, the structures of discourse, which at the same time are divided in three substructures: (a) macrostructures or *topics*, which serve as reflection of ideological position and the overall theme of the discourse. Within this level of analysis, Van Dijk introduces another relevant, the *political or ideological square*, which sheds light over the frequently-used *us* and *them*, creating a clear juxtaposition between the

parts (*Figure 1*). (b) Superstructures or *schematic organization*, which refer to the conventional organizational patterns (parliamentary debates, speeches, news reports) and which parts of the discourse are emphasized; (c) microstructures that encompass the lexicon and syntax, the coherence and argumentation, and rhetorical devices (Van Dijk, 1997). Following these parameters, the thesis will analyze three discourses of the Presidents of China (Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping); Russia (Putin) and Kazakhstan (Nazarbayev and Tokayev) since the independence of Kazakhstan in 1991, in search of the concepts mentioned above, and within its political framework to uncover the intentions of each other.

MDA complements this approach by exploring the framing of geopolitical narratives within the media. Although MDA shares a similar approach with PDA, Van Dijk provides four ideological criteria that should be considered to examine bias in media discourse. These are race, class, gender, and nationality. Moreover, the cognitive component in this case applies to the journalist's mental representation of events, which affects how the news are written (Van Dijk, 2009). The analysis of news structures will examine how information is presented through conventional categories such as headlines, summaries, contextual framing, and attributions (Van Dijk, 2008). The study will investigate ideological influences on news selection, reporting styles, and the representation of key actors, assessing how *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, *Moscow Times*, and *Xinhua* construct and disseminate narratives on the Uyghur issue in Xinjiang province in China. Furthermore, this research will incorporate an analysis of the current status of freedom of the press in each of these countries, acknowledging the different strategies for asserting control including selective framing, omission, and polarization. While Kazakhstan also has a more independent private media, the choice is *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, state-owned and led by the Council of Ministers. The reason behind this choice is that China and Russia have a model of state control of the media, and therefore to analyze the three outlets within similar parameters *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* is the most adequate. Moreover, recognizing the multimodal nature of media discourse, the study will also account for non-verbal elements such as imagery, visual emphasis, and multimedia integration in shaping geopolitical perceptions (Van Dijk, 2008).

Along with PDA and MDA, this work uses a case study on Kazakhstan's response to the war in Ukraine. To do so, the study employs political discourse analysis alongside

empirical data on Kazakhstan's voting behavior in the United Nations (UN) to assess how the country has navigated the geopolitical challenges posed by Russia's invasion. Therefore, it is interesting to explore how this latest conflict has affected and is affecting Kazakhstan's behavior towards Russia, and whether it is consequently inclining its position to China.

As for now, Tokayev has issued an explicit refusal to recognize the Russian-backed separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, along with his remarks at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (June 2022) rejecting Russia's justification for territorial expansion. Additionally, Tokayev's conversations with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, imply that Kazakhstan is not aligning with Russia indiscriminately like Belarus or North Korea have done. However, this rhetorical positioning must not leave aside Kazakhstan's continued economic and security ties with Russia, which have not been interrupted or sanctioned like the EU has done, reflecting the constraints that limit its ability to take a stronger stance. In parallel, the study evaluates Kazakhstan's voting behavior in the UN, focusing on key resolutions related to the war in Ukraine. These include UNGA Resolution ES-11/1 (March 2022) condemning Russia's invasion and UNGA Resolution ES-11/3 (October 2022) rejecting the annexation of Ukrainian territories (Yuneman, 2023). Kazakhstan has abstained from these votes rather than directly opposing Russia, a pattern that suggests a strategy of careful neutrality rather than outright defiance, also because of the factors mentioned above. Moreover, by analyzing how Kazakhstan's votes compare to China's, the study examines whether Kazakhstan has leaned toward Beijing's position or sought to chart its own independent path. This assessment of voting patterns provides an empirical basis for evaluating Kazakhstan's diplomatic calculus, distinguishing between passive abstention, silent endorsement of Russia, or an emerging alignment with China.

2. Political Discourse Analysis

From a constructivist perspective, Kazakhstan's status reflects a constant building of national identity and international positioning, especially in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and growing Chinese influence in Central Asia. Instead of acting merely on material interests or power balances, Kazakhstan's foreign and domestic policies are increasingly shaped by evolving ideas of sovereignty, neutrality, and multivector diplomacy.

Internally, Kazakhstan continues to navigate its post-Soviet identity, distancing itself discursively from Russian historical narratives while promoting Kazakh language, culture, and national unity. Moreover, and probably more than ever, state sovereignty is reinforced through official narratives. President Tokayev publicly rejected the proclamation of Donetsk and Luhansk “republics”, defending the principle of territorial integrity (Dumoulin, 2023). At the same time, an existing rhetoric of China as a formidable economic partner—or “firmly neighbour”—has become increasingly common. Nonetheless, despite the government’s effort to picture China as such, and bilateral diplomatic and soft power initiative, negative stereotypes of Chinese people still persist in Kazakh society (Burkhanov, 2017).

At the same time, Kazakhstan’s economy has been experiencing significant growth since the beginning of the century, due to oil exports, diversification of markets, mineral extractions, and strong foreign direct investment. Nonetheless, in the last decade such growth has slowed down to below a 4%. According to the World Bank, some challenges that Kazakhstan faces in the next years are the decrease in the demand of oil, increase budget spending, and threat to agricultural production and infrastructures due to adverse weather. Moreover, poverty is expected to stay around 6.7% in 2025 (World Bank Group, 2024). In this context, Kazakhstan’s government is trying to keep its economic options wide while maintaining its people content in political terms. Specially since in 2022 massive protests broke out across Kazakhstan demanding more democratization. Such protests were crackdown by the police in what is now known as “Bloody January” (Mazorenko & Sorbello, 2023).

Internationally, Kazakhstan’s multi-vector foreign policy, long framed as a balancing act among Russia, China, and the West, is undergoing discursive adjustment, specially since the rise of Tokayev to power. Although experts expected Astana to pivot to the West due to Ukraine’s invasions, according to Chattam House (2024), economic ties between Russia and Kazakhstan had deepened: “For every visit of Kazakhstan ministers to Washington to discuss sanction regulation, another visit is made to Russia to pledge continued alignment”. Kazakhstan is cautious of aligning with the West due to possible retaliations from Russia.

Nonetheless, this does not keep Kazakhstan from turning to its other “big neighbour”, China. While the state continues to emphasize neutrality and non-alignment, recent

diplomatic gestures (e.g., hosting Xi Jinping's first post-COVID visit) suggest an emergent narrative of strategic partnership with China rooted in shared norms of non-interference and respect for sovereignty (Hess, 2023). Kazakhstan is also responding to international expectations and global norms. In its efforts to become a "bridge between the East and the West", Kazakhstan is active in engaging with regional institutions such as the European Union, the OSCE, and the United Nations (Yuneman, 2023).

Overall, Kazakhstan's trajectory cannot be fully understood through rationalist or materialist lenses alone. In this section, the patterns described above would be analysed through official and non-official discourses from all three countries, to unveil common patterns that indicate proximity or on the other hand, distancing. Moreover, the last section offers an overview on Kazakhstan positioning in the Russian invasion of Ukraine. All this analysis is backed up by the idea that State and media discourse, shaped by leaders, institutions, and civil society, plays a central role in Kazakhstan identity construction. An identity that aspires to be both regionally respected and globally integrated, without being absorbed by the geopolitical ambitions of more powerful neighbours.

The first section of the analysis uses Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) to explore domestic and foreign policy narratives that have to do with Kazakhstan since its independence in 1992. Beyond being a tool to examine state policies, the discourses offer a timeline of Kazakhstan's major events, how leaders framed them to construct meaning, shape national identity, and negotiate power through discourse. The analysis follows the methodological steps of PDA proposed by Teun Van Dijk. Starting with (1) contextualizing communicative events, (2) identifying macrostructures and topics, (3) examining schematic structures, (4) and performing a micro-analysis of language use. The study will also apply the (5) ideological square to uncover discursive polarization, and the (6) framing techniques to illustrate what effect the speaker seeks to achieve in his audience. Lastly, the discourse is situated within (7) broader social structures and power dynamics to highlight the interplay between political language and structural change.

