



The Rising Multiplex World Order and Regional Order in Central Asia: a case study of the Emerging Role of the EU and its implications for Kazakhstan's Multivector foreign policy

Original Paper

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Abstract

This study seeks to examine the role of multivectorism in the ever-changing international landscape and how, despite the detractors that believe multivectorism will eventually deteriorate into balancing and bandwagoning, the new multiplex world has strengthened it. A case study of Kazakhstani foreign policy will unpack this phenomenon by exploring the development of Kazakhstan's multivector policies, including an analysis of the dynamics of multivectorism amidst international tensions and the reshuffling of alliances, shedding light on how these events influence a state's strategic calculus and their interactions within the broader multiplex world. Recent geopolitical and geo-economic conditions have significantly impacted the relationship between the EU and Kazakhstan. The EU's interest in Kazakhstan has increased due to disruptions in the energy supply from Russia, leading to increased engagement in the region to secure its interests. This emphasis on connectivity has created new opportunities for dialogue and cooperation beyond energy. Kazakhstan's strategic importance in balancing relations with Russia has made it a focal point for the EU in the region. The paper will demonstrate how the EU's new interactions reshape the complex political contestation and show how the multiplexity and interdependencies of today's foreign policies are more nuanced than a simple alignment strategy.

Keywords

Multivector Foreign Policy • World Order • Great Power Rivalry • Middle Powers • Geopolitical Competition

1 Introduction

Multiplexity is a world order that is absent of a single global hegemon, instead there is a presence of many diverse actors that are important beyond just the traditional great powers. It emphasises heightened interdependence across global interactions, dynamic and pluralistic global governance, and a rich diversity of cultural, ideological, and political perspectives.¹ In the multiplex world, shifts in the power balance are not limited to changes in the major global powers, and power is not solely determined by material capabilities but also by the ability to shape international interactions and create norms.

The growth of multiplexity coincides with a "rise of middle powers" pursuing multivector policies to establish autonomy and agency within the multiplex world. According to Acharya et al., middle powers are defined by their material capabilities and ability to engage in norm-setting and coalition-building across different issues, making them critical players in multiplexity. Unlike traditional theories of multipolarity, where power concentrates among a few great powers, theories of multiplexity pay attention to actors at different levels.² These states are not just passive entities influenced by great powers; they actively shape regional dynamics and contribute to global governance through multilateral cooperation and strategic partnerships.³

¹ Acharya, Amitav, Alicia Estevadeordal, and L. W. Goodman. "Multipolar or Multiplex? Interaction Capacity, Global Cooperation and World Order." *International Affairs* 99, no. 6 (2023): 2339–2365. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia242>.

² Acharya, Estevadeordal, and Goodman.

³ Jordaan, Eduard. "The Concept of a Middle Power in International Relations: Distinguishing between Emerging and Traditional Middle Powers."

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Kazakhstan has developed as a middle power and has emerged as a lynchpin in the balance of Asia and Europe.⁴ Since gaining independence in 1991, Kazakhstan has utilised a multivector foreign policy to navigate its relationships with both regional and global powers. Kazakhstan engages with many different countries in order to foster economic development and maintain security. Kazakhstan has become an essential part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), maintained strong security ties with the US during the operation in Afghanistan, and has engaged with Russia through regional organisations.⁵ Kazakhstan's multivectorism is evident in its efforts to hedge between more powerful states' interests, securing economic benefits while preserving strategic autonomy. This foreign policy strategy aligns well with multiplexity, challenging norms of traditional multipolarity through active engagement with more powerful countries and is used to develop a network of interdependencies. Kazakhstan exemplifies how middle powers can maintain sovereignty and have influence despite being surrounded by more powerful neighbours. They strategically focus on economic development and national security while avoiding the drawbacks of aligning too closely with any single power.⁶ Since 2022, the ongoing war with Ukraine has increased the EU's interests in Kazakhstan, and these circumstances are increasing the complexity of balancing more powerful players that are at odds with one another while allowing Kazakhstan to expand its multi-vector foreign policies.

This paper contributes to the literature by offering an in-depth analysis of how multiplexity functions in practice, using the case of Kazakhstan's relationship with the EU. It adds to the debate on the role of middle powers in a multiplex world by exploring Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy. The paper highlights how middle powers maintain autonomy and engage with multiple powerful states, even during great power rivalry, challenging traditional ideas of the international sphere being a zero-sum game. It shows evidence of the sustainability of multivector strategies in a polarised international system and the extent to which middle powers can continue to leverage their relationships to avoid becoming entangled in great power conflicts.

