



BETWEEN GIANTS: HOW KAZAKHSTAN NAVIGATES GLOBAL POWER RIVALRY IN CENTRAL ASIA

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This article examines Kazakhstan's foreign policy strategy in the context of intensifying geopolitical competition in Central Asia. Historically, the region has been an arena of rivalry among great powers, beginning with the confrontation between the Russian and British Empires in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Today, this competition has transformed into a multipolar struggle involving Russia, China, and the United States. The study analyzes Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy, which seeks to balance relations with these major actors while safeguarding national sovereignty and economic development. Special attention is given to Kazakhstan's energy resources and its role as a key transit hub linking Asia and Europe. The article explores Kazakhstan's strategic partnerships with Russia in security and military-technical cooperation, with China through the Belt and Road Initiative and energy infrastructure projects, and with the United States in the fields of investment, technology, and critical minerals. These relationships illustrate Kazakhstan's efforts to diversify its foreign ties and avoid excessive dependence on any single power. The article argues that Kazakhstan's multi-vector approach represents a pragmatic response to the emerging multipolar international order. By adhering to principles of international law, peaceful diplomacy, and economic openness, Kazakhstan positions itself as a regional leader in Central Asia and an important actor in shaping regional stability and cooperation amid growing global polarization.

Key words: Multi-vector foreign policy, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), KazMunaiGas, Khorgos Dry Port, Central Asia–China Gas Pipeline, Great Power Competition (Russia–China–USA), Strategic Partnership Declaration (Kazakhstan–Russia, 2025)

The Central Asian region began to play an important role in world politics from the late 19th to the early 20th centuries and was considered a permanent

zone of interest for the political hegemonic states of the Russian Empire and the British Empire, and interest in the territories of present-day Kazakhstan



located in this region was especially great at that time. Today, three giant states are pursuing their interests in this region, and Kazakhstan is also trying to pursue a multi-vector, open, pragmatic policy based on its principles. Another important aspect for Kazakhstan is conducting foreign policy as a leading state in Central Asia and determining the foreign political and economic international relations of Central Asia. The main directions in Kazakhstan's policy today are the restriction of the command economy characteristic of the Soviet era and the transition to a Western-style market economy. From this we can see that the country pursues a number of goals: attracting large investment packages to the territory of the state, developing national industry, and finding new, reliable trade partners. Kazakhstan is also an attractive region for investors due to its wealth in energy resources. Currently, Russia and China are especially trying to use the country's resources in their own interests. Kazakhstan's energy According to Minister Zharkeshov, the country plans to export 88 billion cubic meters of gas to China and other countries by 2026, and according to him, 63 trillion cubic meters of gas reserves have been discovered in 15 regions of Kazakhstan. At the first China-Central Asia Summit, President Xi Jinping proposed establishing an energy development partnership between China and Central Asia to build a closer community with a shared future under the Belt and Road Initiative. In this regard,

Kazakhstan is actively implementing the agreement reached by the heads of state and deepening practical energy cooperation with Central Asian countries.¹ Its geographical location itself means that it is naturally forced to be close to the two giant powers in the region, Russia and China. It will also need to pay special attention to relations with the US and the EU, and use its opportunities taking into account national interests.²

Relations with Russia. The Russian Federation often views Central Asia as a territory of its privileged interests, and this situation causes sharp discontent among all Central Asian states, including Astana, the main reason for this is that during the former Soviet Union it was one of its internal territorial units and the existence of historical, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and military ties. One of the areas that Kazakhstan relies on most with Russia is military-technical cooperation. Most of the military equipment used by Kazakhstan is old Russian equipment, so the provision of services and technical support provided by Russia is one of the main areas of stable cooperation. Another event considered important for both countries was the conclusion of the

¹ <https://astanatimes.com/2025/06/kazakhstan-china-sign-key-deals-in-energy-technology-infrastructure/>

² https://nesa-center.org/dev/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/2022-0126_The-Role-of-Kazakhstan-in-Strategic-Competition.pdf



Declaration “On the Establishment of Strategic Partnership and Alliance” between Russia and Kazakhstan during the visit of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to Moscow on November 12, 2025. Kazakhstan and Russia share a 7,600-kilometer border and maintain economic and security ties through the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Their cooperation includes space exploration at the Baikonur Cosmodrome, industrial projects and joint infrastructure development across Central Asia. Tuqayev’s government established the alliance as a natural evolution of their long-standing partnership. “Despite the difficult international situation, mutual cooperation and partnership are actively developing for the benefit of our people,” Tuqayev said. For Moscow, the new alliance will help demonstrate that it is not isolated, providing confirmation of the partnership of one of Russia’s main neighbors. For Astana, it will reassure Russia that it will continue to cooperate while maintaining the flexibility to engage the United States, China and Europe. The declaration can therefore be seen as a strengthening of Kazakhstan’s strategic political and economic ties.³

Kazakhstan-China relations.