2.1. Political Discourse Analysis of Chinese Foreign Minister to the UNGA in 1992

In September 1992, the world had just witnessed the fall of the Soviet Union after four decades of being immersed in the so-called Cold War. The new Russia occupied the seat of the Soviet Union in the United Nations. In 1992, the UN grew once again, and welcomed former Soviet republics, including all the Central Asia states (Kazakhstan,

Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kirgizstan).¹ This was precisely among the main focuses of the UN at the time, including newly independent states, which was supported by the GA res. 47/130 on the “Respect for the principles of national sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of States in their electoral processes”.² Other focuses were peacekeeping missions, with a special focus on Yugoslavia and Somalia, where human rights were questioned and violated repeatedly. This last aspect links with a third milestone of the UN at the beginning of the 90s, the advancement in international cooperation, which was constrained during the time of the Cold War. The United Nations was finally and suddenly released from the eclipse phase of the Cold War, and *veto* in the Security Council was significantly relaxed, allowing for common decisions in the interest of humanity (Srivastava, 2014).

Kazakhstan, only a year after its independence, was new to the international board. In March 1992 the new state joined the United Nations and quickly began to establish diplomatic relations worldwide. For reasons of proximity and historical ties, the two regional powers, China and Russia, started to put their focus on the young state. Nonetheless, Russia’s intentions were mere maintenance of a sphere of influence that did not want to lose despite the disintegration of the USSR. China, on the other side, saw the opportunity of establishing an economic partner and friendly neighbor that would benefit the new era that the People’s Republic was entering, and established modern diplomatic relations in. Also, in 1992 Deng Xiaoping embarked on his Southern Tour (Xiaoping, 2009), and only a month after Qian Qichen’s intervention on the UN, China decided on 14th Party Congress that the country would endorse a “socialist market economy” or “Socialism with Chinese characteristics”³. China was opening to the world, and did not doubt to offer a hand to Kazakhstan in a subtle but effective way.

In his 1992 address to the United Nations General Assembly, Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen laid out a vision for a post Cold War international order, which according to him was structured around principles of sovereignty, peaceful development, and multipolarity. The macrostructure of the speech revolves around the new global phase

¹ More information about UN membership in: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/growth-in-un-membership#1990s>

² More information in: https://www.un.org/unispal/wp-content/uploads/1992/12/1b1e192f899bb5a085256bd0005bdfff_ares47130.pdf

³ More information in: https://www.idcpc.org.cn/english2023/tjzl/cpcjj/PartyCongresses/202307/t20230727_157826.html

characterized by equality and cooperation. Qian affirms that “the world has now entered a new historical phase of development towards multipolarity,” rejecting the Cold War’s bipolar model and calling instead for shared governance based on the UN system. Themes such as disarmament, economic justice, North–South development disparities, and national sovereignty also appear throughout. China is consistently positioned as a moral and stabilizing force, “a force working steadfastly for world peace,” while Russia appears only once, indirectly referenced in the context of arms control talks with the United States, a notable discursive choice that minimizes Moscow’s role in shaping the new world order.

The schematic structure moves from welcoming newly independent states explicitly saying “I would like to take this opportunity to extend my warm welcome and congratulations to the Republic of Kazakhstan and other newly admitted countries”; to afterwards make a critique of hegemonic power dynamics, and then toward constructive proposals for strengthening the UN and reforming international relations. Qian ends by reaffirming China’s own peaceful development and contribution to global stability. His lexicon reinforces this message with recurring terms like “peace,” “sovereignty,” “mutual respect,” and “cooperation.” China is mentioned more than 20 times, always in a positive, forward-looking light.

Therefore, the polarization is implicit but effective: Qian contrasts China’s cooperative, inclusive vision with unnamed actors that “interfere in and obstruct the normal cooperation between sovereign States.” With this China was already projecting a model for a future that was not Western-led but collectively governed, with China at its moral and diplomatic center. It was an opening for what China wanted to become and was about to show the world. Moreover, by mentioning directly newly formed countries such as Kazakhstan, China was offering its hand to lead a new world order in which traditional powers, including Russia, would become obsolete.

2.2. Political Discourse Analysis of Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev’s First Address to the Nation in 1997

In January 1993, the first Constitution of the Kazakhstan Republic entered into force. The document established a Presidential form of government, and described Kazakhstan as a democratic, secular and unitary state with emphasis on democratic principles. Moreover, the 1993 Constitution accorded Russian as the language of interethnic communication

and prohibited any limitations on the rights of citizens who do not speak Kazakh. It established the Supreme Council is the highest state representative body of the Republic exercising legislative powers. Nonetheless, the Constitution did not last long and in May 1995 President Nursultan Nazarbayev convened a council of experts to draw up a new constitution under his guidance. The new constitution was approved by popular referendum in August 1995 and differed from the old one in some key points. It guaranteed equal rights to all nationalities and prescribed both Kazakh and Russian as official state languages, suitable for use in government documents and education. This was a decisive step towards Kazakh autonomy (Mishra, 2008).

Despite taking steps towards democratization and universal suffrage, Kazakhstan underwent during the 90s a period of adaptation marked by economic turmoil. The reform programme was inspired by the ‘shock therapy’ philosophy that dominated in the early 1990s, which characterized by its rapidity and radical reforms. Kazakhstan possessed huge natural resources, that as the fields of oil and gas, were not explored before independence (Kalyuzhova et. al. 2004:249). Initially the liberal and privatising reforms succeeded but also created a steep decline and hyperinflation. This had severe consequences for Kazakh people, who lived in poverty and suffered from scarcity of food. The economic situation positively changed in 1995 due to the second wave of privatization reforms, that extended to all sectors, and except for an economic downturn connected to the Russian financial crisis in 1998 the economy steadily improved entering the 21st century. During these years, there were also labor reforms, increasing the salary by triple, and allowing protests to demand wider salary changes and labor conditions (Larsson, 2010). In this context Nazarbayev first addressed the nation, on October 10th, 1997, with his project “Kazakhstan-2030” vision, which set high expectations and the premise of a new era.

The macrostructure of Nazarbayev’s discourse revolves around long-term strategic planning, including nation-building, political stability, economic reform, infrastructure development, and civic identity. He identifies Kazakhstan’s mission as becoming a “Central-Asian Snow Leopard”, a metaphor that frames the nation as unique, adaptable, and dignified, in contrast to the overused “Asian Tigers” label. The schematic structure begins with philosophical appeals and a sense of urgency, “Time has come to say once and for all what future we want to build”, followed by an analysis of Kazakhstan’s assets

and challenges, then a detailed exposition of seven long-term priorities, and closes with motivational appeals to collective responsibility.

Nazarbayev's lexicon combines technical vocabulary ("macroeconomic stabilization," "strategic planning") with more common and symbolic language ("unity," "responsibility," "our descendants"), aiming to legitimize reforms while emotionally mobilizing citizens. Patterns of polarization are mainly used to distinct what Kazakhstan *was* and what Kazakhstan *is going to be*. To do so, he keeps "highlighting old" vs. "new systems", "state-led vs. corrupt bureaucracies", dependency vs. strategic autonomy. He warns against "petty interference" and "clannishness," positioning reform as a moral imperative. The power structure is centralized yet participatory; he declares, "I assume full responsibility," but insists that "every citizen must become a patriot."

In the matter of concern, Russia and China are mentioned explicitly. Nazarbayev envisions Kazakhstan as a "connecting link between the three rapidly growing regions, China, Russia and the Muslim world." He praises China's "policy aimed against hegemonism" and affirms "relations of confidence and equality" with Russia, framing both as strategic partners, not threats. This reflects Kazakhstan's determination to establish a multi-vector foreign policy since its early days as an independent state, balancing major powers while preserving autonomy. The framing of Kazakhstan's journey as intergenerational and Eurasian underscores its hybrid identity, integrating Asian pragmatism, Russian cultural ties, and Western modernization. The repeated use of inclusive pronouns and journey metaphors creates a cohesive national narrative cantered on shared destiny, unity, and resilience.

2.3. Political Discourse Analysis of Russian President Dmitri Medvedev's speech during the Celebration of 10th Anniversary of Astana in 2008

In 1997, the Kazakh government moved the capital from Almaty to Akmola, which was renamed Astana a year after. According to Arslan, the geographic change of capitals did have a further meaning than a simple whim of the government. Moreover, this political move symbolized the balance that Kazakhstan was already seeking to maintain between Russia and China. For geopolitical reasons, Astana is in a more central position than Almaty, allowing for better administrative control. Furthermore, Almaty was much closer to the border of China, which could pose a potential security threat. The latter reinforces

the narrative of China as a hazard, despite friendliness among both countries, and China's efforts to deny its expansionists intentions. On the other hand, the position of Astana reinforced the administrative reach over less populated northern regions that have Russian-speaking majority. Since Akmola was at the time a small city, the change of location of the administration also aimed to boost immigration to the metropole and therefore development in north-central Kazakhstan. Finally, according to Arslan, the establishment of a new capital in Astana symbolized a new era and a departure from its Soviet past (Arslan, 2014).