2 Multivectorism

Multivectorism involves developing relations with various states that are significant in world affairs. In contrast to realism's emphasis on balancing or bandwagoning, multivectorism offers a more nuanced approach to foreign policy, in which states engage with multiple powers simultaneously, creating a more fluid and dynamic balance of power.⁷ This strategy, frequently grounded on practical, non-ideological principles, enables a state to interact with various powers following its national interests.⁸ Multivectorism is the theory that middle power states can negotiate better terms for themselves, advance their priorities, and strengthen their bargaining power in international relations by pursuing diverse partnerships to maximise their strategic autonomy and prevent dependency on more powerful states.⁹ This strategy is especially applicable in the modern multiplex world order, where no hegemon guarantees stability and power dynamics are more complex and fractured than in the past. The theoretical basis for multivectorism is developed from the concepts of hedging and omni-enmeshment. States hedge by creating a balanced foreign policy that avoids excessive alignment with a more powerful state and maintaining relationships with several others, aligning but not allies.¹⁰ At the same time, state play their bargaining partners off each other¹¹ and choose to maintain an equidistant connection with multiple states that allows for threats of defection or to trade loyalties.¹²

Politikon 30, no. 2 (2003): 167–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0258934032000147282>; Tom Long, "It's Not the Size, It's the Relationship: From 'small States' to Asymmetry," *International Politics* 54, no. 2 (2017): 144–60, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-017-0028-x>; Tom Long, "Small States, Great Power? Gaining Influence through Intrinsic, Derivative, and Collective Power," *International Studies Review* 19, no. 2 (2017): 185–205, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viw040>.

4 Neafie, Jessica. "Producing the Eurasian Land Bridge: A Case Study of the Geoeconomic Contestation in Kazakhstan." *International Politics* (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-022-00386-9>.

5 Neafie, Vanderhill, Rachel, Sandra F. Joireman, and Roza Tulepbayeva. "Between the Bear and the Dragon: Multivectorism in Kazakhstan as a Model Strategy for Secondary Powers." *International Affairs* 96, no. 4 (2020): 975–993. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaaa061>.

6 Neafie, Jessica. "No One Stole Anyone Else's Cheese: The Politics of Infrastructural Competition in Kazakhstan." In *The Rise of the Infrastructure State: How US-China Rivalry Shapes Politics and Place Worldwide*, edited by Seth Schindler and Jessica DiCarlo, 82–98. Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2022.; Neafie, "Producing the Eurasian Land Bridge: A Case Study of the Geoeconomic Contestation in Kazakhstan"; Vanderhill, Joireman, and Tulepbayeva.

7 Barnett, Michael, and Raymond Duvall. "Power in International Politics." *International Organization* 59, no. 1 (December 2005): 39–75. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818305050010>.

8 Cooley, A. *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Hanks, Reuel R. "Multi-Vector Politics' and Kazakhstan's Emerging Role as a Geo-Strategic Player in Central Asia." *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 11, no. 3 (September 2009): 257–67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448950903152110>.

9 Cooley.

10 Contessi, Nicola P. "Foreign and Security Policy Diversification in Eurasia: Issue Splitting, Co-Alignment, and Relational Power." *Problems of Post-Communism* 62, no. 5 (2015): 299–311. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2015.1026788>.

11 Cooley.

12 Gnedina, Elena. "Multi-Vector' Foreign Policies in Europe: Balancing, Bandwagoning or Bargaining?" *Europe - Asia Studies* 67, no. 7 (2015): 1007–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2015.1066313>.

Omni-enmeshment similarly suggests states engage with multiple great powers to create overlapping spheres of influence; these overlapping spheres make direct conflict among the great powers more costly and allow the hedging state to maintain its autonomy.¹³ Middle powers frequently engage in multilateral diplomacy and participate in international organisations to promote global cooperation and stability,¹⁴ using the power of these organisations to gather more powerful players alongside lesser powers to leverage the strategic positions of the lesser powers. Multivectorism is considered challenging to the realist perspective of power because while it focuses on the ability of states to use material resources to influence others, it defines power and influence more broadly.¹⁵

Multivectorism thrives in a multiplex world because it leverages the flexibility and interdependencies created by a non-hegemonic global order. In such a system, states benefit from engaging with multiple actors without the constraints of zero-sum competition typically seen in traditional power dynamics. Multiplexity allows middle powers to build partnerships with great powers, regional players, and non-state entities and enables states to pursue economic and security cooperation with multiple great powers.

These interdependencies allow middle powers to avoid binary alignments and preserve their autonomy. For instance, despite tensions between two more powerful states, middle powers can maintain relationships with both due to overlapping trade, energy, and security interests. By fostering a more complex and interconnected world order, multiplexity strengthens middle powers' ability to balance relationships and navigate geopolitical competition while enhancing their influence and strategic flexibility.

