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Middle Powers in the Midst of Great Power Rivalries: the Case of Kazakhstan

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Abstract

The middle powers are in a complex regional and global position for strategic maneuvering due to the growing rivalry between the great powers. In contrast to the extensive literature on the competition of major powers, there is a limited number of comprehensive research devoted to the implementation of the foreign policy strategies of the middle powers aimed at preserving strategic autonomy. The analysis of Kazakhstan as a leading actor in Central Asia provides a broad assessment of the understanding of strategically significant states in world politics. Consequently, the literature review examines the elements of Kazakhstan's foreign policy, including diplomatic, economic and security aspects. By employing the theoretical framework of Gideon Rose's neoclassical realism, the study examines the internal factors of the state reflected in foreign policy. Comparative analysis of Indonesia and South Korea reveals strategic approaches for global and regional strengthening. This study examines the concept of balancing Kazakhstan's relations with China, the United States, and Russia using qualitative methods, including a discursive analysis of expert conclusions. Primary qualitative data in the form of 8 semi-structured interviews were collected from experts from analytical centers, higher education institutions and international research institutes. Based on the results obtained, the research revealed three main patterns of power imbalance in Kazakhstan's foreign policy: approaches to diplomatic interactions, evaluation of security autonomy and level of economic reliance on major powers. Consequently, the relevance of the research is to consider the changing role of medium-sized states in shaping the international order.

Keywords: middle power, Kazakhstan, foreign policy, balancing, Russia-China-US relations, major powers, international relations.

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Introduction

In January 2024, the analytical center of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs for the first time included Kazakhstan among the middle powers of the world (Bakhtiyarova, 2024). According to the report, aspects such as the availability of diverse resources, a balanced foreign policy, the status of a regional leader in Central Asia, and a significant role in the Middle East corridor had a decisive impact. Svante E. Cornell, Director of the Institute of Central Asia and the Caucasus and the Silk Road Studies Program, explains that:

The country's economic sector is currently the most developed in the region, serving a leading role in promoting regional cooperation and ensuring the region's connectivity. Kazakhstan has gone beyond the region with international initiatives that cemented its role. In addition, its internal reforms make its status as a middle power increasingly sustainable. (Satubaldina, 2024)

By the end of 2023, the country's GDP was \$264 billion with a population of 20 million people and had attracted \$441 billion in foreign direct investment since 1993, indicating a leading position in the economic aspect compared to the countries of Central Asia (Cornell, 2024). As an example, Uzbekistan's GDP was \$90 billion, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan each had \$10 billion. Thus, the author emphasizes the misleading and inaccurate view of Central Asia as a passive region involved in the “Great Game” between major powers, in which Kazakhstan serves as a pillar of stability and development of the region (Satubaldina, 2024).

According to a German think tank, According to a German think tank, Kazakhstan's foreign policy regime has been developed through selective partnership with major powers to destabilize dominant issues (Gotev, 2024). This policy is not aimed at accepting a particular party, but at participating in all the interests of the parties. In turn, this leads to ensuring maximum independence and respect for one's own state interests, which is evident in Roman Vasilenko's statement. The Kazakh diplomat noted that in the current geopolitical condition, states such as Kazakhstan are able to contribute to international and regional issues through their own resources and diplomatic relations with the powers (Gotev, 2024). The multi-vector nature of Kazakhstan's foreign policy is reflected in the

implementation of a non-confrontational and pragmatic strategy in order to ensure and maintain a balance of power. One possible implication of this is the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020-2030, developed by the administration of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. This document was adopted in 2020 during a period of complex transformation of international relations. It is aimed at achieving strategic goals, including maintaining the independence of the foreign policy course, consolidating leading positions in the region, integration into the international community, increasing the competitiveness of the national economy, preserving the unity of the multinational people and protecting the practical interests of the citizens of Kazakhstan (Akorda.kz, 2020). It is worth noting that the implementation plans of the document are updated every two years. Thus, the Concept is relevant in the current geopolitical situation.

Despite the Western sanctions imposed on Russia, Kazakhstan continues to maintain industrial relations. According to the Bureau of National Statistics (2024), as of July 2024, there are 19,562 Russian legal entities, branches and branches of foreign legal entities with foreign ownership in the country. Moreover, 70% of transactions between states are made in rubles. Kazakhstan controls the transportation of Russian goods through the North-South transport corridor to Turkmenistan, India, Azerbaijan and Iran (Minakov, 2024). Kazakhstan's geopolitical landscape demonstrates its ability to ensure transport and trade flows not only with Russia, but also with China, especially in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. Along with Moscow, Beijing is increasing its trade partnership with Astana, significantly outstripping the Russian side in this matter. For example, the total volume of China's foreign direct investment in the Kazakh economic sector in 2023 amounted to \$25 billion (Minakov, 2024). It follows that the volume of economic cooperation between the two countries has reached 41 billion dollars. Thus, Kazakhstan's strategic multilateralism makes it a channel for unofficial circumvention of the sanctions regime for Russia and China (Minakov, 2024). According to scientists, the geopolitical dynamics of Kazakhstan, depending on the interests of external players, can lead to a complex structure of cooperation, which can affect logistics supply chains.

Despite a decent amount of research on traditional middle powers such as Australia, Canada,

and Turkey, the post-Soviet countries have been poorly studied. Along with the insufficient analysis of Kazakhstan's foreign policy strategies, the study acquires significance. Kazakhstan has an active multi-vector policy aimed at balancing between China, the West and the members of the EAEU, which is a new model of the middle powers. Thus, the relevance of the study is determined by the need to study the strategy of the Central Asian middle power in maneuvering interests between the three world powers.

The organizational structure of this thesis is as follows. The first section provides a literature review that examines the theoretical definition of a middle power, as well as a comparative analysis of the strategic mechanisms of the middle-power countries. The second section includes the methodology and analysis of the data collected during the semi-structured interviews, which describes in detail the systematic approach using a discursive analysis of the speeches of the interviewed experts. The following section presents the results of a study on the effectiveness of Kazakhstan's foreign policy. In conclusion, the interpretation of the results is summarized.

Literature review

This chapter provides an overview of the literature on Kazakhstan's role as a middle power and its position in the great power rivalry. The literature review consists of three main sections: “Theoretical Framework on Middle Powers”, “Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy” and “Comparative Analysis of Middle Powers” with a focus on South Korea and Indonesia. The study also considers subsections. The section “Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy” analyzes three important components: “Diplomatic Engagement”, “Security Autonomy”, and “Economic Partnerships”. These variables reveal the nature of diplomatic strategies, the level of independence in making foreign policy decisions, and Kazakhstan's participation in regional economic initiatives. The review examines numerous scientific articles on this topic.

1. Theoretical Framework on Middle Powers

The ideas of neoclassical realism (NCR) have been applied to the current study. According to Cerioli (2024), “NCR is a diverse analytical umbrella for Realist authors that complements a systemic framework with unit-level variables to differentiate actors, historicise and contextualise their actions, and enable space for agency despite pressures from anarchy” (p. 369). This theory includes the analytical capabilities of Kenneth Waltz's neorealism and Hans Morgenthau's classical realism to study the internal politics of states in the context of the international system (Firoozabadi & Ashkezari, 2016). Consequently, this theory studies the perception of the external impact of the international environment by the state apparatus, which includes three key variables: independent (systemic stimuli), intervening (leader's image, relations between society and the state, strategic tradition, national institutions) and dependent (policy response), which determines the choice of this theoretical paradigm.