10 years later, Russian President Medvedev chose Kazakhstan as his first state visit and delivered a speech in Astana highlighting the solid relationship between Russia and Kazakhstan. During these years Kazakhstan was invested in "kazakhization", highlighting language, and shaping cultural narratives. Moreover, these years the Latinization of the Kazakh script was under preparation, which symbolized a slow but firm thrift away from Russia (Aitymbetov et al., 2015). Aware of this and in support of his nation's interest, Medvedev opened his discourse with highlighting that it was "symbolic that Kazakhstan is the first country I visit as President of the Russian Federation." The Russian President wanted to make sure that Kazakhstan supported Russia, and praised so through the highlight of the CSTO, and energy cooperation. Furthermore, the visit was tightly choreographed to emphasize continuity with Putin, who had invested heavily in reviving Moscow's influence across the post-Soviet space.

Dmitry Medvedev's 2008 speech celebrating the 10th anniversary of Astana is a highly symbolic piece of political discourse. Its macrostructure revolves around various topics: the celebration of Astana's rapid transformation into a "super-modern and comfortable city," and "created for its citizens"; the deep-rooted historical and cultural ties between Kazakhstan and Russia "our peoples have lived together for centuries..."; the personal leadership of President Nazarbayev; and Kazakhstan's Eurasian identity. By linking Astana's development to "ambitious projects" and "national identity," Medvedev aligns Kazakhstan's modernization with a broader vision of Eurasian openness and forward-looking integration, all while positioning Russia as its close and natural partner. He affirms this with the phrase, "Our closeness and unconditional trust... will help us face today's and the future's challenges," thereby framing Kazakhstan's success as a shared achievement rooted in historic brotherhood between both nations.

The schematic structure is ceremonial and emotional, carefully thought to achieve symbolic resonance and a reminder of partnership and shared aspirations. Medvedev begins with warm congratulations and quickly moves into praise for Astana's transformation, calling it "the new face of the country." He attributes this success personally to Nazarbayev, calling the city "his brainchild, his pride and joy." In which "he has invested not only his hard work but also his soul". From there, the speech transitions into a historical reflection: "Our peoples have lived together for centuries." It concludes by reaffirming unity: "the boundary line... does not mean that the hearts of our people were divided", highlighting once again the importance of Russia as a partner to which Kazakhstan is united by more than its current relationship.

Medvedev's lexicon is highly affective, prioritizing words like "friendship," "trust," "brothers," "harmony," and "generosity." The repeated use of "Astana" as both symbol and subject underscores its function as a metaphor for Kazakhstan itself: modern, dynamic, and proud. This speech is not technocratic; it is deeply personal, colloquial and emotionally charged, designed to reinforce cultural proximity and post-Soviet solidarity. Medvedev contrasts Kazakhstan's modern capital with the "ancient land" on which it was built, presenting transformation without erasing tradition. He juxtaposes territorial separation with emotional unity, arguing that the physical boundary drawn in the 1990s "has not changed our open and cordial relations." Thus, he rejects notions of rupture, while carefully respecting Kazakhstan's sovereignty. Undermining the border could be also interpreted as a subtle sign of Russia's indifference to *de iuri* borders, and its conviction that *natural borders* limited by ethnicity or language are more important and could justify an action to protect them.

The last aspect links with underlying power structures: while Kazakhstan is independent, Russia is always going to be there and has interest that cannot be put at risk. Medvedev also emphasizes a horizontal model of partnership between Russia and Kazakhstan. The line "we created our native land together" reflects a rhetoric of equality and fraternal collaboration, that implicitly suggests that all Kazakhstan is today, is also because of Russia's collaboration, and "we" reflects the intentions of reminding the Central Asian state that "they" do not share such bond. Moreover, Eurasianism is invoked as a legitimizing framework: "Astana's development... is associated with the idea of Eurasianism," presenting Kazakhstan as both locally grounded and globally engaged.

Finally, in terms of framing, Astana becomes a proxy for Kazakhstan's identity and trajectory "Astana splendidly reflect the national identity...openness to the world". The speech uses this metaphor to convey that Russian-Kazakh relations are not just strategic—they are emotionally, historically, and morally anchored—and he reflects it emphasizing that they should support each other "as only brothers can". This blend of symbolism, praise, and unity constructs a vision of post-Soviet partnership that is both affective, future oriented, but subtly effective in reminding Kazakhstan where it comes from and where Russia expects it to move to.

2.4. Political Discourse Analysis of Chinese President Xi Jinping's speech at Nazarbayev University in 2013

In November 2013 Xi Jinping became Secretary General of the Chinese Communist Party, to finally assume the presidency in March 2013 succeeding Hu Jintao (Albert, 2025). By 2010, China had surpassed Japan as the second largest economy in the world; and in terms of foreign policy, Xi Jinping was determined to bring China to a "New Era". As a leader, he has been characterized by enhancing traditional Chinese culture and practices, as well as remaining strict in the Communist Party doctrine. One of Chinese historic landmarks was the Silk Road, named in the 19th century, but an older and more historic route for commerce connecting Europe and Asia (Hung and Chan, 2018). Central Asia has always been a "bridge" of commerce between the East and the West, and like the old Silk Road that traversed through the vast land of modern Kazakhstan, it was crucial for the new project to establish Kazakhstan as a lynchpin of the initiative.

Behind the reasons that provoked China to make the decision of embarking in a worldwide project, were the industrial overcapacity, that needed to expand to other markets; the shift from an export-oriented model towards a investment driven one; and the regional inequality within China, which left the western provinces like Xinjiang, bordering with Kazakhstan, behind (Hung and Chan, 2018). The BRI project was first presented in 2013, and Xi Jinping chose two occasions: (1) his visit in September to Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan to present the Silk Road Economic Belt; and (2) Indonesia in October to unveil the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative.

The fact that Xi Jinping chose Kazakhstan to first introduce such an important move of China send an important message, to Kazakhstan and to its regional partner Russia. It was the first time that China posed a real threat in terms of commerce, infrastructure and

investment to Russia. According to Cooley and Laurelle (2016) “China’s infrastructure ambitions in Central Asia could be interpreted as undermining Russia’s own integration project, the Eurasian Economic Union”. Moreover, the display of the Silk Road Economic Belt was done without Russian coordination, signalling Beijing’s confidence in Central Asia despite Russia’s liking. (Wolczuk & Dragneva, 2017)

And why could Kazakhstan have accepted to be part of this initiative? Mainly, because of the investment itself, which allowed the country to modernize infrastructure, and diversify its economy and markets. Nonetheless, there’s another factor that should be considered and is in line with the topic of interest. China has been conscious of the image that might project into the world, as an aggressive and dominant power, backed up by negative stereotypes about China and Chinese people. Therefore, the BRI has developed throughout the years a soft power and cultural plan guided by the motto “persuasion rather than coercion” (Zambayev, 2020). For Kazakhstan, this last aspect is crucial for two reasons. First, to balance its multivector diplomacy and still obtain benefit from the partnership; second, because of the Chinese promise of not interfering in the autonomy and sovereignty of States. The discourse pronounced by Xi Jinping on September 7th, 2013, in Nazarbayev University reflects Chinese intentions, but also unveils the beginning of Chinese presence in Kazakhstan, opening a new era for Kazakhstan’s multivector diplomacy.

In his 2013 speech at Nazarbayev University, Chinese President Xi Jinping delivers a carefully orchestrated discourse that blends historical narrative, diplomatic strategy, and emotional symbolism to announce and legitimize what would later become the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The macrostructure of the speech is layered around four interconnected themes: ancient historical ties between China and Central Asia, mentioning the mission of Zhang Qian, who was sent to Central Asia “over 2,100 years ago...to open the door to friendly contacts...as well as the Silk Road linking East and West”. Second, the current partnership rooted in peaceful coexistence “neighbours connected by common mountains and rivers”; a strategic vision for regional connectivity through the “economic belt along the Silk Road,” and a focus on youth and cultural diplomacy, drawing to the topic previously mentioned regarding the cultural side of the BRI initiative.

The schematic structure follows a diplomatic arc of gradual intensification introduced with a warm line in which Xi Jinping expresses his “great pleasure today to come to Nazarbayev University and meet with all of you”. Xi opens with praise for Kazakhstan’s progress— “a success story written by the people of Kazakhstan”—and invokes cultural and historical memory to establish emotional resonance. He moves from historical continuity saying that “Kazakhstan...has made an important contribution to the exchanges between Eastern and Western civilizations”, to his policy proposal in which he uses a “we” to invite Kazakhstan to take “an innovative approach and jointly build an ‘economic belt along the Silk Road’”. Conscious of such proposal, Xi Jinping makes sure to highlight that “we do not seek to dominate regional affairs...”. The speech closes with a visionary appeal: “Let us join hands to carry on our traditional friendship and build a bright future together.”