3 Multivectorism Under Crises

Although multivectorism provides an adaptable and independent foreign policy approach, realist scholars believe it has significant difficulties during political unrest and crises.¹⁶ It is argued that middle powers pursuing multivectorism may experience political instability and diplomatic isolation due to growing tensions between the major powers because interactions at the international level are inherently zero-sum. As a result, multivectorism's ability to provide strategic flexibility becomes increasingly restricted, and its efficacy may be seriously jeopardised. This section examines the difficulties middle powers have when implementing multivectorism in times of crisis and why it may or may not work.

Middle powers may have reduced capacity to pursue a balanced foreign policy when one or more powerful nations they engage with try to force them to take sides or align more closely with them. States that practice multivectorism have less room to manoeuvre as crises deepen, forcing them to make difficult decisions about partnerships and alignment.¹⁷ This was made explicit during the 2015 Ukraine crisis when Western and Russian pressure mounted on weaker states to show their support or opposition, undermining their ability to use multivector methods.¹⁸ Zalesky notes that in such scenarios, the ability of middle powers to sustain multivectorism is significantly diminished as their policies are increasingly influenced by the expectations and pressures from more powerful neighbours.¹⁹ Political crises force middle powers into strategic dilemmas that challenge the core principles of multivectorism. This dilemma underscores the fragile nature of multivectorism, where maintaining equidistance can often lead to conflicting obligations and strategic confusion.

Additionally, geopolitical conflicts have the potential to seriously affect the economies of states that practice multivectorism by interfering with trade routes, imposing sanctions, or causing market instability. For example, during crises that upset their economic alliances, nations in Central Asia and Eastern Europe that have adopted multivector strategies by interacting with both Russia and Western countries have suffered financial consequences.²⁰ This happened to Kazakhstan when Russia blocked the main export path for Kazakhstani oil when Kazakhstan stood with the EU to stabilise the energy market.²¹

13 Goh, Evelyn. "Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Regional Security Strategies," *International Security* 32, no. 3 (2008): 113–57.

14 Jordaan, "The Concept of a Middle Power in International Relations: Distinguishing between Emerging and Traditional Middle Powers."

15 Neafie; Barnett and Duvall.

16 Konopelko, Agnieszka. "Eurasian Economic Union: A Challenge for EU Policy towards Kazakhstan." *Asia Europe Journal* 16, no. 1 (2018): 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-017-0480-7>; Sullivan, Charles J. "End of an Era? Kazakhstan and the Fate of Multivectorism." In *Kazakhstan and the Soviet Legacy: Between Continuity and Rupture*, 31–50. Singapore: Springer, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-6693-2_3.

17 Sullivan; Zalesky, Boris. "Challenges of Multi-Vectors: The Ideology of International Cooperation in the Context of Global Turbulence." *Scienza Scripts*, 2024.

18 Sullivan.

19 Zalesky.

20 Locoman, Eugen, and Maurizio Papa. "Transformation of Alliances: Mapping Russia's Close Relationships in the Era of Multivectorism." *Contemporary Security Policy* 43, no. 2 (2022): 274–307; Moshes, Arkady. "Ukraine Between a Multivector Foreign Policy and Euro-Atlantic Integration - Has It Made Its Choice?" *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* 426 (2006): 1–5; Nyshanbayev et al., Perin, Maxime. "A Troubling Horizon for Kazakhstan's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy." *Bruin Political Review*, June 21, 2023. <https://bruinpoliticalreview.org/articles?post-slug=a-troubling-horizon-for-kazakhstan-s-multi-vector-foreign-policy>; Sullivan.

21 Kumenov, Alamez. "Russia blocks Kazakhstan's main outlet for oil exports." *Eurasianet*, July 6, 2022. <https://eurasianet.org/russia-blocks-kazakhstans-main-outlet-for-oil-exports>

Middle powers with strong economic linkages to both sides are frequently compelled to make tough choices that jeopardise their multivector strategy when great powers have trade wars or other economic conflicts. For example, Kazakhstan's reliance on Russian infrastructure for its oil exports and involvement in China's BRI has made it more susceptible to external pressures during crises; at any time, Beijing or Moscow may pressure Kazakhstan to choose which state to align with.²² This situation results in economic instability for the middle power and reduces the effectiveness of multivectorism as a strategy for managing international relations.