The principle of asymmetry-authority (AA) framework underlying the model of neoclassical realism is explained in the form of a two-level model with external and internal factors of maneuvering states, taking into account the unevenness in power and political sovereignty (Kuik, 2021). It is a widely held view that the presence of competing powers leads to increased external instability towards the middle powers. This leads to the concept of the ruling elite being the main attribute at the level of a

domestic variable. As a rule, the elite maximizes political authority through the following legitimization groups: a) procedural requirements in the form of the rule of law, democratic elections and social justice; b) the effectiveness of domestic policy development; c) particularist narratives such as identity politics, charisma of the leader and nationalist sentiments (Kuik, 2021). Thus, this concept of neoclassical realism explains in detail the domestic factors influencing Kazakhstan's foreign policy decisions.

As for the concept of the “Middle Power”, despite its historical significance in foreign policy literature and international relations, “the term remains deceptively ambiguous” (Chapnick, 1999). A number of scientists define middle-level states empirically, based on the level of military spending, the life expectancy of citizens and the population, without taking into account the recognition of the state at the regional level. Due to the different interpretations of the concept, it has led to an active debate in the scientific community about the exact definition of the term "middle powers". For example, Bernard Wood noted in his research that the following characteristics define middle-power states, namely the status of a sub-regional or regional leader, the presence of experience in a particular field, mediating and maintaining a balance between conflicting parties, increasing status in the international community through an alliance with a great power, and commitment to multilateral diplomacy (Cornell, 2024). Thus, the literature review presents three theoretical approaches for defining the above term: functional, behavioral and hierarchical. Since states in one model can be classified as a middle power while in the other as a small power, this makes it difficult to define consistently.

The functional model is based on the position of Canadian diplomat Hume Wrong in 1942 that Canada's participation in decision-making process in military matters should depend on three criteria: the degree of involvement, the ability to contribute to the discussion, and the level of government interest. Within the framework of the world order, functionalism was based on the understanding that the delegation of influence between middle-level states depends on their relative capabilities, as well as on economic and political time frames. This is due to the fact that there is no objective method for distinguishing between middle and small powers. For this reason, the middle powers are actually small

powers with a temporarily elevated status (Chapnick, 1999). The inclusion of the functional principle was due to its beneficial influence in the international community. Canada stands as an example as the main representative of the middle power in the mid-1940s. The confirmation of the status of a middle power and the use of its economic development has given the Canadian state stability in solving political, economic and military affairs of the international system. Therefore, functionalism gives the temporary influence of the state to be able to impact certain decisions of major powers.

Existing research shows a preference for a behavioral model. According to Cooper, Higgott and Nossal, middle powers are defined by “their tendency to pursue multilateral solutions to international problems, their tendency to embrace compromise positions in international disputes, and their tendency to embrace notions of ‘good international citizenship’ to guide their diplomacy” (Chapnick, 1999). This model is characterized by values in the form of multilateralism, conflict management and mediation, as well as the desire to enhance international status. Cooper notes that statecraft's concept consists of three parts: “building coalitions and promoting cooperation, providing entrepreneurial leadership, and acting as catalyst and facilitator” (Chapnick, 1999). It has commonly been assumed that “pursuing multilateral solutions to international problems, preferring compromise positions in international disputes and embracing notions of good international citizenship constitute the typical behavior of a middle power” (Shin, 2015).

Initially, the concept originated from a hierarchical school. This approach classifies states according to their capabilities in the following areas: size of territory, gross domestic product, volume of trade and foreign exchange reserves, population and number of military personnel (Shin, 2015). As a rule, statistical indicators are used to measure a country's potential. On the contrary, the Morgenthau school of classical realism explains the international phenomenon for the following reasons. The theory considers the middle powers as active players capable of influencing the system through strategic behavior and diplomacy, not just through material resources, as well as a constructivist approach to national security. According to classical realism, the concept of a middle power is defined as follows:

A middle power is a state actor which has limited influence on deciding the distribution of

power in a given regional system, but is capable of deploying a variety of sources of power to change the position of great powers and defend its own position on matters related to national or regional security that directly affect it. (Shin, 2015)

2. Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy

Kazakhstan has pursued a distinct foreign policy strategy known as “multivectorism” (Zhiyenbayev, 2023). In a period of regional geopolitical instability, this policy is a stabilizing force, indicating the development of equal relations with regional and global powers. In practice, as Sullivan notes, multi-vector nature allows a less powerful state to mitigate dependency dilemmas by entering into an asymmetric relationship (Zhiyenbayev, 2023). This area has laid the foundation for effective cooperation with Russia, China and the United States to promote mutually beneficial interests. Nyshanbayev et al. (2024) noted that Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy reflects a balancing system in Southeast Asia, where the secondary powers maintain a balance between the great powers. Assistance of regional integration is one of the policy principles emphasized in membership in the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-building Measures in Asia, election as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in 2017-2018 and OSCE chairmanship in 2010. However, the binary understanding of balancing and bandwagoning does not fully explain Kazakhstan's multifaceted foreign policy strategy, which includes elements of both strategies (Zhiyenbayev, 2023). Gleason defines a multi-vector foreign policy as a complex strategy based on a political approach capable of simultaneously countering the potentially adverse actions of several partners (Nyshanbayev et al., 2024). Hanks, on the other hand, views this foreign policy approach as a balance of risk and benefit. Based on this, it can be concluded that this concept is characterized as a practical balance of national forces and interests. According to the theory of neorealism, when the interests of the great powers in the region coincide, developing countries tend to react in two ways: balancing conflicting interests or bandwagoning. Swedish scholar Svante E. Cornell, in an August article discussing the growing middle powers in Central Asia, argues that through economic growth, strategic diplomacy and regional leadership, Kazakhstan is rethinking its status in the world community as a middle power (Satubaldina,

2025). According to Cornell:

The premise of the Kazakh foreign policy strategy was how to avoid being subjugated to the great powers or becoming an apple of contention among them. Further, the strategy sought to prevent a situation where the state has to engage in constant hedging among the great powers, jumping from relations with one power to another as necessity requires. (Satubaldina, 2025)

2.1. Diplomatic Engagement

According to Kenzhalina (2014), “Diplomacy is one of the most major tools forming a positive image of the state” (p. 652). It has commonly been assumed that Kazakh diplomacy follows such traditional principles as leadership, pragmatism and dependability (Cohen et al., 2021).