The lexicon combines moral-political values—“solidarity,” “mutual trust,” “win-win cooperation”—with peaceful, inclusive language. The word “friendship” appears over ten times, reinforcing relational diplomacy. He also uses personal anecdotes, like the blood donor Ruslan and the family reunion in Almaty, which serve to soften the strategic narrative, humanizing China and its intentions of regional engagement. At the same time, Xi’s polarization is subtle: while avoiding direct mention of the West, he emphasizes that China “respects the development paths” of others and will “in no circumstances interfere,” implicitly contrasting this with interventionist powers. The power structure Xi proposes is neither hegemonic nor paternalistic but cooperative and enabling, remarking continuously China’s peaceful intentions. The Chinese state is cast as a moral leader that empowers through connectivity, not control. Finally, the framing is rich in metaphor, a distinctive feature of Chinese discourses due to the high symbolism of Chinese language: the Silk Road as a symbol of shared civilizational progress; the “camel bells echoing in the mountains”, and the phrase “as close as lips and teeth” reflects physical and emotional proximity. By tying history, soft power, and strategic connectivity together, Xi positions China not only as a developmental partner, but as a benevolent shaper of a peaceful Eurasian order. Precisely this approach is what offers Kazakhstan an attractive alternative to its other “brother”, to which it is linked despite its liking.

2.5. Political Discourse Analysis of Russia President Vladimir Putin's statement at the 5th Caspian summit in 2018

After the fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of independent states, the question of how to divide the Caspian Sea rose. Because of the incapacity of the leaders at the time to reach multilateral and bilateral agreements, there was a need to create a Summit in which all the matters of dispute could be discussed between the parts. The first Caspian Summit took place in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, in 2002, and it involved all five heads of state of the littoral countries of the Caspian Sea (Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Russia, and Iran) (Coote, 2017). By 2018, when the 5th Caspian Summit was celebrated, there was still no agreement on how to manage the Caspian Sea situation. Nonetheless, it was precisely in this Summit where the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea was signed, which established the bases for territorial division (U.S. Energy Administration, 2022).

By 2018 Russia was still under sanctions of the EU because of the Crimea Annexation in 2014 (Council of the European Union). Moreover, in the same decade, as mentioned in the previous section, China had undermined the influence of Russia on its own "backyard". The Russian Federation was in a position of reinforcing its regional and traditional alliances to alleviate the clear hostility of the European Union and the rise of China's influence. On 2015 the Eurasian Economic Union was created, and according to Zabortseva (2014) the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), could also be seen as a response to China's rise, rather than an attempt to counter—or imitate—the EU bloc. In this context, Kazakhstan was carefully managing a balance between the growing presence and influence of China, and the relationship with Russia. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the promise of Russia to protect all the Russian speaking population, created a sense of alarm in Kazakhstan, especially in shared border with Russia, where most of the Russian-speaking and ethnic Russian population inhabit (Isaacs, 2020). All these factors become clear in Putin's speech in the 5th Summit of the Caspian Sea held in Aktau, Kazakhstan.

In his 2018 statement at the Fifth Caspian Summit in Aktau, President Vladimir Putin delivered a carefully crafted discourse centred on regional sovereignty, multilateral cooperation, and strategic autonomy, framed through the formalization of the *Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea*. The speech's *macrostructure* highlights five core

themes: the Convention as a historic and foundational legal achievement; the affirmation of exclusive and sovereign rights for the five littoral states; the principle of non-intervention—specifically the “non-presence of armed forces of non-regional states”; the vision of shared economic development and regional prosperity; and the commitment to intensified security cooperation amid instability in neighbouring regions like the Middle East and Afghanistan. Through this structure, Putin positions the Caspian not merely as a geographic space but as a zone of shared governance and self-determined order, projecting Russia’s commitment to stability and being leader in such chore.

The schematic structure moves from a ceremonious opening— “a very big, important and significant event”—into a detailed exposition of the Convention’s legal and political implications, followed by acknowledgment of the collaborative process and a forward-looking agenda spanning trade, energy, tourism, ecology, and counterterrorism. The speech concludes with diplomatic goodwill, including explicit praise for Kazakhstan and its president: “I would like to express our gratitude to our Kazakh friends... and to President Nursultan Nazarbayev in the first place.” This inclusion reinforces Kazakhstan’s central role in hosting and facilitating the summit and serves the purpose of positioning it as a credible and trusted actor within the regional framework.

Putin’s lexicon underscores regionalism and mutual respect, with recurring words like “Caspian,” “cooperation,” “mutual,” “security,” “trust,” and “common heritage.” The language avoids confrontation and instead emphasizes balanced, inclusive, and law-based collaboration. The term “our common heritage” reframes the Caspian Sea not as a contested borderland but as a collective responsibility. There is clear polarization embedded within the speech, though subtly conveyed. Putin contrasts the peaceful, cooperative approach of the Caspian Five with the instability of “hotbeds of tension” in neighbouring regions and the risks posed by “non-regional armed forces.” This draws an implicit boundary between the legitimate authority of regional actors and the perceived intrusion of external powers, reinforcing the idea of Russia as a regional leader, and not third states that can interfere in the traditional sphere of influence.

In terms of power structures, Putin affirms a model of horizontal multilateralism, crediting the “high level of trust and mutual understanding” among the Caspian states for the treaty’s success. Yet, Russia is subtly framed as the coordinator of this process—acknowledged through his role in summarizing the collective achievement and defining

the strategic agenda since it “developed and adopted this strategic, fundamental document”. His praise of Kazakhstan not only fulfils diplomatic protocol but also validates Astana’s role as a mature diplomatic actor, and a solid partner for Russia’s initiatives and narratives. Finally, the framing is symbolic and regionalist. The Caspian is presented as a “our common heritage”, drawing the line between who can decide in the matter and therefore who cannot. In this narrative, Russia emerges not as a hegemon, but as a guarantor of regional peace and balance, with Kazakhstan as a trusted partner in maintaining this vision, a role much needed in the context in which Russia was submerged.

2.6. Political Discourse Analysis of Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev’s inaugural speech in 2019

On March 19th, 2019, Nursultan Nazarbayev resigned unexpectedly from its presidential duties. Continuedly and highlighting foreign policy as a pillar of the Kazakh state, he advocated for professional diplomat Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to assume the leadership. Tokayev was crucial in the implementation of multivector diplomacy during the early years of the independence, due to his deep knowledge on international institutions and mechanisms. According to Isaacs (2020), Tokayev “represented not a coloured revolution, but rather a ‘beige transition’”, the optimal character to ensure Nazarbayev’s continuity and therefore Kazakhstan’s *status quo*. His first address to the nation in 2019 shows the key features of the Nazarbayev-Tokayev transition, and sheds light over the upcoming era of Kazakh relations with Russia and China.

In his 2019 inauguration speech, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev constructed a powerful narrative of national renewal, civic responsibility, and moral leadership, while also explicitly highlighting Kazakhstan’s strategic partnerships with both Russia and China. The speech’s macrostructure revolves around reform and transformation: Tokayev declares that “Kazakhstan is entering a new era,” underscoring constitutional reforms, the renewal of political institutions, and the commitment to building a “Just Kazakhstan.” Justice, unity, and civic engagement are central themes, with the repeated affirmation that “the trust of the people is the amanat entrusted to me,” reflecting his moral-political legitimacy.

Structurally, the schematic organization moves from electoral legitimacy and a personal oath to specific policy goals and long-term national vision. Tokayev grounds his

presidency in popular support “The election campaign...showed that civil society had become a full-fledged institution” and frames his agenda as a collective mission– “We have one homeland, one state, and one nation!” Alongside emotion he proposes pragmatic outline of initiatives, including rural development, anti-corruption, industrialization, and institutional reform.

Crucially, in discussing foreign policy, Tokayev explicitly mentions both Russia and China as strategic partners. He states: “Mutually beneficial cooperation and strategic partnership with neighbouring countries – Russia, China and brotherly countries of Central Asia, with partners in integration alliances – will be a priority.” With this direct reference affirms Kazakhstan’s multi-vector foreign policy, and his willingness to continue it, positioning Russia and China as equal and essential partners in Kazakhstan’s diplomatic orientation. The mention of “integration alliances” likely refers to institutions such as the EAEU and SCO, reinforcing regional connectivity without prioritizing one partner over another. At the same time, Tokayev frames Kazakhstan’s international posture as sovereign and balanced, grounded in “modern international law and the UN Charter.” A statement that differs with China’s and Russia’s intention to construct a new international order, and their sometimes reluctance to adhere to international norms.

