

BALANCING, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES: KAZAKHSTAN'S MULTI-VECTOR FOREIGN POLICY AFTER UKRAINE CRISIS

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Abstract: Kazakhstan has long pursued a multi-vector foreign policy, balancing relations with major powers like Russia, China, and the West. However, the Ukraine Crisis and escalating Russia-West tensions challenged this approach. This article examines how the crisis impacted Kazakhstan's multi-vector diplomacy. It analyzes Kazakhstan's efforts to preserve economic and security ties with Russia while maintaining favorable Western relations. Kazakhstan's strategy involves distancing from Russia, intensifying collaboration with China, cautiously engaging the U.S. and Europe, and strengthening Central Asian partnerships. The future trajectory of its multi-vector policy hinges on adapting to regional shifts while safeguarding national interests. The article illuminates complexities small and medium states face in pursuing autonomous foreign policies amid multipolar rivalries. It enhances understanding of how such states navigate major power conflicts to uphold sovereignty and strategic autonomy. The analysis contributes insights into foreign policy dynamics in post-Soviet Eurasia.

Keywords: Kazakhstan; Russia; Ukraine Crisis; Multi-vector Foreign Policy

1 INTRODUCTION

The geopolitical landscape of Eurasia experienced a significant shift following the Ukraine crisis in 2014. This event, particularly Russia's annexation of Crimea and the ensuing conflict in Eastern Ukraine, not only altered the dynamics of relationships among post-Soviet states and Russia but also had extensive implications for the global order. In this context, Kazakhstan, strategically located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, plays a pivotal role. The country's foreign policy decisions are influential, affecting not just neighboring countries but also the wider international community. Historically, Kazakhstan has adopted a multi-vector foreign policy, aiming to maintain balanced relations with major global powers such as Russia, China, the European Union, and the United States[1,2]. The Ukraine crisis was a defining moment in post-Soviet geopolitics, testing existing security and diplomatic paradigms in the region. For Kazakhstan, which shares an extensive and complex history with Russia, the crisis required a nuanced diplomatic balancing act. Kazakhstan endeavored to preserve its strategic partnership with Russia, particularly in security and economic aspects, while simultaneously asserting its sovereignty and independence [3].

This article aims to demystify the evolution of Kazakhstan's foreign policy since the crisis. It examines how the country has navigated the increased tensions between Russia and the West and discusses the implications of these maneuvers for regional stability and global diplomacy. By analyzing Kazakhstan's response to the Ukraine crisis and its subsequent diplomatic strategies, this paper offers valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by Kazakhstan and similar states in managing complex international relations. The article contributes to the academic discourse on Eurasian geopolitics and the strategic considerations of post-Soviet states in the current global order.

Kazakhstan's foreign policy is characterized by multi-vectorism, a pragmatic, non-ideological approach aimed at fostering relations with key global players[4]. This principle was foundational to the Strategy on the Formation and Development of Kazakhstan as a Sovereign State, outlined in May 1992, which prioritized creating a conducive external milieu to bolster the nation's stable growth through political and economic reforms. Multi-vectorism has enabled Kazakhstan to navigate dependencies in asymmetrical relationships, leveraging its position to balance the influences of major powers like Russia, China, and the United States, thereby securing enhanced benefits and agreements [5,6].

A multi-vector foreign policy is a strategic approach that aims to foster strong relationships with a variety of countries and international organizations. The term, known as "multi-vectorism", is grounded in pragmatism and eschews ideological biases, allowing governments to remain neutral and avoid taking sides in international disputes or forming overly close alliances with specific nations or political group. Governments that adopt a multi-vector strategy strive to be seen as reliable partners, facilitating cooperation and dialogue among nations, with their actions driven purely by the state's interests in achieving its policy objectives.

Kazakhstan has been particularly persistent in applying multi-vectorism in its foreign policy, a practice it has honed since the early 1990s[7]. Following the Soviet Union's collapse, the shift towards a multipolar world order, and the acceleration of globalization, Kazakhstan's strategic location and abundant resources have made it a focal point of great power competition. Initially, multi-vectorism served as a strategy for Kazakhstan to navigate Russian dominance in the region and carve out an independent foreign policy path. Moreover, Kazakhstan's independence brought significant economic challenges, with the early years marked by instability and a sharp GDP decline in 1994 [8]. The need for