However, in a multiplex world, interdependencies between states can prevent the zero-sum dynamics often associated with great power rivalries. These realist criticisms are focused on great powers, like China, the US, Russia, and the EU, treating every interaction as a zero-sum interaction, where any gain for one is a loss for the other. But, unlike traditional realist assumptions that middle powers must inevitably align with one dominant actor, multiplexity allows for a more nuanced approach, where multiple interdependencies make the system more complex.²³

This interconnectedness means that even while engaged in rivalry, great powers find it in their interest to maintain relationships and not force the middle power to align against their interests as the economic, security, or political needs now intersect. The interactions of Russia and China in Central Asia highlight this, in which multiple levels of overlapping interactions create more diverse power structures.

Middle powers like Kazakhstan build and maintain multiple relationships across many different issues, otherwise known as "interactive capacity."²⁴ For instance, both great powers could benefit from the strategic resources, trade, or diplomatic leverage a middle power offers, the loss of which could be far-reaching even for the more powerful state in this more interconnected world. These overlapping and multi-level interactions mean that even the more powerful state may find it hard to force the middle power to choose sides despite tensions between those powerful actors. This contrasts with the binary choice imposed by realist perspectives, where states are often forced to align with one major power or another. It allows for a more fluid, dynamic set of relationships where states can engage in cooperative ventures with multiple actors, regardless of tensions between them. As a result, multiplexity creates an environment where cooperation and competition can coexist, allowing states to navigate complex geopolitical landscapes without being forced into exclusive alignments. This multipolar world envisioned by multiplexity is not inherently zero-sum but one where interdependencies shape a more nuanced and cooperative form of international relations.

4 Case Study Kazakhstan

The case of Kazakhstan's relationship with the EU during the war in Ukraine offers a clear example of how multiplexity functions in practice, highlighting how interdependencies can prevent the zero-sum dynamics often seen in great power competition. Through this lens, Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy underscores the core principle of multiplexity: that states can avoid binary alignments and instead leverage their relationships with multiple powers to maintain autonomy and foster mutually beneficial partnerships. This case will demonstrate that multiplexity, emphasising interdependencies, provides an alternative to the zero-sum outcomes commonly assumed in traditional great power politics.

Since the early years of independence, Kazakhstan's multivectorism strategy has focused on maintaining positive relations with global powers. This policy has been instrumental in avoiding conflicts, maintaining diplomatic flexibility, and strategic and geopolitical balance.²⁵ Under Nazarbayev's rule, multivectorism ensured a respected, balanced position in the international system.²⁶ However, it was not without complications, and as relations between Russia and the West deteriorated, especially during Putin's second term, Kazakhstan's approach shifted from "proactive" to "reactive" multivectorism.²⁷ Still, following critical events such as the Russia-Georgia War in 2008 and the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, Kazakhstan balanced Russian aims and managed the rising tensions between major powers while safeguarding its national interests.²⁸

22 Clarke, Michael E. "Kazakhstan's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy: Diminishing Returns in an Era of Great Power 'Pivots'?" The ASAN Forum, April 9, 2015.

23 Acharya, Estevadeordal, and Goodman.

24 Acharya, Estevadeordal, and Goodman.

25 Omelicheva, Mariya Y., and Rouxi Du. "Kazakhstan's Multi-Vectorism and Sino-Russian Relations." *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 4 (2018): 95–110; Ambrosio, Thomas. "Between Threat, Alliance, and Multivectorism: Kazakh-Russian Relations in the Wake of the Russo-Ukrainian War." In *A Revolt in the Steppe: Understanding Kazakhstan's January Events of 2022*, edited by Jean-François Caron, 25–52. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-0783-0_3.

26 Thomas Ambrosio, "Security Hedging After Nazarbayev? The Future of Kazakhstan's Alignment with Russia," in *Understanding Kazakhstan's 2019 Political Transition*, ed. Jean-François Caron (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2021), 29–51, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-33-4308-5_3.

27 Sullivan.

28 Vanderhill, Rachel, Sandra F. Joireman, and Roza Tulepbayeva. "Between the Bear and the Dragon: Multivectorism in Kazakhstan as a Model Strategy for Secondary Powers." *International Affairs* 96, no. 4 (2020): 975–93. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaa061>.

Kazakhstan's foreign policy has explored multivectorism through alignment and regional cooperation within institutional frameworks like the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Using international organisations has provided Kazakhstan with new ways to balance Russia through omni-enmeshment. This strategy was targeted at overcoming Russian hegemony across all sectors, but Kazakhstan's dependencies mean their alignment is still skewed toward Russia.