Through his lexicon, Tokayev uses morally charged language –“justice,” “unity,” “sacred duty,” “trust,” and “honour”–to build an image of a new and strong president committed to Kazakhstan’s sovereignty and strong leadership. The polarization in the speech contrasts a renewed, just Kazakhstan with a past of corruption and disengagement: “All those who illegally hinder... will be severely punished.” The power structure Tokayev reinforces the strong presidential leadership characteristic of Kazakhstan, with accountable institutions and meritocracy: “Strong President - influential Parliament - accountable Government.” He pledges to personally oversee implementation of reforms, while emphasizing participatory governance. Ultimately, Tokayev frames Kazakhstan’s future as one of ethical leadership, national solidarity, and strategic engagement with key neighbours, especially Russia and China, whose inclusion in the speech signals their continued geopolitical centrality to Kazakhstan’s development and foreign policy.

2.7. Political Discourse Analysis of Chinese President Xi Jinping's letter to Kazakhstan in 2024

The following three speeches were delivered in 2024, a year preceded by the beginning of an eventful decade, and several challenges that had been carried onto 2025. Even though the dissertation will provide context nuances under each section, it is relevant to give a general context that sheds light over the events that not only shaped Kazakhstan's foreign policy but have been shaking the international order. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the global order and obliged countries to rethink supply chains and global interdependence. Moreover, it brought debates related to China's role and handling of the crisis. In 2022, Russia entered the territory of Ukraine under the claim of a "special operation" that was not intended to last as long. The operation triggered massive sanctions against Russia and reignited the debate over Russian areas of influence. This event will be further developed in section six regarding the case study on the Russian Invasion of Ukraine. Furthermore, the competition between China and the US intensified, unveiling a more aggressive spot of China, especially in matters like Taiwan. Lastly, the Russian invasion of Ukraine resulted in a global energy security crisis, in which Kazakhstan could benefit due to its richness in uranium, oil, and gas.

In this context, Xi Jinping travelled to Astana on July 2nd, 2024, with the purpose of a state visit right before the 24th meeting Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) celebrated in Kazakhstan (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Eritrea, 2024). Despite the governmental transition in Kazakhstan, Tokayev has remained loyal to the multivector diplomacy and its compromises with China. Many times, undermining matters related to human rights in order to enhance the benefits of an economic partnership with the Popular Republic. During the first years of Tokayev's mandate (2019-2024) China has solidified its position as Kazakhstan's first financial partner, surpassing Russia and has made other advancements in people-to-people exchanges and security compromises (Dukeyev, 2024).

In his July 2024 letter to the people of Kazakhstan, Chinese President Xi Jinping offered vision of China-Kazakhstan relations. The macrostructure of the letter emphasizes historical ties, as a pattern of Xi's discourses, "Over 2,000 years ago, Zhang Qian... opened the door to friendship and exchanges between China and Central Asia" and builds toward strategic goals such as the "permanent comprehensive strategic partnership,"

economic integration through the Belt and Road Initiative, and joint efforts to uphold multilateralism. Xi highlights that it was “in Kazakhstan where he first proposed the Silk Road Economic Belt”, underscoring Astana’s special symbolic and strategic place in China’s Eurasian diplomacy. Economic ties are quantified in hyperbolic terms: “our two-way trade registered a record high of US\$41 billion,” and “cross-border travel reached 600,000 movements thanks to mutual visa exemptions”. These achievements are complemented by soft power initiatives like Confucius Institutes and the Kazakh campus of Northwestern Polytechnical University, all intended to build “an everlasting China-Kazakhstan friendship.”

The schematic structure of the letter follows a diplomatic progression: from a historical narrative to shared achievements and policy alignment, emphasizing the cultural and emotional closeness that translates in a global vision. Xi repeatedly accents that China “will support Kazakhstan in upholding its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity”, presenting China as both a respectful neighbour, like it has done throughout the years. At the same time, he states that China and Kazakhstan “will work together to build an equal and orderly multipolar world... and oppose hegemonism, power politics and bloc confrontation,” a clear yet indirect polarization against Western models of influence, and at the same time an offer to Kazakhstan to join China’s bloc in the building of the new order. Importantly, although the letter is sent on the occasion of the SCO Astana Summit, Russia is never— a significant discursive choice that elevates China as Kazakhstan’s primary partner and the SCO’s moral leader. This omission allows China to frame itself as the prime enabler of Eurasian stability and integration, decoupling its leadership from traditional shared role with Moscow.

Xi’s lexicon reinforces this posture through emotionally resonant language: “friendship” and “cooperation” appear frequently, while metaphors like “five fingers held together make a powerful fist” and “as frequently as relatives do” humanize and soften China’s rising influence. The power structure is presented as balanced yet clearly led by China. Xi offers support, access to markets, and political backing, while encouraging Kazakhstan’s proactive role within shared frameworks like the UN and SCO. Altogether, the letter carefully crafts a vision in which China emerges as Kazakhstan’s principal strategic partner —economically, culturally, and ideologically— and positions this relationship as the model for a peaceful, multipolar Eurasian future.

2.8. Political Discourse Analysis of Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's speech at the SCO Summit in 2024

Days later after the previous letter, and in this world context Tokayev delivered his speech at the 24th SCO Summit in Astana. In his 2024 address at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev presented a discourse that combined regional leadership, institutional reform, and multilateral diplomacy. The macrostructure of the speech focuses on Kazakhstan's achievements as SCO Chair – “Kazakhstan, as the SCO Chair, has fully accomplished all the goals and objectives declared at the previous summit” – as well as priority themes including peace and security, economic resilience, connectivity, and institutional modernization. In this narrative, the SCO is framed as a platform capable of promoting peace, harmony, and development across Eurasia, and Kazakhstan is presented as both initiator and bridge-builder.

The schematic structure follows a summit speech format: Tokayev opens with praise for Astana as “a recognized centre of international politics,” followed by a review of Kazakhstan's accomplishments, detailed presentation of four strategic priorities (security, economy, transport, reform), and a diplomatic handover. Notably, China and Russia are explicitly mentioned: Tokayev offers warm congratulations to President Xi Jinping for assuming the SCO chairmanship and expresses confidence in China's future leadership – “Kazakhstan will provide all possible assistance to your forthcoming responsible mission.” Additionally, Russia is acknowledged as an active economic stakeholder: “China, Russia, India, Uzbekistan, and the Kyrgyz Republic are already actively working” on the Astana International Financial Centre platform. The direct mention to Chinese leadership beyond protocolary, is also a statement of support and alliance. Meanwhile, Russia is mentioned with the rest of the countries, not highlighting any specific aspect.

Tokayev's lexicon balances technical and moral registers, with frequent repetition of words like “cooperation,” “peace,” “stability,” and “mutual trust.” The term “cooperation” alone appears over a dozen times, emphasizing a multilateral ethos. At the same time, he uses emotionally charged phrases – “calling humanity to peace, creation, and mutual trust”. Polarization in the speech is implicit but significant. While no external actors are named, Tokayev clearly contrasts the SCO's “constructive role” and “democratic basis” with the current “acute crisis in the entire system of international relations” and the “erosion of international law.” These contrasts implicitly critique Western-dominated institutions or

unilateral actors without overt confrontation, aligning with the SCO's strategic ambiguity, and with Kazakhstan's foreign policy, in which western countries still play part.

In terms of power structures, Tokayev constructs a horizontal model: the SCO is portrayed as an organization where "the voices and interests of all its member states are equally taken into account." Yet, he also recognizes China's rising leadership role, stating confidently that the "Chinese chairmanship will make a significant contribution to further enhancing the global authority of the SCO." At the same time, Kazakhstan is not passive – its policy proposals, such as the SCO Economic Preference Base and the UN SDG Center in Almaty, show that Astana seeks to shape the agenda, not merely follow it. Finally, Tokayev's framing is future-oriented and moral. He speaks of the SCO as a "guarantor of peace and security throughout the Eurasian continent" and describes Kazakhstan's initiatives as driven by "a sincere desire to contribute to our common noble goals." This framing reinforces the goal of Kazakhstan to picture an image of a responsible and trustworthy regional actor.

2.9. Political Discourse Analysis of Vladimir Putin's article for *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* in 2024

Two years after the Russian entrance in Ukrainian territory, Putin has recurred to Russia's traditional spheres of influence. Nonetheless, some states –among them Kazakhstan– have not actively and explicitly taken part for Russia. In the case of Kazakhstan, it has distanced itself from Russia's aggression while seeking other partners (Dumoulin, 2022). As well as Xi Jinping issued a letter to Kazakhstan previous to the SCO Summit, Putin decided to do so through an article in one of the principal Kazakh newspapers. In this context Putin published in November 2024 an article in *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* constructs an emotive narrative of Russia–Kazakhstan relations, framed as a unique historical alliance now evolving into a model of modern integration and sovereignty.