Thus emphasizing that in international relations, a hedging strategy is a common concept among small and medium-sized states to implement a dual imperative such as autonomy and security. According to Sim and Aminjonov (2022), the definition of hedging is characterized as “a set of strategies that cultivate a ‘middle position’ if a state ‘cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality’”. Medeiros compares hedging with a strategy of geopolitical insurance in case of failure of interaction with a major power, which is one of the principles of this diplomatic strategy (Sim & Aminjonov, 2022). Today, Central Asian scholars agree that the region represents a complex of regional security, in which a hedging strategy aimed at maximizing security and autonomy from each other, as well as from major powers, is more effective (Sim & Aminjonov, 2022). In this regard, Kazakhstan is a relatively active representative of this diplomatic strategy in relation to China. The state is a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, as well as a founding member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. It is worth noting that the People's Republic of China expressed a relatively negative position on the C5+1 meeting organized in February 2020 by the United States. A likely explanation for China's behavior in rivalry with the United States is related to its interest in promoting autocratic values or spreading the influence of an anti-democratic regime in Central Asia. Under the leadership of President Tokayev, Kazakhstan continues to prioritize the development of allied relations with Russia, focusing on expanding

multilateral cooperation within the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) (Wang, 2024). According to the 2014 Foreign Policy Concept, Kazakhstan is committed to cooperation with Russia in humanitarian, trade, economic, political and cultural aspects, which is also based on the Treaty on Good Neighborliness and Alliance in the 21st Century of November 11, 2013. After the re-election of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in 2022, Russia was the first official international visit, which carries symbolic significance. As the President of Kazakhstan emphasized, “the Russian Federation has been and remains the main strategic partner, a state with which we have deep relationships in various industries” (Putz, 2022). From the point of view of Kazakh-American relations, the state uses a balanced approach to expand strategic cooperation with the United States. As an example, the influence of the United States extended to such initiatives as the United States Strategy for Central Asia for 2019-2025 and the C5+1 diplomatic platform. On February 28, 2023, the visit of former US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken Tokayev emphasized in this way that “in crucial strategic areas such as security, energy, trade, and investment, our countries enjoy a robust foundation of mutual trust and longstanding collaboration. We are eager to further enhance this cooperation” (Wang, 2024).

2.2. Security Autonomy

Kazakhstan has maintained bilateral relations with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization since 1992, when the country joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, established by the Alliance in December 1991 as a forum for discussing and coordinating security issues with its new partners (Aben, 2017). In May 1994, official practical security cooperation with NATO was established after the signing of the Partnership for Peace framework document. According to James Appathurai, “NATO Secretary General’s Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia, Kazakhstan is the alliance’s most active partner in the region” (Aben, 2017). As highlighted in Kuzembayeva's (2016) analysis, Kazakhstan's active participation in the international arena within the framework of multilateral security mechanisms is conditioned by the desire to spread valuable European experience in Asia. Since the European direction occupies one of the key aspects in Kazakhstan's foreign policy. The Individual

Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) is a fundamental indicator for mutual cooperation between NATO and Kazakhstan. The purpose of this document is to provide assistance from the Alliance in meeting the priority needs of the state, especially in strengthening the country's security and defense sector. Since 1995, within the framework of the Partnership for Peace program, Kazakhstan has been involved in a number of program activities, including defense reform, military-to-military cooperation, civil-military relations, civil contingency planning and disaster response, professional training and scientific cooperation (Aben, 2017). Currently, Kazakhstan's multi-vector policy, focused on active participation in regional initiatives, is a significant practice for NATO. As an example, since 2002, the state has been participating in the Planning and Review Process under the Partnership for Peace program to increase interoperability between units of NATO member countries and the armed forces of Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan is not aiming for full membership in NATO. However, as Aben (2017) noted, institutionalized cooperation with the North Atlantic Alliance is important for a state because of the following functions: expanding security cooperation in the Central Asian region, strengthening the armed forces, increasing regional stability, and neutralizing the external influence of major powers. One example is the "New Silk Road Initiative" presented by the United States in 2011 for Central Asia, aimed at strengthening its influence in the region by facilitating trade between Central and South Asia (Wang, 2024).

2.3. Economic Partnerships

In the context of the economic perspective, Kazakhstan's foreign policy adheres to a dual strategy of participation in two integration projects: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) (Isaacs, 2020). The signing of the "Strategic Directions for Developing the Eurasian Economic Integration until 2025" by the members of the heads of the EAEU member states in 2020 highlighted the need to strengthen the organization's innovation and investment sector. In November 2022, 17 bilateral documents totaling \$50 million were signed at the 18th Forum of Interregional Cooperation between Kazakhstan and Russia (Wang, 2024). It has been reported that the total investment volume of Russian companies in the first half of 2023 amounted to \$1 billion,

indicating that Russia is one of the five largest investors in Kazakhstan. On the contrary, in June 2022, at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, President Tokayev emphasized that, “China is currently the main economic and foreign trade partner, and Chinese investments in our economy have exceeded \$22 billion over the past 15 years. Thus, strengthening bilateral cooperation with China is crucial for our country” (Wang, 2024). According to data for the first half of 2023, the trade turnover between Kazakhstan and China amounted to \$13.6 billion, with the Chinese side accounting for 20% of the total trade volume (Wang, 2024). As a result, trade increased by 20.5 percent compared to last year and strengthened China's position as a leading trading partner. The President of Kazakhstan noted that the Belt and Road Initiative “allows to create a new geo-economic paradigm” (Yerimpasheva et al., 2022). However, as noted by Yerimpasheva, Myrzakhmetova and Alshimbayeva (2022), some Kazakhstani experts express concern about the expansion of China's influence through this project. For example, author Heer argues that China's model of economic development and governance has serious consequences because the strategies and goals of the Chinese Communist Party do not match those of other countries in particular with the United States. According to the authors' SWOT analysis, the following strong priority aspects of the integration of two major projects, namely the EAEU and BRI, are presented: a) high demand for raw materials and goods on foreign and domestic markets; b) China's interest in developing land corridors; c) the availability of free economic zones (Yerimpasheva et al., 2022). Being between two major powers, Kazakhstan is in maneuvering as well as maintaining independence and gaining a competitive advantage. It is worth noting that in the post-Soviet space, Kazakhstan was the first to show interest in promoting economic cooperation and restoring collective networking. The weaknesses are as follows: a) the unstable geopolitical situation in the Eurasian space; b) Western sanctions against Russia and Belarus; c) the predominance of the political agenda in matters of EAEU integration (Yerimpasheva et al., 2022). Sustainable integration in the EAEU countries is not ensured due to the lack of developed democracy in the states. Despite this, opportunities such as the creation of transport and logistics centers outside Kazakhstan; attracting export cargo flows from Japan and South Korea through Lianyungang Airport; attracting foreign logistics operators to Kazakhstan; and

the development of transit air transportation indicate the multi-vector nature of Kazakhstan (Yerimpasheva et al., 2022). Specifically, this indicates the strengthening of economic independence from China and Russia and strengthens its role as a neutral hub between the West and the East, demonstrating strategic balancing.

3. Comparative Analysis of Middle Powers

The purpose of conducting a comparative analysis is primarily to study the theoretical relationship in which the key pattern is the domestic or social characteristics of certain states. According to the literature of international relations, Indonesia and South Korea are considered representatives of the middle powers. Middle power theories suggest that soft power tools such as consensus building, participation in international mediation, and peacekeeping are significant foreign policy behaviors. The role of non-Western powers in the international order has led to the widespread use of the term ‘middle power’ to explain the foreign policy behavior of these states (Karim, 2018). It is noted about the legitimization of multi-vector nature, emphasizing that Kazakhstan positions itself as an independent player and a neutral mediator along with the same middle powers as Indonesia or South Korea. The main difference of which is the limited resources of soft power in comparison with the above-mentioned states.