substantial capital investment and diverse market access for its growing energy sector in the late 1990s further propelled Kazakhstan towards a multi-vector approach, seeking multiple partners in direct competition with Russian interests. With both domestic and international objectives in mind, the Nazarbayev administration explored all options to ensure state security and economic growth. This multi-vector strategy enabled Kazakhstan to navigate complex international dynamics while making strides towards its policy goals. Shortly after gaining independence, Nazarbayev laid the groundwork for Kazakhstan's foreign policy, identifying key regions and countries for strategic partnerships, including the CIS states, Europe, Asia, North America, and the Pacific Basin, with a special focus on Russia, China, and the United States[9]. Beyond these powers, Kazakhstan has sought to foster relations with Western Europe, Central Asia, and other regions to gain economic support and development experiences. The country has also prioritized joining various international organizations, engaging in multilateral diplomacy, and taking on international responsibilities, significantly boosting its global image.

Kazakhstan's foreign policy formulation and implementation reflect a deep understanding of the international and domestic strategic landscape. Its "diversified and balanced" diplomacy, tailored to the nation's needs at the onset of independence, not only solidified its standing in the international community in a relatively short period but also created a conducive external environment for economic development. This approach has positioned Kazakhstan as a key player in the economic and social progress of the Central Asian region[10,11].

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

This article employs a qualitative research methodology, relying on a comprehensive literature review and analysis of primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include official government documents, such as the Foreign Policy Concepts of Kazakhstan, presidential speeches, and official statements from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Secondary sources encompass academic articles, policy papers, and reports from think tanks and international organizations. The collected data is analyzed using a thematic approach, focusing on the key aspects of Kazakhstan's foreign policy, including its multi-vector strategy, the impact of the Ukraine crisis, and its diplomatic practice in relation to Russia, the West, China, and Central Asian countries. The analysis is guided by the theoretical framework of neo-classical realism, which considers the interplay of systemic and domestic factors in shaping foreign policy decisions.

3 RESULTS

3.1 The Impact of the Ukraine Crisis on Kazakhstan

At the end of 2013, Ukraine's situation spiraled out of control, evolving into a political crisis following widespread protests over political issues and the signing of free trade agreements. This crisis extended beyond Ukraine's borders, significantly altering the geopolitical dynamics of the Eurasian region. Kazakhstan, a key player in the post-Soviet realm, experienced adverse effects in its economy, security, and diplomatic relations as a result.

3.1.1 Economic development

The war's actual economic impact on Kazakhstan has been notably mixed. Given the close economic and trade ties between Kazakhstan and Russia, the sanctions and counter-sanctions between the West and Russia have had a serious negative impact on the economy of Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan has seen a notable drop in its GDP. While the GDP figures in the local currency, tenge, show an increase, fluctuations in the exchange rate mean these figures don't accurately capture the economic reality. When converted to US dollars, the picture changes dramatically, revealing stagnant growth or even a recessionary pattern. Between 2013 and 2016, Kazakhstan's GDP decreased from \$236.6 billion to \$137.3 billion, marking a significant slowdown. Although there was some economic recovery from 2017 to 2020, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic triggered another economic downturn. To date, the annual GDP growth rate has not rebounded to its pre-2014 levels as seen Figure 1.

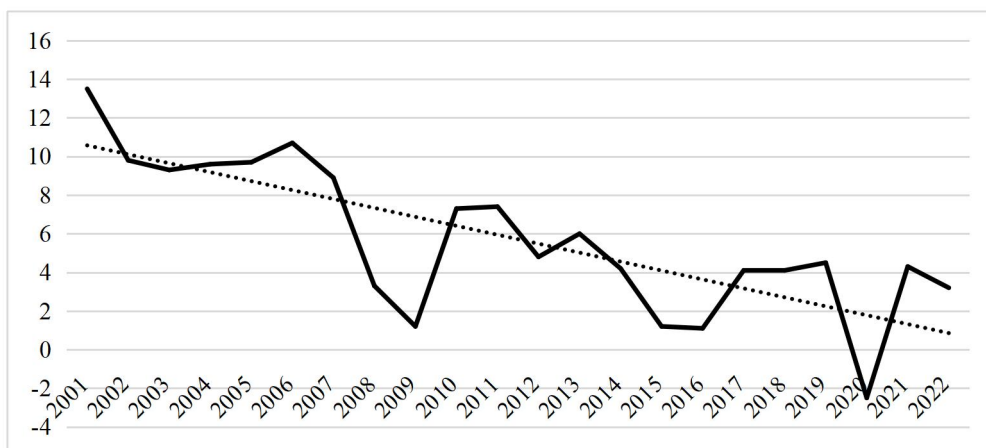


Figure 1 Annual Growth Rate of Kazakhstan's GDP, 2001-2022.