The macrostructure of the article is built around six key themes: historical friendship and moral-cultural ties; strategic economic integration through the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and logistics corridors; technological-industrial cooperation; shared cultural and educational projects; a collective memory of WWII; and commitment to a multipolar world order rooted in international law. The article positions the Russia–Kazakhstan partnership not just as bilateral diplomacy but as a historical bond – "Our partnership is

based on the traditions of friendship, good-neighborliness and mutual assistance... built on the inviolable principles of equality and respect.”

The schematic structure unfolds from a personal and symbolic introduction – “I would like to share my vision... on the eve of my state visit” – through concrete economic achievements and shared institutional projects and culminates in appeals to common heritage and a multipolar future. Putin emphasizes regular and close relations with President Tokayev, including “synchronizing watches” on global issues. The article details large-scale cooperation: \$28 billion in trade turnover, \$13 billion in Russian investments, 23,000 joint enterprises, and key energy and logistics projects such as the Caspian Pipeline Consortium and North-South corridor.

The lexicon is dominated by soft power language: “joint,” “mutual,” “cooperation,” “trust,” “brotherhood,” and “peace.” The article names Kazakhstan and Tokayev repeatedly and with praise, while Russia is framed as a benevolent enabler and respectful partner, a nuance that was not as explicit in previous discourses. Putin also thanks Kazakhstan for its support of the Russian language, its role in founding an International Organization for the Russian Language and acknowledges the planned opening of more Russian-language schools and a new MGIMO branch in Astana. A key difference with previous discourses is the explicit focus on soft power plans, beyond mere economic cooperation based on historical ties. China is notably not mentioned in the article, which could be a strategic omission given the current geopolitical context. This allows Putin to present Russia as Kazakhstan’s primary historical, cultural, and geopolitical partner, uncontested by any other great power.

The polarization in the article is implicit: the Russia–Kazakhstan partnership is cast as morally legitimate, sovereign, and productive, in contrast to unnamed external forces associated with “negative political conjuncture” and threats to commercial independence – thus avoiding direct mention of Western powers while still opposing unipolar influence. The power structures presented are formally horizontal but subtly strategic. While cooperation is emphasized, Russia acts as coordinator and capacity provider, via Rosatom, trade platforms, interregional forums, and energy routes. Kazakhstan is acknowledged as a sovereign peer, yet Russia is clearly the driving force in maintaining and expanding this system.

Finally, the framing is emotional and makes sure to remind Kazakhstan the long history of its relations with Russia. Russia and Kazakhstan are “as close as brothers,” linked through WWII sacrifice, Soviet legacy, and post-Soviet integration. The article concludes with a vision of a multipolar world and Kazakhstan’s rising role, including its invitation to join BRICS as a partner state, a move that further integrates Astana into Russia-led frameworks. A common discourse feature among those who are reticent to the current world order, is the hope and assumption of leadership to build a new one, which they claim would be multipolar, and would include every oppressed state in the world. Altogether, Putin’s article is a discursive reaffirmation of regional primacy, moral legitimacy, and strategic interdependence, designed to reinforce Russia’s centrality in Kazakhstan’s present and future, without ever invoking China.

3. Media discourse analysis

These are topics that force Kazakhstan to take a stance on more sensitive issues regarding China and Russia. This section applies Media Discourse Analysis to examine the news on the topic of the alleged violations of human rights in the Chinese province of Xinjiang. The analysis begins with a brief contextual overview of the media environment in China and Russia, drawing on insights from Reporters Without Borders (RSF). The methodology follows a structured analytical framework: it starts by defining the objective, which in both cases aim to support the belief that state media reinforces the official discourse presented in the section above. Subsequent steps involve examining macrostructures, applying the ideological square to identify polarization, and conducting micro-level analysis of language use, pragmatics, rhetorical strategies, and underlying ideological structures (Van Dijk, 2009).

3.1. Media situation in Kazakhstan, Russia and China

The context of the media situation in all three countries, Kazakhstan, Russia, and China will be based on the annual index issued by Reporters without borders, which analyses the media landscape of the country, along with economic, political, legal, sociocultural, and security framework.

Country	2023	2024
Kazakhstan	134/180	↓ 142/180

China	179/180	📈 172/180
Russia	164/180	📈 162/180

Source: [Reporters without Borders](#) Author: own elaboration

Kazakhstan

According to Reporters without Borders, as to 2024, Kazakhstan’s media environment is undergoing a dual transformation: while the quality of online journalism is gradually improving, mechanisms of repression are also becoming more sophisticated, particularly in the digital space, one of the few remaining arenas for independent expression. Traditional media have largely been used to echo official narrative due to years of restrictive reforms. In response, journalists have turned to alternative platforms like YouTube and Telegram to launch projects that challenge pro-government messaging. However, these efforts operate within a heavily constrained political context. For example, during the January 2022 protests, authorities solved the unrest with police intervention, media blackouts, and censorship of journalists.

Economic pressures also play a role. Independent media, such as *Vlast.kz*, *Uralskaya Nedelya*, and *KazTAG* excluded from state subsidies, must compete with government-funded outlets that can afford lower advertising rates. Still, the government offers them public funding in exchange of not touching on sensitive national topics (Nussipov & Dragomir, 2019). Social attitudes further complicate the landscape, as journalists face public skepticism, accusations of corruption, and physical threats. (Reporters without Borders, 2024).

China

China’s media system is defined by centralization in which major outlets, such as *Xinhua News Agency*, *China Central Television (CCTV)*, and the *People’s Daily*, operate under the Party’s directives. At the core is the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) Propaganda Department, which issues regular directives to media outlets about what can and cannot be reported. These instructions are often informal and *ad hoc*, which creates a system of “adaptive improvisation” where journalists must constantly interpret and anticipate political red lines (Repnikova, 2017).

Journalistic activity is under surveillance of legal provisions that allow the prosecution of individuals on charges such as “subversion” or “picking quarrels,” often resulting in extended detention without trial. Economically, the media sector remains profitable but is almost entirely aligned with party interests, with legislative proposals under consideration that would prohibit private investment altogether. This consolidation is occurring alongside the decrease of both domestic and foreign correspondents, who face growing logistical, technological, and legal barriers to independent reporting (Reporters without Borders, 2024).

Russia

Russia’s media environment has significantly worsened since the start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022. Independent news outlets such as *Meduza* and *TV Rain* have been labelled “undesirable organisations,” making it a criminal offense to mention or engage with them, while most others have been blocked or branded as “foreign agents.” International broadcasters like Euronews and the BBC are no longer accessible, and the remaining media, mostly state-owned or affiliated with Kremlin-linked entities, operate under direct instructions from the presidential administration (Reporters without Borders, 2024).

The legal environment is also critically punitive, with offenses such as spreading “false information” about Russian military operations now punishable by up to 15 years in prison. Many of the legal changes that originated during COVID-19 have worsened during wartime. As today, journalists face intimidation, including fines, detentions, cyber harassment, and even surveillance of family members. Many have chosen exile, though even abroad they remain vulnerable to prosecution *in absentia*, highlighting the cross-border nature of the current climate of media repression (Reporters without Borders, 2024).

3.2. Human Rights issues in Xinjiang

This section examines how *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, *Xinhua News* and *Moscow Times* represent the issue of human rights in China’s Xinjiang region using a Media Discourse Analysis framework. The objective is to investigate how topics such as Uyghur repression are framed, or omitted, in Kazakhstan’s, China’s and Russia’s official media, and how these representations align with the state’s diplomatic positioning.

Kazakhstan's geographical proximity to Xinjiang, combined with its economic and political ties to China, makes this issue highly sensitive. The selected articles dated, 2013, and 2023, highlight cooperation and trade between Kazakhstan and Xinjiang while avoiding any reference to any human rights situation. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, since 2017 between 800.000 and two million Uyghurs have been retained in the so-called by the Chinese government "vocational education and training centers" (Maizland, 2022). While international media have been widely covering the situation ever since, the *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* has not mentioned any human rights issue to date. Moreover, Amnesty International published an article on 2019 demanding Kazakhstan to not return asylum-seekers to Xinjian⁴. Instead of covering certain sensitive issues, the articles focus on trade deals, and regional development partnerships, effectively depoliticizing the region and enhancing the benefit of cooperation with China, specially through the Xinjian region.

At the macrostructural level, each article is structured around themes of economic cooperation and regional connectivity. The most recent article titled "Tokayev: Kazakhstan is ready to increase exports to Xinjiang", President Tokayev is quoted saying, "Kazakhstan is interested in increasing mutual trade, in particular the supply of environmentally friendly agricultural products to Xinjiang" (Kazpravda.kz, 2023)., while the 2014 article, written when the first signs of Chinese intervention in Xinjiang resonated internationally, is titled "Uyghur separatism in China will be calmed with marriage capital". It describes the situation in Xinjiang as a domestic challenge for China without any ethical judgment. The article notes: "The authorities are trying to stabilize the situation not only through the construction of infrastructure... but also through strengthening the ideological core of Uyghur society – the institution of marriage" (Kazpravda.kz, 2021).