South Korea

According to Zhang (2024), despite the fact that Korea is gradually becoming an influential regional power in East Asia and an increasingly active participant in global politics, it remains a “small power” compared to China and Japan. Recent researchers have pointed to the declining momentum in South Korea's diplomacy as a middle power. Against the background of the rivalry between China and the United States, in which Korea is faced with a dilemma of choice, the concept of "conditional bridging" is being put forward (Zhang, 2024). This approach puts forward the Republic of Korea as both a mediator in cooperation and an observer in resolving political issues. Moreover, the government adheres to a so-called "wait-and-see" strategy based on contributing to international relations between China and Japan. At the same time, Korea does not seek to demonstrate leadership in this matter,

preferring a strategy of adaptation and deterrence. As an example, it is worth noting the APEC summit in November 2014, in which Chinese President Xi Jinping met with former Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo. In this symbolic turn, former President of the Republic of Korea Park Geun-hye proposed to resume the trilateral summit. This approach of South Korea, from restrained diplomacy to direct influence on the situation, is described as the role of a mediator.

Indonesia

As noted by researcher Karim (2018), as is the case with other developing powers, Indonesia's desire to play a more active role at the global level is a logical consequence of its material potential and recent political and economic development. From the point of view of material capabilities, Indonesia belongs to the group of middle powers, but in political discourse this concept has been used in rare cases. Foreign policy circles prefer to refer to Indonesia as "a regional power with global interests and concerns" (Karim, 2018). During the presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004-2014), the state participated in such political events to strengthen its international status as the 13th session of the Conference of the Parties in 2007, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the 9th World Trade Conference. It is worth noting that Joko Widodo is the former president of the Republic of Indonesia. Despite the fact that the concept of a middle power was adopted during his presidency, he restrained Indonesia's desire for this status. As a result, the government adheres to a revisionist position. Thus, empirical analysis defines Indonesia's self-identification as a middle power as a deterrent to its orientation to the regional level and its desire to assume the role of a regional leader in order to demonstrate global prospects (Karim, 2018).

Methodology

Research design

The purpose of this study is to examine the key factors influencing the positioning and foreign policy decisions of Kazakhstan as a middle power in the context of interstate strategic rivalry. This study uses a qualitative research method that assists in explaining and interpreting social phenomena, as well as identifying the perception and behavior of the target audience. At its core, quantitative research asks open-ended questions, the answers to which are not easily expressed in numbers, such as “how” and “why” (Tenny et al., 2022). In detail, this approach involves the systematic organization, description, collection, and interpretation of visual, textual or verbal data (Hammarberg et al., 2016).

Consequently, the primary data is collected through semi-structured expert interviews, combining both unstructured and structured elements. As noted by Easwaramoorthy and Zarinpoush (2006), “Interviews are useful when the topic of inquiry relates to issues that require complex questioning and considerable probing” (p.1). In this case, to obtain analytically valuable expert answers to the submitted open-ended fixed and follow-up questions. The semi-structured interview scheme is not limited to a strict set of questions, thereby allowing the researcher to delve into the search for high-quality information in more detail.

As for the theoretical approach, neoclassical realism is the most relevant for describing the research method. This school of thought implies the capacity to elaborate on the content of strategic choice, with an emphasis on how states respond to the pressures they are subject to by the international system (Mallett & Juneau, 2023). This distinguishes it from Waltz’s realism or structural realism, relying directly on structural aspects to explain international conditions. Within the framework of neoclassical realism, it is appropriate to consider the domestic political aspects of Kazakhstan that influence foreign policy decisions.

For the data analysis strategy, discourse analysis was used, specializing in the exploration of the structure, content and function of language in a social and political context. This strategy has

contributed to the formation of key concepts such as “middle power”, the definition of relevant discursive models used by experts during interviews, as well as the analysis of their own positions on Kazakhstan's strategic maneuvering. As mentioned, primary and secondary data are used for data collection, in which secondary data includes the collection of information from official statements, scientific articles and analytical reports.

Research question and hypotheses

The main research question is: “What are the internal and external considerations determining Kazakhstan's strategy as a middle power in the context of current geopolitical competition?”. The following two research hypotheses are highlighted, offering the expected result to the above question.

Hypothesis 1: The domestic factors of Kazakhstan's strategic course depend on leadership preferences, bureaucratic capabilities, and political and economic realities of the state.

Hypothesis 2: Kazakhstan adheres to a pragmatic balancing strategy that determines foreign policy decisions in order to preserve strategic autonomy.

Data collection

The participants were selected using a non-probability method of purposeful sampling. This method was chosen by conducting qualitative research on a difficult-to-access area of analysis, in this case on the topic of the middle powers. The study requires the involvement of a narrow circle of respondents with specific knowledge or relevant professional experience in international relations, political science or regional studies. The sampling method does not require significant time to collect data, which makes it easier to collect qualitative analysis. In addition to the respondents' experience and knowledge, accessibility and willingness to participate, as well as the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in a clear, expressive and reflective manner, are also important (Palinkas et al., 2015).

As mentioned, the primary data was conducted in the form of semi-structured expert interviews. During the interview, eighteen open-ended questions were posed to clarify the participants' views on foreign policy strategies, regional cooperation, theoretical foundations and reflections on the future

prospects of Kazakhstan. The participants provided both detailed proactive responses, as well as neutral and concise ones. The respondents were recruited through professional contacts, including experts in the field of foreign policy, independent researchers, and professors from higher education institutions. Interviews with all participants were conducted online via the Zoom platform due to the flexibility and convenience of time for respondents. The interviews were conducted in two languages: English and Russian, and ranged from 13 to 54 minutes.

It is worth noting that an audio recording was provided for the interview for further transcription and analysis of responses with the participant's permission. The approval of ISE Committee for Scientific Research at Maqsut Narikbayev University was obtained for the collection of primary data. This provided guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality for the interviewees who reviewed the informed consent form. The description of the form outlined the purpose of the study, a brief description of the types of questions, the voluntary nature of participation, as well as the anonymity of the respondents' answers.

Data analysis

Interviews were conducted with eight respondents, including two female and six male persons: representatives of educational institutions such as L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University and the Nazarbayev University's Graduate School of Public Policy, experts from the Turkic Academy and the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, employees of the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies (KazISS) and independent researchers in the field of foreign policy from the analytical center “Eurasian Monitoring” and Zhibek Zholy TV channel. It took two weeks to collect the data, with an average interview duration of 33 minutes. The dialogue in both languages was transcribed using the TurboScribe software with editing of spelling errors after transcription. Then, the Russian version of the text was translated into English to further encode the main themes and discourses of the primary data. Thus, this method of discourse analysis made it possible to describe the process of using language in terms of cognitive, emotional and situational aspects.

Findings

1.1 Conceptualization of the Middle State

Based on the information provided by the participants at the beginning of the interview regarding the theoretical basis of the concept of middle powers, it can be noted that this definition does not have a specific fixed explanation.

The majority of participants, namely 5 out of 8, emphasized that powers in this category have the ability to exert influence beyond their immediate environment, balancing external influence and opposing commensurate states. To a more clarifying question about possible criteria for including states in this category, the participants mentioned the following aspects: economic potential, measured by GDP, diversification of resources and accessible trade networks of different countries; diplomatic tools in the form of the ability to mediate between other powers, the creation of a coalition, the formation of global norms, as well as some influence on a geopolitical field; and a certain strategic autonomy. At the same time, 3 out of 8 respondents noted the vagueness of the above-mentioned term and the lack of its specificity. As an example, interviewee 6 points this out as follows:

“The concept of “middle power” seems conceptually vague and often devoid of meaningful analytical value. In the modern international order, it is often used as a “comforting term” for states that have neither the military nor the political influence of great powers”.