In addition, Kazakhstan is facing problems of devaluation of the national currency, rise in unemployment, and concerns over energy and food security. Within the initial fortnight of the crisis, the Kazakhstani tenge plummeted by 15.3 percent in comparison to the dollar, mirroring the initial decline of the rouble[12]. This led to a surge in the cost of various imported items, including food, consumer goods, gas, and refined oil products, directly affecting the purchasing power of the population and, by extension, potentially the social stability. In 2022, Kazakhstan's unemployment rate stood at 4.9%, with 4.583 million people out of work. This represents an increase of 87,000 from the 4.496 million unemployed in 2021[13]. Such a rise in unemployment is likely to contribute to greater social instability, as more people face economic hardship. Kazakhstan relies heavily on Russia for imports like sugar, grain, and cooking oil. However, the Ukraine crisis has led to a decrease in these Russian exports, driving up prices. Concurrently, disruptions in production, logistics, and trade have significantly increased the cost of food and energy products. It poses a risk to Kazakhstan's food and energy security and exacerbates inflation problem. From 2014 to 2023, inflation in Kazakhstan surged by 124%[14].

At the same time, Kazakhstan might have found new opportunities to expand its economic influence in the region. In 2022, Kazakhstan's export to Russia nearly doubled, and the majority of transactions were carried out in national currencies, sparking concerns that the country might be serving as a conduit to sidestep Western sanctions, despite its declarations to the contrary. Additionally, the high prices of oil and gas positively influenced the country's trade balance. Kazakhstan could also benefit from the influx of a number of international companies compelled to exit the Russian market. In response to the invasion, Kazakhstan is actively encouraging businesses to relocate from Russia by offering incentives. The country has already secured agreements with over 50 companies, notable names include Honeywell, WEG, TikTok, Fortescue Metals Group, and Carlsberg. Furthermore, Kazakhstan aims to attract an additional 300 businesses from over 20 countries, with a significant focus on companies from Germany and the United States[15]. President Tokayev has called on the government to create favourable conditions for their relocation. This strategic move aims to capitalize on its unique geographical location at the juncture of European and Asian markets.

3.1.2 Security

Russia's annexation of Crimea and destabilization of Ukraine have heightened anti-Russian sentiment in Kazakhstan. Russia's actions are seen as a warning since it shows Russia's determination to interfere with the domestic affairs of its neighbours to advance its own agenda. These actions highlight the significant costs associated with any efforts to distance oneself from Russia's influence. According to President Vladimir Putin, the primary justification for Crimea's return was to safeguard the interests of Russians living abroad due to historical reasons[16]. Given that northern Kazakhstan has a predominantly Russian population, this move has raised concerns in Kazakhstan about its own sovereignty.

The "Great Russianism" of the Russian political discourse has stirred up Kazakhstan's sense of sovereignty and exacerbated its Russophobia. In February 2014, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, head of Russia's LDPR party, expressed support for incorporating Central Asian nations, such as Kazakhstan, into the Russian Federation as part of a proposed Central Asian Federal District. That same year, during an all-Russian youth forum, President Putin remarked that Nursultan Nazarbayev had "established a nation on a territory that had never previously been recognized as a state"[17]. After the escalation of the Ukraine crisis, the Russian politician Dmitry Drobnitsky mentioned that Kazakhstan could be Russia's next concern because of the numerous Russians living in its territory[18]. Subsequently, the Russian Ambassador to Kazakhstan, Ambassador Borodavkin, publicly stated in an interview that Kazakhstan's "ultra-nationalist" tendencies and "Russophobia" were getting worse, and that Russia would help suppress Kazakhstan's "nationalism" and "extremism" if Kazakhstan needed it[19]. The comments sparked widespread uproar and strong reactions across the country, leading to a public outcry and heightened discussions among the citizens.