China is one of Kazakhstan's largest trading and economic partners. As of 2024, the volume of trade relations between the two countries has also grown

at a record high and reached 44 billion US dollars.⁴ One of China's strategic priorities is economic expansion through the "One Belt, One Road" initiative (BRI). Kazakhstan plays an important role in this process as a "key connecting link" due to its geographical location. Kazakhstan is its main transit area when China aims to enter the markets of Europe and the Middle East. There are several major projects being implemented in the region, in particular in Kazakhstan, one of the most important of which is oil pipelines. The Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline is partly owned by China's national oil corporation CNPC (China National Petroleum Corporation) and the Kazakh company KazMunaiGas. The pipeline supplying Kazakh oil to China has a capacity of about 400,000 barrels of oil per day. There is also a Central Asia-China gas pipeline. It starts in Turkmenistan, passes through Kazakhstan, and collects part of Kazakhstan's gas during transit. Another major project in China and Kazakhstan is the Khorgos land port. It is the largest dry port in the world and is located on the Kazakhstan-China border. However, trade volumes have decreased significantly due to the pandemic. Temporary restrictions have also been imposed on the transit of perishable

³ <https://timesca.com/kazakhstan-russia-sign-comprehensive-strategic-partnership-declaration/>

⁴ <https://astanatimes.com/2025/06/kazakhstan-china-deepen-strategic-partnership-sign-24-agreements/>



goods from the European Economic Union countries, including Kazakhstan.⁵

US-Kazakhstan relations. On November 6, 2025, President Donald Trump met with Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and strongly signaled the strengthening of the strategic partnership between the two countries. During the meeting, the United States and Kazakhstan agreed to expand cooperation in political, economic and technological areas, including major projects related to critical minerals, transportation, artificial intelligence and information technology. The parties announced several significant commercial agreements with US companies. A \$7 billion contract for the purchase of Boeing aircraft by Air Astana, a record \$4.2 billion deal with Wabtec for the supply of locomotives, as well as a multi-billion dollar import of John Deere agricultural machinery were among the agreements. In addition, a tungsten mine processing project in Kazakhstan and cooperation with the US company Leidos on the modernization of the national air traffic control system were considered important. It was also decided to expand cooperation with companies such as NVIDIA, Oracle, and Starlink in the field of artificial intelligence and digital services. In general, the meeting demonstrated that relations between the United States and Kazakhstan are moving to a new level and that economic, technological, and

cultural cooperation has long-term prospects. The main goal of the United States in taking relations with Astana to a new level can be assessed as an attempt not to lose to Russia and China in the geostrategic competition and to increase its political and economic influence in the region through Kazakhstan.⁶

Against the backdrop of an increasingly polarized international order, Kazakhstan continues to pursue its multi-pronged foreign policy. Although global challenges may complicate the pursuit of such a policy, as President Tokayev has noted, there is no alternative to this policy. This approach of Kazakhstan allows it to balance relations with different geopolitical centers at the same time and serves to prevent the country from becoming unilaterally tied to any alliance. Kazakhstan has always considered adherence to the principles of international law and the UN Charter as a priority, and has supported the resolution of conflicts in different regions of the world exclusively through peaceful and diplomatic means. President Tokayev's article published in the American magazine *The Hill* in September also emphasized the responsibility of global leaders. According to him, climate change, the rapid development of artificial intelligence, and the growing nuclear threat are bringing humanity to a historical turning point. Therefore, today's

⁵ <https://nesa-center.org/dev/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/2022-0126-The-Role-of-Kazakhstan-in-Strategic-Competition.pdf>

⁶ <https://kz.usembassy.gov/a-new-era-in-u-s-kazakhstan-relations/>



decisions determine the fate of not only
today's generation, but also the future.⁷

⁷ <https://astanatimes.com/2024/01/no-alternative-kazakhstan-continues-multi-vector-foreign-policy/>



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