This uncertainty may reflect a deconstruction of the concept, the validity of which depends on the political or research context. According to an expert from the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, the phrase *“comforting term”* does not reflect analytical rigor, but rather giving states the symbolic and psychological status of a middle power in order to declare their own international subjectivity. It is worth noting about the applied narratives of other experts such as *“There is no common concept of the middle power. Each researcher, each scholar defines it in their own terms”* (Interviewee 7) and *“I think that middle power is something that is constructive. It is constructed by some German or maybe other experts to describe the positioning of small and middle countries”*

(Interviewee 4). Thus, the concept of a middle power has a fluidity feature for analyzing the positions of states in this case with Kazakhstan, and is also one of the representatives for scientific debates in academic discourse.

It is noteworthy that the question of defining Kazakhstan as a middle power also caused a hesitation in the answers. According to the analysis, three respondents noted a positive response, two — expressed a combined position, and three — emphasized that Kazakhstan is a potentially developing middle power.

To confirm the affirmative statement, the participants repeatedly emphasized the ideas of Kazakhstan's active participation in UN peacekeeping operations and the regulation of certain conflict situations, such as the Astana process on the Syrian issue, as well as the voluntary abandonment of nuclear energy and the distinctive diplomatic activities of the state. According to the expert from the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies (KazISS), the most important criterion for determining Kazakhstan as a middle power is foreign policy behavior. The respondent identified the following four focuses: a) maintaining peace and stability in the international system, as well as participating in various international peacekeeping initiatives; b) availability of a wide range of international tasks; c) expanding international services to benefit from cooperation; d) a leading position in solving international issues. As an example for the fourth point, the respondent highlighted the consultative meeting of the heads of State of Central Asia held on August 9, 2024, at which a number of documents were adopted, including the concept of regional development “Central Asia – 2040”, prepared by the delegation of Kazakhstan and agreed with other states. According to the expert, *“It is a diplomatic tool to promote one's vision of development”* (Interviewee 1).

In terms of an ambivalent answer, the respondents mentioned that for certain Western theorists, Kazakhstan cannot be considered a middle power according to the following criteria related to population density and large GDP, however, as the participant 3 noted, *“...in terms of real policy, international processes, and our peacekeeping mission, in principle, it meets the requirements (Kazakhstan is considered a middle power)”*. On the one hand, frequently used phrases such as

“availability of resources”, “active diplomacy” and “participation in regional initiatives” demonstrate signs of a middle power in Kazakhstan. On the other hand, it is a widely held view that *“dependence on external factors”, “limited autonomy” and “weak influence on global processes”* cast doubt on its status as a full-fledged middle power.

Regarding the third group of respondents, one of the participants shared the opinion that Kazakhstan is an emerging middle power that is on its way to becoming a full-fledged middle power, emphasizing the following: *“Well, Kazakhstan in its official discourse and rhetorically positioned itself as a middle power. However, in analytical terms or in more research terms, I would say Kazakhstan does not fully qualify for this term”* (Interviewee 8). According to the expert, this is directly related to the following four main factors. Firstly, the low level of a diversified economy is in contrast to the classical middle powers (e.g. Canada, Australia, Turkey or South Korea). Since, Kazakhstan remains dependent on free energy resources, mainly natural gas, oil, and petroleum products. Secondly, there is a lack of autonomous defense potential, due to the fact that most of the military equipment and training is provided to Kazakhstan by Russia. Thirdly, there is a low percentage of reliable and transparent democratic institutions, as the state is currently in the process of institutional reforms. Fourth, Kazakhstan does not support a consistent global projection of soft power. According to the respondent, *“Kazakhstan, what it does, it does portray its middle power primarily to bolster domestic support from the public and also to help it realign with the local powers”* (Interviewee 8). In addition, such ideas as *“Kazakhstan's middle power, I believe, is more of a myth rather than a functional reality”* (Interviewee 8) and *“We are not a middle regional state yet because it has its own critiques”* (Interviewee 4), were mentioned. These narratives demonstrate the gap between realistic opportunities and the political rhetoric of the state, as well as the insufficient legitimization of the status of a middle power.

In addition, it is worth noting the preferences of 6 out of 8 participants of the theoretical school, which turned out to be neoclassical realism. This option is due to the fact that foreign policy is formed not so much on the basis of institutional interests, but rather depending on internal political and economic realities, as well as system-level constraints, because of its geopolitical location in close

proximity to Russia and China. This is followed by the presence of variables at the domestic level, including the rivalry and interests of the elites, which can be emphasized in the context of the January 2022 events. Moreover, the respondents noted that the choice of this theoretical school is explained due to its relevance in the current geopolitical system, and this is emphasized in the form of statements, *“I like liberalism theory, but unfortunately the recent events in international policy show that the realism school is more relevant and appropriate and applicable in today's geopolitics”* (Interviewee 4), *“...when you become a diplomat and really face these problems, you see that the only theory which is applied in international relations is realism”* (Interviewee 5) and *“The most appropriate theoretical framework, in my opinion, is neoclassical realism”* (Interviewee 6).

1.2 Foreign Policy Strategy and Behavior

During the interviews, 7 out of 8 respondents expressed a common opinion on the issue of Kazakhstan's foreign policy approach towards major powers, namely China, Russia and the United States, expressed in a balancing strategy. According to neoclassical realism, this strategy assumes that domestic policies often limit states' balancing efforts, which leads to an imbalance (Wojciuk, 2021). For this reason, the factors influencing the effectiveness of a balanced approach are presented as the vulnerability of the regime to internal challenges, the degree of social cohesion, and the level of consensus among the elite regarding the scale of strategic risk.

The participants emphasized the need for the above approach due to geopolitical tightness, noting such ideas as *“When a country remains between two countries, it always leads to one side accusing the other of moving closer to the other”* (Interviewee 1), *“Therefore, we are balancing on their interests and on our interests”* (Interviewee 3) and *“We have to balance between these three great powers. And of course we can't afford to be in confrontation with these countries”* (Interviewee 7). In addition, there is a clear bias of Kazakhstan towards Russia, which may reflect overlapping attempts at balancing. According to respondent 6, one of the factors of this is the country's participation in such integration projects as the CSTO and the EAEU, and despite statements about the multi-vector nature, Kazakhstan is still structurally and institutionally tied to the Russian sphere of influence, which limits

its foreign policy maneuverability. An example is the comment of respondent 4 that, *“Russia is our destiny, right, at least for the next 50 years”*.

It is also worth noting the opposite opinion offered by one respondent regarding Kazakhstan's position, which can be described as calibrated hedging. This is primarily due to maintaining strategic security ties with Russia and growing economic cooperation with China, including multilateral and bilateral agreements such as the Belt and Road Initiative. The following narratives were used about the United States: *“rather cautiously”*, *“far for us”* and *“not so seriously yet”*. According to an expert from Nazarbayev University, *“Kazakhstan usually historically has served as a buffer zone between the unstable South Asia and the more or less stable Europe and Caucasus”*. The respondent stressed that there is an asymmetric foreign policy because Kazakhstan still prefers Russia and China in its foreign policy rather than Western powers and often adopts *“some ambiguous postures”*. As an example, this may be reflected in the fact that Kazakhstan has avoided official recognition of the Taliban government, but is still cooperating with it.

Moreover, it is worth emphasizing the number of mentions of powers by experts, where: Russia was mentioned 17 times, emphasizing the “dominance” of this actor in the perception of foreign policy; China — 12 times, noting the increasing role of the state in political and economic influence; and the United States — 6 times, indicating the remoteness of the power. Thus, the gap between the first and second actors is not large, which may indicate a potential alternative in China.