Critiques of the economic collaboration have also become increasingly common. Kazakhstan openly criticized attempts to provide integration projects with a political dimension and suggested that they pose a threat to the country's political sovereignty. The Kazakh elite is strongly opposed to Kazakhstan's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which it sees as a means of realizing Russia's imperial ambitions. Although Kazakhstan's involvement in the EAEU was touted to bring economic advantages, the sentiment among the populace, including civil society and the business sector, has been more skeptical over the last ten years. From 2010 to 2015, civil society organizations actively participated in debates about this issue, utilizing press conferences, forums, and roundtable discussions to voice their apprehensions regarding Kazakhstan's integration into the Customs Union and subsequently the EAEU[20]. Kazakhstan declared it would maintain the option to exit the Union should it pose a threat to the nation's sovereignty[21]. Although such declarations might seem at odds with Kazakhstan's role as a key proponent of the Union, they were mainly directed at the domestic audience and, to a degree, reflect underlying skepticism among the Eurasian project's participants. This rhetoric, highlighting a practical stance and the importance of sovereignty, continued even after the political shift in 2019[22]. The war in Ukraine has laid bare the fragility of Kazakhstan's economic ties with Russia. Russia's decision to halt specific exports to EAEU member states, aiming to safeguard its domestic market, swiftly influenced the cost and accessibility of several staple foods in Kazakhstan, underscoring the nation's profound reliance on its adjacent ally.

The future trajectory of Kazakhstan is closely linked to the outcome of the crisis in Ukraine. Political reform is more likely if the Kazakhstani government lose Moscow's support due to a Russian setback. Conversely, a Russian victory might lead to a stronger influence in the region, reinforcing the current political landscape in Kazakhstan and beyond. However, the crisis may also hinder domestic progress. Deep socio-economic frustrations had been bubbling in the population for several years and had led to recurrent protests. The crisis added further distress to the society already

deeply shaken by the traumatic events of "Bloody January". In a society divided and concerned about escalating costs due to geopolitical tensions, the government might struggle more than ever to address public discontent.

3.1.3 Diplomatic relations

For many years, Kazakhstan has implemented a multi-vector foreign policy, striving to maintain a balanced relationship with key global players like Russia, China, the United States, the European Union, and its neighbors. However, the Ukraine crisis has complicated the geopolitical landscape in the Eurasian region, making it more challenging for Kazakhstan to navigate the interests of major powers and regional entities. On one hand, Kazakhstan shares a strategic alliance with Russia, marked by significant economic ties and military-security cooperation. On the other hand, it is connected with Western countries and trading partners that contribute substantially to its economy. These relationships are crucial for Kazakhstan's modernization and growth, placing its foreign policy at a crossroads. While adopting a strategy of diversified balance may alleviate some pressure to pick sides, the Ukraine crisis underscores that such an approach doesn't completely remove the necessity to make tough decisions in a complex global political context. Kazakhstan has opted for a cautious and neutral stance, avoiding a binary choice between major powers. It highlights the pragmatism and diversity of its diplomatic approach.

Although the crisis has had some negative impact on Kazakh-Russian relations, Kazakhstan continues to regard Russia as a top-priority diplomatic partner due to its special significance in terms of history, geography, economy and security. In June 2014, the Kazakh Foreign Minister Idrissov highlighted in an interview that Kazakhstan has sustained long-term strategic relationships with Russia across political, trade, economic, and cultural areas, engaging at both regional and global levels through bilateral and multilateral cooperation. However, amidst escalating tensions between Russia and the West, Kazakhstan has not aligned itself entirely with Russia's political stance. Instead, it has actively sought investments from the U.S. and Western countries, and has enhanced its collaboration with the European Union. A notable instance of this was the president's visit to the EU headquarters in October 2014, where he underscored the significance of bolstering ties with the EU. During this visit, there were substantial discussions with senior officials of the European Commission about the future of cooperation.

Russia-Ukraine Conflict in 2022 has complicated Kazakhstan's efforts to maintain a diverse and balanced diplomatic approach, prompting a reassessment of its ties with Russia. With the U.S. and Western countries imposing comprehensive sanctions on Russia and hinting at secondary sanctions, Kazakhstan has come under scrutiny. High-ranking officials like European Commission President Von der Leyen, U.S. Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Elizabeth Rosenberg, and Assistant Secretary of Commerce Matthew Axelrod have openly criticized Kazakhstan for potentially aiding Russia in circumventing sanctions and export controls. Consequently, Kazakhstan's stance has shifted from its position in 2014, as it now appears to be publicly distancing itself from Russia.

3.2 Diplomatic Practice of Kazakhstan After Ukraine Crisis

3.2.1 With Russia – gradual distancing while maintaining priority

Kazakhstan shares significant ties with Russia, being a founding member of the EAEU and having one of the world's longest land borders with Russia. The 2014 Foreign Policy Concept outlines Kazakhstan's commitment to "further strengthen its ties with Russia across political, trade, economic, cultural, and humanitarian sectors, grounded in the Treaty on Good Neighborliness and Friendship in the 21st Century"[23]. Under President Tokayev's leadership, Kazakhstan has continued to prioritize the "advancement of alliance relations with Russia", focusing on expanding multilateral cooperation within the frameworks of the EAEU, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), among others. Significantly, Tokayev's first international visit following his reelection in 2022 was to Russia, a gesture he described as "symbolically important"[24]. This underscores that Kazakhstan's "Russia First" diplomatic approach remains steadfast.