The overall tone is pragmatic and development-oriented, reinforcing a narrative of normal and mutually beneficial relations. In discussing Uyghur separatism, for instance, the article avoids mentioning detention centers, instead noting that "the Chinese authorities are investing in building kindergartens, schools, and even marriage support programs to improve social cohesion" (Kazpravda.kz, 2014). The use of the term "social cohesion" instead of "surveillance" or "assimilation" indicates a reframing of security policy into a

⁴ Full article in: https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp_content/uploads/2021/05/EUR5715722019ENGLISH.pdf

narrative of social development. The articles rely heavily on state actors and institutional language, presenting initiatives as technical and unproblematic. On the other hand, the 2023 discourse highlights Kazakhstan's role as a reliable economic partner and emphasizes China's development efforts, while omitting or downplaying any narratives of human rights violations. The ideological framing constructs Xinjiang as a promising site of investment and infrastructure.

On the microstructural level, the language used is neutral. Terms such as “cooperation,” “readiness,” and “supplies” dominate the narrative. In the article that touches on Uyghur separatism, the framing focuses on economic incentives (e.g., “marriage capital”) as tools of stabilization, without any critical reflection on their social implications. The rhetorical strategies reinforce depoliticization: metaphors, euphemisms, and neutral bureaucratic language are used to present cooperation as natural and uncontested. In this sense, the discourse constructs economic engagement as the default mode of interaction between Kazakhstan and Xinjiang, while simultaneously masking deeper ideological and ethical tensions. Human rights issues are not contested or debated—they are simply excluded. Moreover, the audience is positioned to interpret Xinjiang through a lens of commerce and connectivity rather than as a site of crisis.

When cross-referenced with the conditions of media production and reception, the alignment with state narratives becomes more evident. Popular impressions of China are often negatively biased in Kazakhstan. Nonetheless, the government is trying to maintain a positive image to reinforce and even justify the amicable relationship that both countries enjoy nowadays.

Following the analysis, *Xinhua News Agency*, a state news agency, that following the Party's guideline, has been extremely careful when writing news on Xinjiang. In China, topics related to ethnic minorities and national unity are particularly sensitive, and Xinjiang, home to the Uyghur population, has been at the center of global scrutiny.. The two articles selected are one in Spanish (2019), highlighting poverty alleviation, and another in English (2024), focused on counterterrorism offer a window into how Xinjiang is discursively reframed to justify policy while sidelining criticism.

At the macrostructural level, the first article Spanish, 2019 presents an image gallery featuring Uyghur residents of Xinjiang in improved housing and modernized

neighborhoods. The theme of poverty reduction dominates the narrative, and the government is portrayed as the agent of positive change, providing resources to help residents "escape backward conditions." The second article (2024) focuses on national security. It opens with a clear ideological framing: "Xinjiang has been a main battleground in China's fight against terrorism, separatism, and extremism." This frames the region as a site of national security concern and justifying strict security policies as necessary for stability.

Applying the ideological square reveals a stark dichotomy. "We" (the Chinese state) are cast as modernizers, protectors, and developers, while "They" (extremist elements) are depicted as threats to peace and order. Uyghurs, when mentioned, are framed either as grateful beneficiaries of state-led development or as individuals vulnerable to radicalization. The narrative emphasizes state benevolence and necessity of control, while delegitimizing alternative perspectives as foreign interference or misinformation.

The microstructural elements reinforce this dichotomy. In the Spanish-language article, the language reinforces the positive image of the state, using terms such as "modern homes," "improved livelihoods," and "government assistance." The residents are photographed smiling, living in bright homes, and participating in cultural activities. In the English-language article, terms like "combat," "extremism," and "protect the people" dominate, along with the use of vague collective nouns (e.g., "forces hostile to China").

Rhetorically, depoliticize the issue. In the development-focused article, poverty alleviation is framed as a humanitarian mission, avoiding any political conflict. In the security-focused article, the justification of policy is rooted in a discourse of protection and anti-terrorism, echoing global post-9/11 narratives that validate state surveillance and intervention. At the cognitive and ideological level, the framing promotes state paternalism and national unity. The representation of Uyghurs as passive recipients of state aid or as potential threats serves to naturalize the CCP's role as both caregiver and protector. These narratives construct mental models that align with the broader ideological goals of Xi Jinping's administration: to portray China as a harmonious, multi-ethnic state where dissent is equated with instability.

Lastly, an analysis of four articles from *The Moscow Times* reveals contrasting narratives around China's policies in Xinjiang and the regional reactions from Russia and Central

Asia. At the macrostructural level, each article frames Xinjiang through different lenses. In “Russia Among 37 States Backing China's Policy in Xinjiang”, the article reports that Russia and others supported China’s internal actions, quoting the joint letter sent to the UN: “Faced with the grave challenge of terrorism and extremism, China has undertaken a series of counter-terrorism and deradicalization measures in Xinjiang” (Reuters, 2019). The article also includes the Chinese government’s defense of the so-called “vocational education and training centers,” noting they “have now been graduated from, with attendees having found stable employment” (Reuters, 2019). In contrast, “C. Asian Uighurs Fear Violence” centers on the impact of these policies, highlighting the psychological effects on diaspora communities. One passage reads: “It’s a strong psychological blow for Uighurs in Kazakhstan” (Leonard 2019), attending to human rights concerns like other international media.

The microstructure changes slightly throughout the articles. The first article on how “Russia supports China’s Policy in Xinjiang” (2019), employs formal political phrasing, with terms such as “counter-terrorism” and “deradicalization,” reflecting the Chinese government’s language. The article “Anti-Terror Exercises Only a First Step” (2003) also mirrors official terminology from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), discussing joint efforts to combat “the so-called ‘three evil forces’, separatism, extremism and terrorism.” This language only reflects a security-oriented issue, leaving aside any concern of human rights implications. In contrast, the article “Creating Freedonias in China and Russia” (2009) uses metaphor and historical analogy, warning of the dangers of authoritarian leadership. It asserts: “Oppression is a package deal. It starts with rewriting history and ends with barbed wire” (Gebert, 2009). This shift in tone from institutional to critical is a clear departure from state-aligned narratives.

Applying van Dijk’s ideological square, the first two articles portray China and its allies (including Russia and Kazakhstan) as responsible actors fighting extremism. There is at all times a collective “we”, as those seeking for the security of their nations. For example, the joint statement cited in the first article praises China for achieving “remarkable achievements in the field of human rights” (Reuters, 2019), in contrast to the prevailing international narrative. Meanwhile, the Uighur communities described in “C. Asian Uighurs Fear Violence” are explicitly driven by fear: “Public reactions among Uighur

minorities in Central Asia have been muted... amid fears that governments might crack down on protesters to appease China” (Leonard, 2009).

At the ideological and cognitive level, the articles reflect two opposing mental models. The first sees stability and counter-terrorism as crucial for the security of a nation, accepting China’s internal policies as necessary measures. This model supports sovereignty and non-interference as core principles, which are the mottos that China praises in its foreign policy. The second model, evident in the more critical pieces, warns against sacrificing individual rights for state control. It reflects on the experiences of marginalized groups and raises alarms about regional authoritarian convergence. Considering production and reception, *The Moscow Times*, an English-language independent outlet operating in Russia, is a more “West oriented” newspaper, which tries to adapt to a narrative that might be more focused on human rights. While it does not condemn China, it raises concerns about certain aspects.

3.3. Case study: Russian war against Ukraine

One event requires of more analysis, since it represents the most current episode in which Kazakhstan has had to challenge its multivector diplomacy. To analyze such conflict, the thesis will greatly rely on the analysis provided by M. Dumoulin (2023) about “How Russia’s War on Ukraine is reshaping Kazakhstan”. The Russian war against Ukraine has profoundly reshaped regional dynamics not only in Europe, but also in Central Asia, compelling states like Kazakhstan to adopt postures that signal an increasing reluctance to Russia’s expansionist claims. While Kazakhstan still follows a "multi-vector" foreign policy, the shock of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has pushed Astana to reconsider its partnerships. Notably, this recalibration increasingly favours stronger engagement with China, as evidenced by political, economic, and strategic shifts since 2022.

Kazakhstan’s initial response to the Russian aggression to Ukraine was carefully designed to preserve neutrality while reaffirming its sovereignty. The deputy foreign minister, Roman Vasilenko, reassured that Kazakhstan did not wish to “find itself behind a new iron curtain”. President Tokayev publicly rejected the recognition of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, directly confronting Putin at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2022. Moreover, President Tokayev has met with Volodimir Zelensky on several occasions since February 2022. Nevertheless, this

balancing act has not shielded Kazakhstan from Russian backlash. Russian media figures and politicians accused Kazakhstan of "ingratitude" and raised questions about its territorial integrity, implicitly threatening consequences like Ukraine's (Dumoulin, 2023).