Furthermore, both the limitations and advantages of Kazakhstan's strategic autonomy were revealed. Based on the respondents' responses regarding the benefits, the experts emphasized the availability of minerals, the geographical location in the center of the Eurasian continent, the presence of large foreign oil and gas companies (e.g. CNPC, Chevron and TotalEnergies), the diplomatic traditions of Tokayev and Nazarbayev, as well as the acceptance of commitments in international organizations. In the case of natural resources, this is confirmed by phrases such as *“Our natural resources are of course our leverage”* (Interviewee 7) and *“So I think one of the most – I would say pros or enablers of Kazakhstan's economy is, of course, vast natural resources”* (Interviewee 8).

Nevertheless, there are an equal number of aspects that limit strategic autonomy, namely dependence on Russian military and infrastructure imports, a political system that restricts any innovation in terms of institutional reforms, China's growing influence in the transport and investment sector, as well as national identity. Regarding the narrative of the diplomatic tradition, respondent 4 noted the uniqueness of diplomacy, which contains *“Asian elements”* and *“Russian-speaking, Soviet, old-minded pragmatism”*. This is noteworthy because it is the national pattern, which includes various religious, linguistic, mental and regional differences, that is one of the limitations of autonomy. Since, the participant of the Turkic Academy emphasized that *“We are not a homogeneous, let's say, consolidated nation. We still have debates on the national language, for example”*. A similar discourse can be traced in the dynamics of the presence of foreign oil and gas companies, whose influence serves as a certain guarantee against external pressure and dependence on infrastructure, transport and investment ties with major powers, which limits autonomy.

It was reported that domestic policy is closely integrated and interdependent with foreign policy. Because it is the internal behavior that acts as the main function in shaping both the internal and foreign policy of Kazakhstan. This is due to the centralization of power in the system centered around the president. It follows that foreign policy reflects the interests of the top leadership and a narrow elite group, rather than a parliamentary faction or any other groups. According to the respondent,

“So foreign policy narratives, like the topic of today's discussion, portraying Kazakhstan as a middle power, is employed rather, I think, to bolster the regime in front of the people and the international community rather than reflecting any actual geopolitical standing that Kazakhstan is utilizing” (Interview 8).

For a comparative analysis, it is worth quoting the statement of the following respondent:

“Leadership is important. For example, before Tokayev, we used to say that Kazakhstan foreign policy is another way of foreign policy. But after Tokayev came to power, we see that this oligarchic structure also shapes foreign policy. So, leadership is also important” (Interview 5).

Based on the above-mentioned expert opinions, it can be noted that foreign policy depends on

the leadership and personality that pursues a technocratic and flexible foreign policy. In addition, such detailed ideas about the foreign policy apparatus as “*to be loyal to the system*” and “*top decision-making is still unclear*” were mentioned, indicating bureaucratic costs and lack of transparency in the decision-making process. This leads to a decrease in the adaptability of institutions and institutional memory, which is not a consistent foreign policy. As the foreign policy expert noted, “*Foreign policy is a subject which is very complicated for the main public*” thereby pointing out the problem with the voice, reflecting criticism from society. This is expressed in the accusation of the leadership for “abandoning” national interests for the sake of foreign influence.

In the speeches of the participants, the narratives “integrated” and “interdependent” were often used in the direction of domestic and foreign policy. Thus, the influence of internal factors cannot be overestimated. In Kazakhstan, foreign policy is largely a function of internal political and economic realities and the personal interests of the ruling elites. The lack of a systematic foreign policy school, the weak involvement of civil society, and dependence on the position of the Russian Federation and China turn foreign policy into a “reactive tool” rather than a “strategic resource”.

An important factor is also the multi-vector strategy, marked by the effectiveness of 6 out of 8 respondents, as well as a decrease in its efficiency by two participants. A multi-vector strategy is a term coined by former President Nazarbayev, but the strategy is currently under increasing pressure due to increased geopolitical tensions, especially in connection with events in Ukraine and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It has generally been assumed that a multi-vector foreign policy provided some flexibility and unipolarity after the Cold War, a unipolar or multipolar world. However, the current situation is characterized by systemic rivalry between Russia, China and the West, complicating the situation of Kazakhstan. This leads to an inability to function in their own interests, forcing them to maneuver. The participants emphasized this as “*...the only policy that is possible in our realities*” (Interview 1) and “*Multi-vector approach remains effective. But when the roll goes off in one direction, that's when it stops working*” (Interview 3). On the other hand, respondent 6 notes that “*Kazakhstan is faced with the need to choose, but continues to demonstrate uncertainty*”, emphasizing

that a multi-vector strategy can only work if there is genuine strategic autonomy, strong diplomacy and economic independence, “...*which is not yet observed*” (Interview 6).

1.3 Regional Positioning

Regarding the soft power tools used by Kazakhstan in the form of cultural diplomacy, education, mediation or international initiatives, the respondents presented different points of view. The majority noted the effective use of educational initiatives, while 3 out of 8 participants expressed the limitations and lack of soft power.

According to an independent researcher from the “Eurasian monitoring” analytical center, “*Kazakhstan is doing well in all these areas*”. Despite the reflection of the cultural context in the following initiatives, such as the participation of the Kazakh delegation in EXPO 2025, held in Japan on April 13 and October 13, as well as the holding of the World Nomad Games, educational activities are the predominant component. An example is the Bolashak scholarship, which provides graduates with the opportunity to study abroad on a funded basis and remain employed by local or international organizations. This is confirmed by the words of a respondent from the Eurasian National University that, “*Only education can make our young people competitive in this new emerging world*”. Participant 4 emphasizes the idea that “*...Kazakhstan could be an education hub in Central Asia, even in a wider region*”. At the regional level, this may indicate the image of the state as a potential platform for the international exchange of competencies, while at the global — this is due to the fact that the state is able to compete with larger powers through educational technologies. On the contrary, participant 5 expressed doubts about the educational paradigm of soft power, emphasizing that, “*...but seeing that some foreign students are coming to Kazakhstan to study, we can say that I'm not sure whether it's Kazakhstan's soft power or those universities' soft power*”. This phrase clearly expresses critical and skeptical discourse. Regarding the remaining soft power tools, namely international initiatives and participation in peace negotiations, the respondents expressed that these efforts did not produce a sustainable result due to limited resources and a weak reputation base.

This leads to the question of Kazakhstan's positioning as agenda setting or a rule taker in the

following organizations: the SCO, the EAEU, and the CICA. Based on the responses received, it is worth noting that the state adheres to both positions in the above-mentioned organizations. Although Kazakhstan's role as an active participant in promoting stability and economic development has been mentioned repeatedly, it is worth noting that the country plays an ambiguous role. In institutions led by Russia, such as the Eurasian Economic Union or the Collective Security Organization, Kazakhstan mainly acts as a rule taker due to the existing structural asymmetries. As a respondent from Nazarbayev University noted, *“Russia has more influence, more power, and that's why it primarily allows itself to dictate some of the rules to the neighboring countries”*. However, on the platforms of the United Nations, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or the Collective Security Treaty Organization, Kazakhstan is *“trying”* to position itself more as an agenda-setting body whose role is still limited. First of all, due to the lack of institutional capacity, independence and regional consensus that Kazakhstan could become a leading country. According to respondent 6, the following explanation was given:

“In the EAEU, Kazakhstan more often acts as a performer, following in the wake of Russian politics. Within the SCO and CICA, Kazakhstan's role is less defined - it does not demonstrate initiative, and the structure of these organizations is not sufficiently institutionalized to have a lasting effect on the image and influence of the state”.