By engaging with multiple great powers and integrating them into regional and international frameworks, Kazakhstan aims to prevent any single power from dominating the region. This strategy and Kazakhstan's efforts to assert its sovereignty and independence may significantly affect the geopolitical landscape in the wake of growing instabilities. Diversification is crucial as Kazakhstan faces increasing pressure from global geopolitical shifts and the need to sustain economic resilience amid uncertainties in the global market.

Kazakhstan can only partially sever ties with Russia due to their deep economic, political, and cultural connections. The prominent use of multivectorism is the economic benefit that Kazakhstan has secured through its cooperation with Russia. But still, Kazakhstan has consistently pushed back against Russia when its actions have not aligned with Kazakhstan's own foreign policy goals.²⁹ Even when faced with geopolitical tensions, Kazakhstan has committed more toward multivectorism, and Astana pushes its own interests without bowing to the needs of the more powerful state. Following the conflict in Ukraine in 2014, Kazakhstan was left in a contentious crisis in EU-Russia relationships. Still, contrary to arguments that either the EU or Russia may pressure Kazakhstan to align with one or the other,³⁰ Kazakhstan was able to continue acting in its interest and continued to benefit from ties to both the EU and Russia.

Following the 2014 conflict, Kazakhstan sought to diversify its partnerships and supply routes to enhance its economic stability.³¹ Multivectorism flourishes because Kazakhstan has demonstrated a strong commitment to maintaining its agency and willingness to navigate its alliances while preserving its strategic independence. For example, Kazakhstan called on Russia and the CSTO to provide support in January 2022, following the outburst of mass protests and civil unrest, but refused to support Russia's military actions in Ukraine later that year. Additionally, during a joint panel with President Putin, Tokayev explicitly declined to recognise the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics.³²

Moreover, other state actors do not favour Kazakhstan becoming more pro-Russian. Kazakhstan regularly consults with the EU and the US to mitigate the risks of secondary sanctions against its companies.³³ The state-owned holding company Samruk-Kazyna has expressed readiness to withdraw from projects that might violate the terms of the Western sanctions against Russia.³⁴ These actions illustrate Kazakhstan's intent to remain engaged in the international arena, avoiding overly close alignment with Russia amidst current geopolitical tensions.

5 Relationship with EU

Since gaining independence, Kazakhstan has played a key role in shaping the EU's engagement with Central Asia, though much of this relationship has historically operated on the regional level. The EU's evolving foreign policy towards Central Asia has been characterised by shifting perceptions of the region. The EU initially viewed the region through a lens of geopolitical instability and exoticism, later evolving into a strategic partner in energy and counterterrorism efforts.³⁵ Throughout the 1990s, the EU focused primarily on economic cooperation, particularly in resource extraction, as seen in Kazakhstan's 1992 agreements with European corporations to develop major oil and gas fields like Karachaganak. While the EU did establish formal diplomatic ties with Kazakhstan in 1994 and initiated broader regional agreements, its engagement remained primarily economic.

The early 2000s saw the EU gradually increase its involvement in Kazakhstan following the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan, highlighting Kazakhstan's strategic significance. However, like other states in the region, Kazakhstan was often viewed through a Central Asia lens, with the EU's strategy treating the region as a somewhat homogeneous entity. The 2007 EU strategy for

²⁹ Vanderhill, Joireman, and Tulepbayeva.

³⁰ Konopelko; Sullivan.

³¹ Collins, Neil, and Bekenova, Kristina "Fuelling the New Great Game: Kazakhstan, Energy Policy and the EU." *Asia Europe Journal* 15, no. 1 (2017): 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-016-0451-4>

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³³ Astakhov, Ilya. «Что делает Казахстан, чтобы не попасть под вторичные санкции.» *Orda.kz*, 2022. <https://orda.kz/chto-delaet-kazahstan-chtoby-ne-popast-pod-vtorichnye-sankczii/>.

³⁴ KazTAG. "Samruk-Kazyna Promised to Withdraw from Projects That Violate Anti-Russian Sanctions." *KazTAG*, 2022. <https://kaztag.kz/en/news/samruk-kazyna-promised-to-withdraw-fromprojects-that-violate-anti-russian-sanctions>.

³⁵ Fawn, Rick, Karolina Kluczevska, and Oleg Korneev. "EU–Central Asian Interactions: Perceptions, Interests and Practices." *Central Asian Survey* 41, no. 4 (2022): 617–638. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2022.2134300>.