Scaping from such aggressive rhetoric from its historical partner Russia, China offers Kazakhstan several advantages as an alternative strategic partner: economic capital, infrastructural investment through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and political support without democratic conditionality. As Greitens (2022) notes, China's overarching objective in the Russian's aggression to Ukraine has been to undermine U.S.-led alliances and promote its Global Security Initiative (GSI), which reframes global governance around principles of sovereignty and non-interference. This aligns closely with Kazakhstan's domestic concerns about national unity, identity, and managing Russian influence. The growing perception that the Western order is no longer reliable, and the aggressiveness of Russia, makes China a convenient partner for Kazakhstan.

But is this shift towards China truly happening? One of the clearest signals of Kazakhstan's pivot toward China is the importance given by Chinese Foreign policy to such relations. Xi Jinping's choice of Astana as the destination for his first foreign visit after the COVID-19 pandemic, was widely interpreted as symbolic of Kazakhstan's central role in China's regional strategy and an endorsement of President Tokayev's leadership. Notably, this visit occurred amidst tense relations between Kazakhstan and Russia and served to reinforce Kazakhstan's geopolitical autonomy. Moreover, even though China's economic engagement in Kazakhstan precedes the Russian war against Ukraine, it has intensified since it commenced. Kazakhstan is a major node in the BRI, serving as the overland gateway to Europe. In the context of Western sanctions against Russia, China has had an incentive to reroute logistics and commercial activities through Kazakhstan. At the same time, the Tokayev government has actively sought to reduce its reliance on Russian exports and infrastructure. Disruptions to Kazakhstan's oil transit through Russian pipelines, interpreted by many as punitive acts, have highlighted the risks of overdependence on Russia. In contrast, China offers investment in alternative transport routes and energy infrastructure, which aligns with Kazakhstan's goals of economic diversification and strategic autonomy. Moreover, Kazakhstan's younger generation, especially the urban middle class, is increasingly distancing itself from Russian narratives. A growing number are turning toward the Kazakh language, rejecting the dominance of

Russian media, and participating in humanitarian efforts for Ukraine—such as the symbolic installation of Kazakh yurts in Ukrainian cities to support civilians during winter (Dumoulin, 2023).

While the Chinese political model does not inspire popular admiration in Kazakhstan, China's non-interference stance and material offerings appeal to the government, which as the previous section has proved, has been trying to undermine negative comments about China to enhance the benefits of the titling towards the bilateral relationship.

Another indicator of Kazakhstan's evolving foreign policy posture is its behaviour in UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolutions related to the Ukraine conflict. While many of Russia's traditional allies, including Belarus and Syria, voted against resolutions condemning the invasion or suspending Russia from international bodies, Kazakhstan consistently chose to abstain. For instance, it abstained from the March 2022 resolution demanding Russia's immediate withdrawal from Ukraine⁵, and from the April 2022 vote to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council ⁶ (Yuneman, 2023). Though abstention may seem neutral on the surface, in the context of Kazakhstan's close ties with Russia, it has been widely interpreted as a deliberate signal of disapproval. These votes mark a significant departure from Kazakhstan's previous alignment patterns and reflect a broader recalibration of its international alignments. The abstentions allowed Kazakhstan to preserve its bilateral relationship with Moscow while reaffirming its independence and opposition to the violation of territorial integrity. These resolutions are relevant because they align with China's own behaviour in the UN, where Beijing has also largely abstained rather than opposed resolutions targeting Russia, thus providing a diplomatic model that Kazakhstan appears increasingly inclined to emulate (Dumoulin, 2023).

Kazakhstan's tilt toward China does not mean it has abandoned completely its traditional multi-vector diplomacy. Kazakhstan has simultaneously deepened relations with Turkey, Gulf states, and the EU, but in the hypothetical case, China could stand out as the partner best positioned to supplant Russia's influence. Nevertheless, this shift toward China is not without risks. Kazakhstan has been cautious not to provoke Russia outright. Its abstentions at the UN, continued membership in Russian-led organizations like the CSTO and EAEU, and hesitancy to limit Russian media domestically all reflect its strategic

⁵ Extended information in: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113152>

⁶ Extended information in: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1115782>

vulnerability. According to Hess (2023) “Despite Moscow’s diminished influence in Central Asia, regional states cannot afford to completely ignore Russian interests”.

Findings and conclusions

The dissertation explores how Kazakhstan balances its foreign policy towards Russia and China, and does so by also considering Kazakhstan as an actor with agency and national identity, that influences such decisions. It begins by contextualizing Kazakhstan’s emergence as a sovereign state in 1991 and the formulation of its multi-vector diplomacy under President Nazarbayev. The literature review examines mainstream realist and neorealist perspectives, which frame Kazakhstan as a passive actor balancing external pressures. In contrast, this study introduces a constructivist framework, emphasizing how national identity, historical narratives, and social norms shape state behavior in the international arena.

Using PDA and MDA based on Teun van Dijk’s methodology, the core of the research analyzes political speeches and media representations from Kazakhstan, Russia, and China. Nine political speeches by Nazarbayev, Tokayev, Putin, and Xi Jinping, are examined, as well as state media coverage on the issue of violation of human rights in Xinjiang. These sources reveal how each country constructs its geopolitical identity and how Kazakhstan discursively manages to reinforce its agency while balancing between Russia and China. Afterwards, Kazakhstan’s response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine highlights is used to illustrate these dynamics, and support the hypothesis that Kazakhstan is slowly but firmly drifting away from Russia and its narratives. Kazakhstan has refused to recognize separatist regions, abstained from critical UN votes, and maintained economic ties with both Russia and China. Xi Jinping’s 2024 state visit and Kazakhstan’s hosting of the SCO summit position China as a substitute for Russia as Kazakhstan’s most influential partner, but always framed as a strategic and diplomatic opportunity rather than a realignment of alliances. The analysis reveals how Kazakhstan's discourse shows an effort to gradually shift away from Russian dominance, while embracing Chinese economic partnership. This is further evidenced by several key findings.

First, it uses differentiated strategic narratives. With Russia, Kazakhstan’s discourse reflects cautious continuity, invoking shared history but avoiding overt endorsement of expansionist policies. With China, Kazakhstan projects a vision of partnership grounded

in development and respect for sovereignty—principles that align with the BRI narrative and China’s soft power strategy. Second, in the international arena Kazakhstan is not fully aligning with China, but it is definitely not aligning with Russia. Kazakhstan’s abstention in UN votes, its dialogue with Ukraine, and its balanced engagement in the SCO illustrate a foreign policy guided by the principle of sovereignty rather than just material interest, a principle that China says to respect in all its partnerships. Finally, going beyond the neorealist portrayal of Kazakhstan’s foreign policy, the dissertation has been able to prove that Kazakhstan is not a mere passive actor with just materialistic goals, but an active state which also decides its international alignment based on national identity and core values of Kazakhstan as a nation. Moreover, media analysis supports these findings. Kazakhstani state media sidesteps controversial topics such as human rights abuses in Xinjiang. The framing is neutral, careful, and avoids antagonizing either power. However, there is a notable absence of criticism toward China and a discursive effort to normalize Chinese presence and cooperation, even as Sinophobic undercurrents persist in Kazakh society.

In sum, while discursive proximity to Russia persists, particularly via historical narratives, shared cultural memory, and institutional frameworks like the CSTO and EAEU, there is a growing discursive and strategic alignment with China. Xi Jinping’s speeches and China’s state-led narratives emphasize mutual respect and non-interference, which align with Kazakhstan’s sovereignty-driven rhetoric. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) along with its soft power strategies frame China as an attractive partner, and maybe an alternative to its former and most influential partner, Russia. By contrast, Russia’s discourse continues to evoke nostalgia and emphasizes historical bonds and “brotherhood.” However, due to events like the invasion of Ukraine Kazakhstan has asserted its territorial integrity and neutrality more strongly, which aligns with China’s speech and partnership conditions. Even though Putin’s rhetoric draws back to traditional and cultural ties, it does not emphasize on Kazakhstan’s sovereignty and multipolar cooperation.

Nonetheless, relations between China and Kazakhstan are not as strongly based and developed like those with Russia. First, because of cultural affinity among populations, and also because the strong power that Russia still holds in the regions. The main aim of this dissertation is to open the question of regional stability and do so through a different

approach that goes beyond economic and geopolitical assumptions. Central Asia is a crucial region not only for those in and around it, but for the whole world. As Kazakhstan tries to emphasize, the region is a bridge between the east and the west, and the agency of those states *in* it, not only of the superpowers with interests, must always be taken into account.

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