Economically, Kazakhstan is highly dependent on Russia. Since the official launch of the EAEU, the two countries have been actively promoting trade within this framework, with particularly cooperation in the fuel and energy, mining and metallurgy, agriculture, transport and communications, machine building, chemical and aerospace industries, etc. In 2020, the Heads of the EAEU member states signed the "Strategic Directions for Developing the Eurasian Economic Integration until 2025", which is designed to increase the Union's investment and innovation activity. In 2021, Prime Minister Asghar Mamin and Prime Minister Mishustin signed the Economic Cooperation Program for 2021-2025. In November 2022, at the 18th Interregional Cooperation Forum of Kazakhstan and Russia, the two countries signed 17 bilateral documents totaling \$50 million[25]. In 2022, the volume of trade between Kazakhstan and Russia reached a record high of \$27 billion. Russian companies rank among the top five investors in Kazakhstan's economy, with their total investment surpassing \$20 billion. In the first half of 2023, Russian investment in Kazakhstan exceeded \$1 billion, marking a 20 percent increase from the previous year[26]. Russia remains Kazakhstan's top economic partner.

In the area of military security, Russia and Kazakhstan share a commitment to uphold regional peace and stability, collaborating closely under CSTO framework. In October 2020, the Defense Ministers from both countries signed a military cooperation treaty. It outlines plans to enhance cooperation in various areas, including expert training, joint military drills, military technology and equipment, armaments, peacekeeping operations, and regional security initiatives. During his discussion with Minister Sergei Shoigu on the same day, President Tokayev highlighted the significance of military collaboration between Kazakhstan and Russia as a cornerstone of their strategic partnership [27]. In addition, the armed forces of the two countries regularly conduct joint exercises aimed at strengthening cooperation in regional security and combating terrorism and extremism. In January 2022, escalating gas prices sparked riots in

Kazakhstan, referred to as the "Bloody January". In response, Russia advocated for the deployment of CSTO peacekeeping forces to assist the Kazakh government in quell the situation. This action underscored Kazakhstan's ongoing reliance on Russia for security support.

However, Kazakhstan has been working to dilute the image of overdependence on Russia. While the President of Kazakhstan acknowledged the CSTO's effective response, he subtly distanced himself from the notion of Russia's dominant role in addressing the "Bloody January" events. Tokayev clarified that it wasn't Russia alone that "saved" Kazakhstan, instead, it was the CSTO that dispatched peacekeeping forces to help quell the riots[28]. Also, Kazakhstan has been making efforts to refrain from supporting Russia's geopolitical actions. For instance, during the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the Nazarbayev administration chose to abstain from UN resolutions on the matter. The situation became more complex following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, prompting Kazakhstan to distance itself from Russia more than it had in the past. The intensification of the crisis in Ukraine and the subsequent increase in sanctions against Russia have narrowed the room for neutral stances. President Tokayev affirmed Kazakhstan's respect for Ukraine's territorial integrity and expressed a desire to bolster its longstanding cooperation with Europe and the United States[29]. While Kazakhstan chose to abstain from a UN resolution that condemned the war, it made a clear stance by declaring non-recognition of the separatist republics in Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Additionally, the Kazakhstani government has provided humanitarian aid to Ukraine and firmly stated it would not facilitate Russia in bypassing sanctions. This declaration is particularly significant for Kazakhstan, which, as part of a customs union with Russia, could potentially face repercussions from anti-Russian sanctions. Kazakhstan has also expressed a commitment to fostering stable relations with the EU and has shown willingness to contribute to stabilizing the global energy security landscape[30]. In essence, Kazakhstan is cautiously distancing itself from Russia through both its statements and actions.

3.2.2 With West – from distancing to moderate contacting

In the early 2000s, attempts by Western nations to promote "democratic transformation" in Central Asia led to instability and disorder, prompting Central Asian countries to strengthen their ties with Russia and reduce their engagement with the U.S. and Western countries. In 2011, the U.S. introduced the "New Silk Road Initiative" for Central Asia, aiming to assert its influence in the region by fostering trade between Central and South Asia. The Kazakh government values economic aid and investment opportunities from the U.S. Despite a temporary dip in economic interactions during the Trump era, Kazakhstan's interest in American trade and investment remained steadfast. Following the 2014 Ukraine crisis, Kazakhstan aimed to lessen its economic reliance on Russia by seeking external assistance for market development. In 2018, an invitation to the U.S. was extended to former President Nazarbayev, leading to the signing of the Enhanced Strategic Partnership for the 21st Century. This agreement spans a wide array of bilateral cooperation matters, further strengthening Kazakhstan-U.S. relations as both sides committed to enhancing their economically advantageous partnerships, particularly in boosting trade and investment[31].

Following the escalation of the Ukraine crisis, Central Asian nations, including Kazakhstan, are confronted with the dilemma of "picking sides". President Tokayev has frequently emphasized a stance of neutrality, partly to evade potential secondary sanctions from Western countries. Meanwhile, the U.S. is seeking to influence Central Asian geopolitics through initiatives like the "C5+1 Diplomatic Platform" and the "US Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025," aiming to engage Kazakhstan and its neighbors more closely. In response, Kazakhstan is keen on broadening its strategic options, striving to safeguard its interests through balanced engagement with the United States. On the first anniversary of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, U.S. Secretary Blinken's visit to Kazakhstan was highlighted by Tokayev as a significant step towards bolstering strategic cooperation. Tokayev noted, "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"[32]. Since then, high-ranking U.S. government officials have made frequent visits to Kazakhstan. In September 2023, the U.S. invited the heads of the five Central Asian states to New York for the C5+1 summit. This move, followed by similar engagements from its allies with Central Asian leaders, underscores the growing interest of the U.S. and Western countries in strengthening partnerships with Central Asia.

Kazakhstan stands out in Central Asia for proactively forging strong connections with the EU, aiming to secure financial and technical assistance from Western European countries and to gain their support in joining international economic organizations. The EU-Kazakhstan Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, encompassing 29 cooperation areas, marks a significant milestone in deepening their bilateral ties. Presently, the EU is Kazakhstan's foremost investor and trade partner, with the country drawing in over \$170 billion in EU investments over the last three decades and hosting nearly 3,000 companies with EU capital[25]. In response to the intensification of the Ukraine crisis, Kazakhstan has made efforts to steer clear of the anti-Russian sanctions by openly expressing its intent to enhance economic collaboration with the EU. In the first Central Asia-EU Summit, President Tokayev affirmed that forging a strategic partnership with the EU has been a cornerstone of Kazakhstan's foreign policy. At the second summit in 2023, Tokayev highlighted Kazakhstan's potential to leverage its economic, trade, and transport-logistics capabilities to foster mutually beneficial ties with the EU. He encouraged European partners to engage in developing The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR).

Beyond the president, other senior Kazakh officials have increasingly engaged with EU counterparts to pursue economic cooperation. In November 2022, former Prime Minister Smailov and European Commission President Von der Leyen inked a Memorandum of Understanding on collaboration in emerging energy sectors, including battery technology and the green hydrogen value chain[33]. In March 2023, Kazakh Deputy Minister of Economy Abdulkarimov led a delegation to the Central Asia Energy Trade and Investment Forum in London, presenting

investment prospects in the energy area to potential partners. Furthermore, in May 2023, the Kazakh Minister of Energy convened with an EU delegation, headed by the EU Ambassador to Kazakhstan, to deliberate on energy policy cooperation[13]. Therefore, Kazakhstan's vigorous pursuit of stronger ties with EU nations primarily aims to mitigate potential adverse impacts and establish a new balance centered around "economic diplomacy".

3.2.3 With China – deepen friendship and cooperation

During the Ukraine crisis, Kazakhstan was actively engaging with China's Silk Road Economic Belt initiative, introducing its own economic project, the Bright Road Plan, to complement it. Kazakhstan has made it clear that it aims to "enhance in-depth strategic cooperation with China through high-level political dialogue" and foster "a stable, comprehensive, and strategic partnership with China". The Ukraine crisis has expanded the opportunities for collaboration between China and Kazakhstan, leading to a significant improvement in their bilateral relations over recent years.

In the area of politics, China and Kazakhstan have enjoyed frequent high-level engagements, continuously improving their political trust. In September 2015, the leaders of both countries ratified the Joint Declaration on a New Stage of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. During his state visit to China in June 2018, Nazarbayev emphasized Kazakhstan's commitment to its relationship with China, expressing a desire to align development strategies and enhance practical cooperation in areas like investment, innovation, agriculture, and energy. Tokayev's inaugural visit to China as president in September 2019 promoted the bilateral ties to a "permanent comprehensive strategic partnership", heralding a new era of high-quality development. The year 2022 marked the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and Kazakhstan, with both sides keen on advancing strategic cooperation, fostering collaboration across various sectors, and deepening their amicable ties. In June of that year, Tokayev underscored the priority of Kazakhstan's relationship with China in its foreign policy, aiming to expand the facets of their bilateral relations[34]. The two countries have engaged in profound discussions on significant international and regional matters, jointly contributing to the enhancement of their bilateral relationship. Furthermore, through platforms like the "China+Central Asia" Foreign Ministers' Meeting and the "C+C5 Summit", China and Kazakhstan have engaged in both bilateral and multilateral dialogues, reinforcing their strategic trust and commitment to mutual benefit.

In the area of economic and trade collaboration, China and Kazakhstan have been progressively enhancing their strategic partnership and broadening their economic activities. Both countries are advancing the Belt and Road Initiative and the Bright Road Plan, diligently implementing policies and engaging in various cooperative ventures in infrastructure, trade, and manufacturing sectors. The extensive and high-level economic connections have intensified the interdependence between China and Kazakhstan, with their shared interests leading to significant agreements on bilateral cooperation and regional development. Currently, China and Kazakhstan maintain seven pairs of year-round operational border ports, five cross-border oil and gas pipelines, two cross-border railways, and one international border cooperation center[35]. Key infrastructure projects like the China-Kazakhstan Logistics Cooperation Base, Khorgos port, Aktau port, and the new Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran Corridor are put into operation. At the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2022, Tokayev highlighted, "China is now Kazakhstan's primary economic and foreign trade partner, with Chinese investments in our economy surpassing \$22 billion over the last 15 years. Thus, enhancing our bilateral cooperation with China is crucial for our nation". During the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the trade between China and Kazakhstan has seen a notable rise. The total trade volume between the two countries in 2022 reached \$31.2 billion, marking a 23.6 percent increase from the previous year and setting a new record[35]. In the first half of 2023, trade between China and Kazakhstan amounted to \$13.6 billion, up 20.5 percent from the previous year, with China accounting for 20 percent of Kazakhstan's total trade volume, solidifying its position as Kazakhstan's leading trade partner[36]. The future of China-Kazakhstan economic cooperation looks very promising.

In the realm of cultural exchanges, the relationship between the two countries has grown increasingly close, enhancing the "people-to-people bond". In 2015, they reached an agreement on cultural and humanitarian cooperation, aimed at fostering comprehensive exchanges and collaboration across various humanistic fields[37]. As part of the Belt and Road Initiative, China and Kazakhstan have seen a significant uptick in people-to-people interactions, with burgeoning cooperation in education, culture, tourism, and other sectors. Kazakhstan has established five Confucius Institutes, and seven Kazakhstani centers have been set up in Chinese universities. The exchange of international students between the two nations is on the rise. During Chairman Xi's visit to Kazakhstan in September 2022, the leaders agreed in principle to establish the Luban Workshop in Kazakhstan, with construction commencing eight months later. Moreover, the two countries signed a mutual visa exemption agreement to facilitate people-to-people exchanges. The leaders of China and Kazakhstan have designated 2024 as the Year of Kazakhstan Tourism in China. Both parties are keen on unlocking the potential of regional and border cooperation, encouraging more connections between provinces and cities, and further enhancing people-to-people ties.

3.2.4 With Central Asian Countries – enhance intra-region integration and deepen regional cooperation

Central Asia holds a distinctive position in Kazakhstan's foreign policy, shaped by the deep historical and cultural connections and their shared national security, political stability, and economic growth. Kazakhstan advocates for regional integration to mitigate potential conflicts, addresses socio-economic challenges, and tackles water resource issues. It is committed to confront internal and external challenges, enhancing cooperation across political, economic, cultural, and humanitarian spheres based on mutual benefit and equality.

In terms of regional bilateral relations, Kazakhstan places special emphasis on its relationship with Uzbekistan, marked by frequent interactions in recent years. State visits by the Kazakh president to Uzbekistan in 2016, 2017, 2019, and 2022 have significantly bolstered political ties. In 2022, the leaders of both nations signed the Treaty on Allied