In addition, a participant of the Turkic Academy provided a link to the book *“Central Asia: the Views of Washington, Moscow and Beijing”* by Russian expert Dmitry Trenin, which emphasized that the SCO is based on three pillars, namely Russia, China and Kazakhstan, indicating a certain voice in this organization.

Half of the respondents were critical of the narrative of *“regional leader”* and the attachment of this status to Kazakhstan. The main reason for this is the avoidance of regional hegemony in Central Asia, preferring a pattern of *“cooperation”* rather than *“leadership”*. In the context of cooperation with the Central Asian states, experts highlighted Uzbekistan in particular. For example, a respondent from the KazISS put forward a statement on the existence of informal mutual understanding in the form of the formula *“Successful Uzbekistan – successful Kazakhstan”*, emphasizing the intention to mutual

development and the absence of the need for competition. According to an expert from the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy:

“Until recent times, we used to say that Kazakhstan is the rising star of Central Asia. But now I think we should act together with Uzbekistan. If Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan unite their strengths, I think the region will also be strong” (Interview 5).

This phrase may indicate the transition of hierarchical discourse to multilateral cooperation on such potential factors as changes in the political elite, the progress of external pressure and the increased activity of regional states. In addition, the concept of *“integration”* was used, which is considered controversial due to the *“risks of Islamization and demography”* as well as Kazakhstan's double standards due to the participation of projects led by Russia. The narratives used as "big brother" and "leaders" in relation to Kazakhstan determine the opinion about Kazakhstan's leadership positions in the region. However, Central Asia is a divided region and, as a result, there is no regional organization of its own, as well as problems in the field of water supply. Thus, to a certain extent, Kazakhstan can be considered a regional leader, primarily due to its economic superiority and investments in infrastructure. However, this leadership is limited by the lack of political influence on neighbors, and integration initiatives are not sustainable.

1.4 Geopolitical Challenges

Kazakhstan's foreign policy adaptability to geopolitical changes presented the multilateral opinions of experts. The majority of respondents, namely 5 out of 8, noted the following adaptation features: compliance with the principles of foreign policy, promotion of cultural and diplomatic initiatives, and immunity to the influence of major actors.

Despite its traditional allied relations with Russia, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Kazakhstan has taken *“very careful steps”* to adjust its foreign policy to the weak institutional context abroad. It was emphasized that Kazakhstan *“openly avoided endorsing Russia's actions in Ukraine”* (Interview 8) after the president's non-recognition of the separatist regions of Ukraine at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in 2022. Thus, Kazakhstan confirmed its commitment to

territorial integrity, and also tried to expand its activities with the European Union, Turkey and some partners in East Asia. In addition to the interest of cooperation from the European Union, there is also a growing role of the C+5 format. However, according to one of the respondents, “...at this stage there are no signs of a significant adaptation of the foreign policy course”. Kazakhstan maintains an inertial model of behavior, mainly responding to external challenges, but not forming its own proactive strategy.

From the point of view of the economic factor, as previously noted, dependence on exports of raw materials and infrastructure projects involving China, as well as trade and logistics ties with Russia, seriously limits the space for independent foreign policy. Attempts to diversify within the framework of cooperation with Turkey or the EU are being made, but they are fragmentary and symbolic. This is confirmed by the statistical data of the respondent, which indicates the number of unprofitable investments in the amount of 2.5 billion dollars and the volume of trade with Russia is approaching 30 billion dollars and with China it is about 44 billion dollars. Moreover, the participant noted the logistics southern corridor leading to Afghanistan, Pakistan or the Indian Ocean. Thus, Kazakhstan is trying to revive Silk Road initiatives, most of whose infrastructure projects are funded by China.

Unlike classic middle powers such as Turkey, South Korea, and some other countries, Kazakhstan lacks reliable infrastructure, military capabilities, and a limited military presence abroad. An example is Turkey, which maintains a military presence in Syria and some neighboring regions, indicating that it defends its interests through military interventions. In turn, Kazakhstan has no military bases outside the country, with the exception of several UN peacekeeping contingents in the Golan Heights in Syria. A distinctive feature is also the consideration of the point of view of the middle power in decision-making.

1.5 Potential Foreign Policy Trajectories

In this section, the respondents proposed various ideas for the formation of Kazakhstan's foreign policy in the coming years, taking into account the risks and opportunities in the context of current global trends. In addition, 3 out of 8 participants left this question open.

One of the respondents noted that “*There are many risks, as well as opportunities*”, while

another — noted an optimistic trajectory for development, explaining that “*Kazakhstan is an attractive country for investments from large countries, as well as international banks like the World Development Bank or the Asian Development Bank*”. A participant from the Eurasian National University emphasized the immutability in foreign policy, “*...the state apparatus will continue in the same spirit as it is now*”, but noticeable shifts in demographic, social and linguistic factors. According to the respondent, the risks are mostly related to linguistic, territorial and economic pressures from the Russian side, as well as China, which is developed in the field of artificial intelligence, digital governance and social engineering. From the point of view of domestic factors, the expert promotes the idea that “*half of our people are isolated, they're leaving in a very repressed world*”, emphasizing the lack of education of the population.

Phrases such as “*We have no other way*”, “*...we need to continue our multi-vector foreign policy*” and “*...we cannot have bad relations*” with the European Union, the United States, China, and Russia are repeatedly mentioned. This creates a lack of alternatives, indicating the normalization of the current foreign policy course. The most possible trajectory is to maintain the status quo with minor adjustments. On the contrary, respondent 6 asserts the possibilities of the state as a more active diplomacy and strengthening regional leadership through economic and logistical initiatives. However, as it was noted, “*...much will depend on the transformations in Russia itself*”.

In addition to the political context, the participants shared their views on aspects of Kazakhstan's foreign policy that remain insufficiently explored in academic and applied research. Respondent 2 mentioned the economic contribution to the academic and educational sector. According to an expert from the analytical center, Kazakhstan's investment in research and development (R&D) has a very small percentage of investments in this area, which leads to a weakening of the educational sector. To obtain an accurate percentage, the ranking of countries in the world by the level of research activity for 2019 was analyzed, including a comparative analysis of published peer-reviewed articles by national scientific communities. It is worth noting that more recent data for at least the last three to four years is not publicly available. Kazakhstan ranked 61st out of 197 with 2,367 published articles per year. The

participant also gives an example of the poor condition of laboratories in higher educational institutions in Kazakhstan, where *“they contain those devices that were still available in the 60s. That is why there is this weak development, or one might say, stagnation in the educational sphere”*.

In the context of political research, one of the participants suggested focusing on issues of soft power, the potential role of interreligious dialogue, peace initiatives, and the role of education in uniting peoples. The following phrases, such as *“civil society”* and *“strength of the people”* emphasize the expert's idea of building a stable and flexible relationship between the people of Central Asia, noting the importance of certain actions on the part of civil society groups, especially youth, academics, researchers and journalists. Moreover, it is necessary to develop academic diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy and information diplomacy. These suggestions are justified by the fact that:

“So I think that when you ask about liberalism, we recall in mind the importance of the morale, values, principles. This is very important. Especially now when the democracy and liberalism is not in the rise, in decline, temporarily. So we need to focus on the values, on the universal values, which unites people like dignity, equality, democracy, human rights, and things like that”
(Interview 4).