Central Asia mainly focused on energy security,³⁶ and its broader priorities, including democracy and human rights,³⁷ were criticised for lacking specificity, especially in addressing the individual needs of countries like Kazakhstan.³⁸

Economic ties between the EU and Kazakhstan strengthened in the 2010s, culminating in the 2015 signing of the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA), which marked a significant step in deepening bilateral relations. Despite this, much of the EU's approach to Kazakhstan continues to be shaped by its broader regional strategy, exemplified by the 2019 "New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership" framework.³⁹ While the EU remains one of Kazakhstan's key trading partners and a significant source of investment, much of the relationship is still defined by the EU's regional approach to Central Asia rather than a tailored bilateral strategy.

5.1 *The War in Ukraine and its aftermath*

The war in Ukraine significantly altered the EU's foreign policy strategies. Before the war, Russia was a key supplier of gas and oil to the EU, accounting for over a third of its gas imports in 2020 (37%) and relying on the EU for 85% of its gas sales.⁴⁰ However, as the conflict unfolded, the EU enacted sweeping sanctions, including a ban on Russian oil imports in December 2022 and additional sanctions on petroleum products in 2023. These measures marked a dramatic shift in the EU's approach to its primary energy supplier, signalling an urgent need to diversify energy sources.

The war in Ukraine has reshaped the policy and the interest of the EU towards Kazakhstan in two main ways: 1) Kazakhstan could be a part of the diversified energy sources of the EU, predominantly for gas and oil; 2) Kazakhstan might be a source of green energy, which helps the EU to meet its climate change commitments. EU leaders have since intensified diplomatic engagement with Kazakhstan, exemplified by European Council President Michel's visit in 2022. During this visit, a high-level meeting with Central Asian leaders signalled the EU's strong political commitment to deepening ties with Kazakhstan and the region after years of somewhat distanced diplomatic relationships.⁴¹ Following this meeting, the European Commission (EC) and Kazakhstan agreed to collaborate on green hydrogen production and extracting raw materials for wind turbines and electric car batteries, highlighting the EU's long-term strategy to shift its energy dependencies away from Russia.⁴² In May 2022, discussions about the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route underscored the EU's intention to bypass Russia, with plans to use the Caspian Sea to transport goods.⁴³ This marked a significant shift in the EU's strategic approach, prioritising Kazakhstan as a crucial partner in diversifying energy routes and supply chains.

Kazakhstan has also been central to the EU's efforts to expand regional political ties. In November 2022, the Vice President of the EU Commission, Josep Borrell, met with Kazakh and Uzbek foreign ministers to explore new links between Europe and Central Asia, emphasising the importance of cooperation in trade, digitalisation, energy, and transportation.⁴⁴ The second EU-Central Asia Summit in June 2023 further solidified these ties, with Kazakh President Tokayev highlighting the need for further trade development, mainly through the Middle Corridor.⁴⁵

In addition, the EU has actively monitored Kazakhstan's compliance with sanctions on Russia, with Special Envoy O'Sullivan praising the country's reduction in the re-export of sanctioned goods.⁴⁶ This growing partnership was further cemented in

36 Mantel, Richard. "EU-Central Asia Relations in the Energy Sector with a Special Focus on Kazakhstan." *Natural Resources* 375 (2015): 55–66. <https://doi.org/10.3917/eufor.375.0055>.

37 Kassenova, Nargis. *The New EU Strategy Towards Central Asia: A View from the Region*. Centre for European Policy Studies, 2008.

38 Fawn, Rick, Karolina Kluczevska, and Oleg Korneev. "EU–Central Asian Interactions: Perceptions, Interests and Practices." *Central Asian Survey* 41, no. 4 (2022): 617–638. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2022.2134300>; Arynov, Zhanibek. "Changing Perceptions of the European Union in Central Asia." *CAIRN.INFO*, 2022..

39 European Commission. *The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership* (JOIN(2019) 9 final). European External Action Service, 2019. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf.

40 Martínez-García, Manuel A., Carlos Ramos-Carvajal, and Álvaro Cámara. "Consequences of the Energy Measures Derived from the War in Ukraine on the Level of Prices of EU Countries." *Resources Policy* 83 (2023): 104114. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resourpol.2023.104114>.

41 European Council. "President Michel Visits Central Asia." October 28, 2022. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/european-council/president/news/2022/10/28/20221028-pec-visits-central-asia/>.

42 Lillis, Joanna. "EU Taps Kazakhstan for Rare Earths, Green Hydrogen." *Eurasianet*, November 7, 2022. <https://eurasianet.org/eu-taps-kazakhstan-for-rare-earths-green-hydrogen>.

43 Lillis, Joanna. "In Turkey, Kazakhstan's President Talks Trade and China Transport." *Eurasianet*, May 12, 2022. <https://eurasianet.org/in-turkey-kazakhstans-president-talks-trade-and-china-transport>.

44 Akhmetkali, Aibarshyn. "Kazakhstan and EU Agree to Strengthen Cooperation in Trade, Energy, Digital, and Logistics During EU Top Official Josep Borrell's Visit." *The Astana Times*, November 17, 2022. <https://astanatimes.com/2022/11/kazakhstan-and-eu-agree-to-strengthen-cooperation-in-trade-energy-digital-and-logistics-during-eu-top-official-josep-borrells-visit/>.

45 Sakenova, Saniya. "President Tokayev Outlines Priorities for Central Asia and EU Cooperation." *The Astana Times*, June 2, 2023. <https://astanatimes.com/2023/06/president-tokayev-outlines-priorities-for-central-asia-and-eu-cooperation>.

46 Satubaldina, Assel. "EU Sanctions Envoy Hails Kazakhstan's Efforts in Reducing Reexports to Russia." *The Astana Times*, June 28, 2024. <https://astanatimes.com/2024/06/eu-sanctions-envoy-hails-kazakhstans-efforts-in-reducing-re-exports-to-russia>.

May 2023 when the EU and Kazakhstan agreed on specific actions to implement their strategic partnership in raw materials, batteries, and renewable hydrogen.⁴⁷

In January 2024, the European Parliament adopted a resolution to update the EU's strategy in Central Asia, underscoring the region's growing importance for the EU. A joint roadmap for strengthening EU-Central Asia relations was approved, and high-level visits have continued.⁴⁸ By August 2024, Borrell made his second official visit to Kazakhstan, again focusing on strategic issues, indicating the sustained attention the EU is giving to the region. The upcoming EU-Central Asia leaders' summit, scheduled for 2024, will formalise C5 + EU cooperation at the highest political level, further cementing these ties.⁴⁹ These high-level meetings demonstrate the shift in the EU's strategic calculus, driven by the need to mitigate the growing influence of Russia and China in Central Asia, boost Euro-Asian connectivity, and address security concerns linked to Afghanistan.⁵⁰

While Kazakhstan's alignment with Russia remains a point of critique,⁵¹ its position as a key energy supplier and transit hub has made it a priority for the EU. Kazakhstan's oil primarily travels through Russia, with 80% of it transported via the Caspian Pipeline Consortium to the port of Novorossiysk, highlighting the country's dependence on this route. However, Kazakhstan is actively pursuing alternative export routes and solutions to reduce its reliance on Russian infrastructure.

6 Discussion

These shifts in focus by the EU have strengthened the broader dynamics of multiplexity in international relations, where states interact across multiple interactions, fostering complex interdependencies that transcend traditional bilateral frameworks. Kazakhstan is crucial to both the EU and Russia for economic trade, particularly in the energy sector. Strengthening Kazakhstan's ability to build dialogue with both the EU and Russia. As a result, Kazakhstan, as a middle power, can maintain various relationships, depicting strategic autonomy. Kazakhstan welcomed this new initiative and showed its deepest interest in "new" forms of cooperation, rather than being closed or keeping a distance from offered new ways of collaboration under the changed policies of the EU.

In examining Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy within the context of great power rivalries, it becomes evident that traditional realist theories, which often view international relations through a zero-sum lens, offer an incomplete picture. Realist perspectives typically emphasise that states must align with one dominant actor to avoid being marginalised by the rivalries of great powers. This view posits that any gain for one power results in a loss for another, thus compelling middle powers to make stark choices between competing blocs.⁵²

However, Kazakhstan's experience illustrates the limitations of this traditional framework and highlights the relevance of multiplexity as a more accurate description of contemporary international relations. Unlike the binary alignment dictated by realist theories, multiplexity acknowledges the complexity of global interactions, where great power rivalries do not merely constrain states but engage in multiple, overlapping relationships.

The 2022 Ukraine war could have posed a significant challenge to Kazakhstan. The EU and Russia compete more actively for regional power and resource control. Kazakhstan, in turn, needs to balance its deep-rooted ties to Russia, and its desire to maintain positive relations with the West has become more pronounced. During the crisis, Kazakhstan's efforts to sustain multivectorism are challenged by, on the one hand, increased pressure from Moscow's expectations for regional allies to demonstrate loyalty regarding its stance on the Ukraine war, and on the other hand, Western sanctions against Russia and their stance on the Ukraine war.⁵³

47 European Commission. "European Commission Vice-President Dombrovskis Meets Kazakh Prime Minister Smailov to Advance Cooperation on Raw Materials and Renewable Hydrogen." May 19, 2023. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_2815.

48 The Astana Times. "European Parliament Report Calls for Updated Central Asia Strategy." January 10, 2024. <https://astanatimes.com/2024/01/european-parliament-report-calls-for-updated-central-asia-strategy/>; Omirgazy, Daniyar. "European Commission Vice President Visits Kazakhstan, Meets Government Officials." The Astana Times, January 11, 2024. <https://astanatimes.com/2024/01/european-commission-vice-president-visits-kazakhstan-meets-government-officials>

49 European Parliament Think Tank. "EU-Central Asia Relations: Future Perspectives and Current State of Play." March 15, 2024. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2024\)762300](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2024)762300).

50 Komilov, Allouddin. "What Explains Growing European Engagement in Central Asia?" The Diplomat, November 21, 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/11/what-explains-growing-european-engagement-in-central-asia/>

51 Mallinson, Kate. "Russia's Influence in Kazakhstan Increasing Despite the War in Ukraine." Chatham House, February 16, 2024. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/02/russias-influence-kazakhstan-increasing-despite-war-ukraine>.

52 Acharya, Estevadeordal, and Goodman.

53 Perin, Max "A Troubling Horizon for Kazakhstan's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy," Bruin Political Review, June 21, 2023, <https://bruinpoliticalreview.org/articles?post-slug=a-troubling-horizon-for-kazakhstan-s-multi-vector-foreign-policy>.

This could have forced Kazakhstan to reconsider its multivector strategy approach due to mounting pressure from Russia and the West, each seeking loyalty and economic alignment. This perspective aligns with the traditional belief that geopolitical competition creates a zero-sum game, where states cannot effectively balance competing interests for long. However, what transpired defied these expectations. Kazakhstan maintained and strengthened its multivector foreign policy despite intense external pressures. The country's deepening relationship with the EU is a clear example of how Kazakhstan expanded its strategy despite geopolitical polarisation. Instead of choosing a side, Kazakhstan capitalised on the shifting dynamics—especially the EU's search for alternative energy sources due to disruptions from Russia—further solidifying its role in the global energy market. The complexity of the multiplex world also means that Russia needs Kazakhstan in the given circumstances and the conditions of the international arena. While Russia has strategic interests in maintaining influence over its Central Asian neighbours, its ability to act as a hegemon in the region is complicated by the interconnectedness of global politics.

As a result, it is difficult for Russia to demand exclusive loyalty from Kazakhstan without risking its interests. For instance, Russia's economic ties with Kazakhstan and its reliance on regional stability create mutual dependencies that discourage Russia from forcing Kazakhstan into a binary alignment. Russia recognises that pressuring Kazakhstan too heavily in a multiplex world could lead to unintended consequences, such as driving Kazakhstan closer to other powers, which would loosen Russia's regional influence.

In this context, Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy manifests multiplexity. The country benefits from maintaining relationships with the EU and Russia, and neither great power can afford to alienate Kazakhstan entirely due to each of its strategic and economic interests in the region. Multiplexity creates an environment where middle powers like Kazakhstan can serve as intermediaries, using their relationships with multiple actors to preserve autonomy and avoid having their foreign policy options significantly restricted by great power conflicts. This dynamic showcases how multiplexity can create a world that avoids zero-sum outcomes, enabling states to foster diverse partnerships and cooperation, even amidst broader geopolitical tensions. The interdependent nature of multiplexity ensures that middle powers can serve as bridges between rival great powers, maintaining their relevance and influence in the global arena.

7 Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper enhances our understanding of how multiplexity operates in the contemporary international system, particularly in the case of Kazakhstan's evolving relationship with the EU. By examining Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy, the paper demonstrates that middle powers can successfully navigate complex geopolitical landscapes and maintain strategic autonomy even amid great power rivalries. The evidence challenges traditional zero-sum perspectives by illustrating how Kazakhstan has leveraged its diverse relationships to preserve its position and influence.

This evidence shows that the characteristics of the international system are quite different from the traditional realist expectations. Multiplexity is a more fitting description, and the ideas of multiplexity continue evolving into more cooperation and less conflict. This has changed power relations and how middle powers, like Kazakhstan, can engage with stronger powers. Middle powers' increased use of the multivector strategy complements the world order's multiplexity. It shows how the rise of middle powers is defined by the state's ability to create new paths through the growth of its networks.

This illustrates that global cooperation is not defined through a regional hegemon or purely through balancing and bandwagoning. That cooperation has formed a 'stickiness'⁵⁴ that does not change because of a crisis and gives power through networks to states that have strategically developed successful multivector foreign policies. In a multiplex system, no single power has total control, which makes the international environment more flexible and complex.

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⁵⁴ Acharya, Estevadeordal, and Goodman, 2364.

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