Relations, elevating their relationship from a strategic partnership to allied status. That same year, discussions between the Kazakh and Uzbek Prime Ministers at the CIS Heads of State Council led to an agreement to boost bilateral trade to \$10 billion, aiming to strengthen trade connections. Kazakhstan also prioritizes its diplomatic relations with Kyrgyzstan, with the Kazakh head of state visiting Kyrgyzstan four times since 2014. During a 2022 visit, President Tokayev emphasized the significance of the visit in enhancing the strategic partnership and boosting bilateral cooperation, noting Kyrgyzstan's close ties with Kazakhstan[38]. Subsequently, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan signed a joint statement and 13 memorandums to fortify their partnership. The strategic partnership with Tajikistan is similarly deepening. In May 2023, Tajik President Rahmon's visit to Kazakhstan led to discussions on promoting trade, education, and cultural cooperation, culminating in the signing of an Alliance Cooperation Declaration to solidify their collaborative foundation. Rahmon was awarded Kazakhstan's highest honor, the Order of the Golden Eagle. Additionally, the Kazakhstan-Tajikistan business forum in Astana saw the signing of over 40 agreements valued at \$1.8 billion[39]. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, both Caspian Sea neighbors, share broad mutual interests across various sectors. In October 2021, President Tokayev made his first state visit to Turkmenistan, engaging in comprehensive discussions with President Berdymukhammedov on numerous topics, including their strategic partnership. Tokayev affirmed Kazakhstan's strong support for Turkmenistan's peace-oriented policies, its efforts to enhance regional collaboration in Central Asia, its stance of permanent neutrality, and initiatives like the "Days of Turkmenistan Culture" in Kazakhstan. They also explored expanding bilateral cooperation in energy, logistics, transportation, agriculture and industry. The visit was marked by the signing of several collaborative agreements, including a Joint Declaration by the Heads of State, further propelling the strategic partnership between the two nations.

The momentum for regional cooperation in Central Asia has been increasingly evident, with the leaders of the five countries regularly engaging on international and regional matters. The fourth Central Asia Consultative Meeting in 2022 saw the successful adoption of a joint statement, the 2022-2024 Roadmap for Regional Cooperation Development, and the landmark Treaty on Friendship, Good-Neighborliness, and Cooperation for Central Asia's Development in the 21st Century. At the 5th Consultative Meeting of Central Asian Heads of State, Tokayev highlighted Central Asia's emergence as a hub of new economic prospects in trade, investment, business, science, and innovation. He stressed the coming decade's critical role in maximizing economic opportunities, urging the nations to present a united front to the global community, foster humanitarian cooperation, enhance inter-university ties, and collectively promote the Central Asia tourism brand. Kazakhstan's commitment to deepening regional cooperation and fostering close ties among Central Asian countries underscores its leading role in the region.

4 DISCUSSION

The analysis of Kazakhstan's foreign policy evolution since the Ukraine crisis reveals the country's pragmatic and balanced approach to navigating the complex geopolitical landscape of the Eurasian region. The findings highlight the challenges faced by Kazakhstan in maintaining its strategic partnership with Russia while simultaneously asserting its sovereignty and independence. The impact of the Ukraine crisis on Kazakhstan's economy, security, and diplomatic relations underscores the vulnerability of post-Soviet states to regional geopolitical tensions and the far-reaching consequences of such crises.

Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy, characterized by fostering relations with key global players such as Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union, has been instrumental in enabling the country to balance the influences of major powers and secure enhanced benefits and agreements. This approach has positioned Kazakhstan as a key player in the economic and social progress of the Central Asian region. However, the Ukraine crisis has tested the resilience of Kazakhstan's multi-vector strategy, prompting the country to reassess its ties with Russia and diversify its engagements with other global and regional powers.

The findings regarding Kazakhstan's diplomatic practice after the Ukraine crisis, including its gradual distancing from Russia, moderate contact with the West, deepening friendship with China, and enhanced cooperation with Central Asian countries, demonstrate the country's adaptability and pragmatism in foreign policy decision-making. These strategic maneuvers highlight Kazakhstan's efforts to safeguard its national interests, mitigate potential adverse impacts, and establish a new balance in its international relations.

The article's analysis contributes to the understanding of the factors shaping Kazakhstan's foreign policy choices and the challenges and opportunities faced by the country in managing complex international relations. The findings have implications for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners interested in Eurasian geopolitics and the foreign policy strategies of post-Soviet states. The article also contributes to the theoretical discourse on neo-classical realism, demonstrating the interplay of systemic and domestic factors in shaping foreign policy decisions.

Future research could explore the long-term implications of the Ukraine crisis for Kazakhstan's foreign policy and regional stability, as well as the evolving dynamics of Kazakhstan's relationships with major global and regional powers. Comparative studies examining the foreign policy strategies of other post-Soviet states in the context of the Ukraine crisis could provide valuable insights into the broader geopolitical trends in the Eurasian region.

COMPETING INTERESTS

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