The following necessary studies were also mentioned, such as Kazakhstan's policy in the Turkic world, the benefits and costs of Kazakhstan's participation in the EAEU, the mechanisms for shaping foreign policy decisions within the country, the role of informal institutions and the influence of elite groups on the international agenda.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is worth noting that Kazakhstan's status as a middle power in Central Asia has caused a significant rethink for the region. Central Asia is considered as a region of the “Great Game”, in which the rivalry of major powers takes place, while the local states are dependent territories. However, as shown in the study, this description is not accurate and not correct. As a representative of a medium-sized state, Kazakhstan has strengthened cooperation between Central Asian states to address regional issues. Thus emphasizing that for external actors, the officially approved status of a middle power is an important factor.

Despite the lack of a theoretical general concept of middle-class states, the analysis of the semi-structured interview showed the consistency of a multi-vector strategy. The internal factors expressed in the social cohesion of citizens, bureaucratic elements of leadership and consensus of the elite fully reflect the systemic incentives of Kazakhstan's foreign policy decisions. As indicated by the limitations of the subject with the ability to strategic discourse. The approach based on active diplomacy and a balanced pragmatic strategy demonstrates that the concept of a middle power expresses the self-identification of a discursive plan in the context of Kazakhstan's foreign policy, and not just an analytical feature. This allows us to conclude that the state strives for strategic autonomy in the international system.

Conducting comparative characteristics between states claiming the status of middle powers reveals similarities and differences in foreign policy and domestic policy. Kazakhstan adheres to its role as a transit bridge between the West and the East, as well as a neutral mediator in regional and international issues. Accordingly, this approach emphasizes the implementation of a risk minimization strategy and the strengthening of the strategic autonomy of the State. Through a semi-structured interview, the proposed hypotheses about internal factors in domestic politics and a pragmatic balanced approach in foreign policy were proved.

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Appendix A

Profile of the participants

Participants	Affiliation	Years of Experience
Interviewee 1	Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (KazISS)	9 years
Interviewee 2	Analytical Research Center "Eurasian Monitoring"	Not provided
Interviewee 3	Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (KazISS)	20 years
Interviewee 4	L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University	13-14 years
Interviewee 5	Turkic Academy	20 years
Interviewee 6	The European Governance Lab; Korea Institute for International Economic Policy	5 years
Interviewee 7	Zhibek Zholy TV channel as an expert on foreign policy	20 years

Interviewee 8	Department of Public Policy at Nazarbayev University	Over 5 years
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Appendix B

Interview questions

Themes	Questions	Follow-up questions
Professional background	<p>1. What is your current professional affiliation and position?</p> <p>2. How many years of experience do you have in the field of international relations, foreign policy, or Central Asian studies?</p>	-
Expert perspective and theoretical framing	<p>3. Based on your professional experience, how would you define a “middle power” in today's international system?</p> <p>4. Do you believe Kazakhstan qualifies as a middle power? Why or why not?</p> <p>5. Which international relations theory - neoclassical realism, liberalism, or constructivism -</p>	<p>3. Which criteria (e.g., economic capability, diplomatic activism, regional influence) are most essential in your view?</p> <p>4. How does it compare to classical or emerging middle powers?</p>

	do you find most useful in analyzing Kazakhstan's foreign policy behavior?	
Foreign policy strategy	<p>6. How would you describe Kazakhstan's foreign policy approach toward Russia, China, and the United States?</p> <p>7. What are the key enablers of Kazakhstan's strategic autonomy?</p> <p>8. How do domestic factors - such as leadership preferences, bureaucratic capacity, or elite consensus - shape Kazakhstan's foreign policy decision-making?</p> <p>9. Is Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy still an effective strategy in the current geopolitical climate?</p>	<p>6. Do you see consistent balancing, hedging, or a shift in alignment over time?</p> <p>7. What are the most serious constraints?</p>
Regional engagement and soft power	10. How has Kazakhstan sought to project influence through soft	10. Which efforts have been most successful?

	<p>power - such as cultural diplomacy, education, mediation, or international initiatives (e.g., Astana peace talks, CICA)?</p> <p>11. In regional organizations such as the SCO, EAEU, and CICA, do you see Kazakhstan as an agenda-setter or more of a rule-taker?</p> <p>12. What is Kazakhstan's role in the Central Asian region, in your view?</p>	<p>11. How does it position itself within these institutions?</p>
<p>External pressures and strategic responses</p>	<p>13. How has Kazakhstan adjusted its foreign policy in response to recent global developments?</p> <p>14. How do economic dependencies - on trade, investment, or infrastructure - from major powers affect</p>	<p>14. Are there any efforts to diversify these dependencies?</p>

	Kazakhstan's foreign policy options?	
Comparative reflections and future outlook	<p>15. Compared to other middle powers (e.g. Indonesia, South Korea, or Türkiye), how would you evaluate Kazakhstan's approach to navigating great power rivalries?</p> <p>16. What strategic or diplomatic tools should Kazakhstan prioritize in order to enhance its status as a middle power and protect its interests in a multipolar world?</p> <p>17. What potential trajectories might Kazakhstan's foreign policy take in the near to medium term?</p>	15. What are the key differences or similarities?
Final reflections	18. What areas of Kazakhstan's foreign policy or role as a middle power remain	-

	underexplored in academic or policy research?	
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Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

Middle powers in the midst of great power rivalries: the case of Kazakhstan

Researchers: Daiana Aitmurzina (Bachelor's Student in International Relations), Nurzhanat Ametbek (Supervisor)

Thank you for your participation in our research! This study aims to examine the role of middle powers in the context of great power competition, with a focus on Kazakhstan.

In this study, you will be asked to answer a set of questions about your perspectives on international governance, foreign policy, and the strategies of middle powers. This process will take approximately 20 minutes.

Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time, for any reason, by informing the researcher. You are also free to skip any questions you prefer not to answer. (Note: Mandatory questions have been pre-approved by the Committee.). This research study does not offer any monetary compensation or fees for participation.

Data Privacy:

Fully Anonymous Data. This study is fully anonymous. Your participation is completely confidential. Once your responses are provided, they cannot be linked to your identity and therefore cannot be withdrawn or deleted after participation.

With your explicit permission, the interview may be audio-recorded or the Zoom meeting may be recorded. These recordings will be stored securely in the researcher's university-associated cloud storage and will be permanently deleted upon completion of the research.

Participation is entirely voluntary, and you are free to decline to answer any question or to withdraw from the interview at any time without any consequences.

Data Storage and Access:

Research data will be securely stored on password-protected computer and used solely for scientific analysis. Only the researchers will have access to this data.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the ISE Committee for Scientific Research at Maqsut Narikbayev University.

If you have any questions, please contact Daiana Aitmurzina at d_aitmurzina@kazguu.kz or Nurzhanat Ametbek at n_ametbek@kazguu.kz. If you have any complaints regarding the study, you may contact the Chair of ISE Committee for Scientific Research at i_qoraboyev@kazguu.kz.

Thank you for reviewing this information.

Consent Form

I have read and understood the information provided and:

- I agree to participate in this study
- I don't want to participate in this study
-

Signature:

Date: