

Status Seeking in the Steppe Taking Stock of Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy, 1992-2019

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Abstract In its 25 years of existence as an independent state, Kazakhstan has had to invent an entire foreign policy. The process was driven by multiple objectives, for a large part aimed at ensuring the success of the broader state-building project: the preservation of national sovereignty, political stability, economic growth, and taking on international responsibilities. This strategy, shaped at once by the nature of the political regime and the constraints of the regional system, was inspired by the convergence of economic, political, and geopolitical considerations. Taking stock of Kazakhstan's external action, this article finds unexpected correspondence with the key tenets of middle power doctrine, pointing to a widely unacknowledged reading of the country's external action.

Keywords Foreign policy. Middle power. Status. Kazakhstan. Authoritarianism. Developing country.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 What is a Middle Power? The Basic Elements of an Elusive Status. – 3 Nationalism: Positioning on the International Scene. – 4 Activism: A Responsible Actor of the International Community. – 5 Internationalism. – 6 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

Accounts of Kazakhstan's foreign policy often highlight its energy and dynamism: whether in relations with the great powers, the internationalization of the mineral sector, multilateral diplomacy, or other areas, culminating in the election to a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.

Though analysts have typically considered such kind of initiatives as disjointed episodes, they appear to reveal a common thread materializing a certain vision and planning. Tellingly, the 2006 strategic document *Kazakhstan 2050* – the updated version of the 1997 *Kazakhstan 2030* – aims to position the country among the fifty most competitive countries in the world (Nazarbayev 2006).

Together with a heavier foreign policy footprint, the country has also experienced the gradual amelioration of its economic indicators prior to a pronounced slowdown between 2014 and 2016. Kazakhstan had displayed an economic vitality buoyed by hydrocarbon exports, becoming the second largest economy in the CIS thanks to a GDP of more than \$230 billion in 2013. However, the drop in oil prices clipped that figure to \$137 billion in 2016 before it climbed again in 2017 reaching \$172.941 billion in 2018. In 2015, direct investment jumped by 80% in the hydrocarbons and by 30% in the agricultural sector (Orazgaliyeva 2016). That same year, the World Bank recognized Kazakhstan as a middle-income country thanks to a per capita GDP of \$10,500 (World Bank 2016). The World Economic Forum placed it 50th out of 144 countries in their *Global Competitiveness Ranking* (Tengri 2015), and WIPO ranked it number two in Central and Southern Asia in the *Global Innovation Index* (WIPO 2015). In 2014, Astana announced a 36% increase in its military budget, namely from \$2 to \$2.7 billion by 2017 (Gorenburg 2015).¹

Growing rates of (relative) economic growth and military expenditures are standard indicators used to measure power trajectories (Organski & Kugler, 1980). Thus, taking stock of this pattern in light of the asserted intentions of the Kazakh government as reported above begs the question whether Kazakhstan can be considered an emerging power in its own right.

Albeit improving, the measurements reviewed above are hardly suggestive of a great power. Thus, the trajectory conceivable for Kazakhstan would be that of an emerging *middle* power, and even in this case there is reason for scepticism. For one thing, Kazakhstan is far from the trillion-dollar-plus league that *established* middle powers subscribe to in terms of annual GDP. Moreover, since the term's

¹ The names Nur-Sultan and Astana are used interchangeably in this text to refer to the recently renamed capital of Kazakhstan.

appearance in the literature, scholars have seemed to imply that the presence of a democratic political regime was a constitutive attribute of a middle power. Yet, this assumption is challenged by the return of authoritarian great powers in the contemporary era (Gat 2007) and the growing place of “counter-norms” (Cooley 2017), which create a favourable environment for the reappearance of non-democratic middle powers too (Jordaan 2003, 165).

Though the question may seem surprising and even paradoxical, it is worth entertaining, as this could help better understand what a middle power represents, particularly at a time when established ones may appear to be under strain (see David; Roussel 1996-97; 1998).

While the strong role of the executive government and their reading of the international environment in steering the country’s more assertive foreign policy is fundamental, a host of domestic factors and motivations may be filtering such a conduct. For example it has been noted that authoritarian regimes may want to build their international profile in order to deflect pressures for democratization from the international community (Jourde 2007). Moreover, Kazakhstan watchers have suggested the foreign policy regime has sometimes used as a source of legitimation and authoritarian consolidation (Schatz 2006; Marat 2009; Matveeva, 2009; Schatz and Maltseva 2012; Del Sordi and Dalmaso 2018). On the other hand, the Government of Kazakhstan has also undertaken a robust developmental mission during the period here examined, which its leadership may have determined to require a corresponding foreign policy.

Whereas attempting to answer the question whether Kazakhstan can be considered a rising power may prove futile, this article examines to what extent does its foreign policy behavior conform with the middle power style. The goal, however, is not so much to determine the sources of such conduct; rather, it is taxonomic. Due caveats notwithstanding, if authoritarianism and middle powermanship are found to coexist in foreign policy behavior, such perspective can allow analysts to paint a more comprehensive portrait of Kazakhstan’s foreign affairs, and perhaps those of countries displaying similar characteristics.

The first section reviews some of the main contributions in order to distil a broad analytical framework highlighting the key attributes of a middle power, consisting of the concurrent and balanced pursuit of nationalism, activism and internationalism. In sections two, three and four I contrast these criteria against evidence of concrete policy. I conclude by nuancing the outlook for Kazakhstan as a potential middle power.

2 What is a Middle Power? The Basic Elements of an Elusive Status

Although some trace back its origins to the middle ages (Holbraad 1984, 42), the term middle power made its appearance in mid-century Canada, in the course of the debate on the country's role in the postwar world order. At a time when the San Francisco conference was discussing the institutionalization of a great power club (the P5), Prime Minister Mackenzie King declared Canada a middle power, determined to preserve an influence commensurate with the role played in the war.

As with other similar constructs, its origins in the policy realm gave the term its successive ambiguity as a concept: its meaning being often conveyed with the aid of clichés such as possessing the ability to “punch above one’s weight”, being a “good international citizen” or what not.

As is commonly highlighted, an underlying political choice by the national élites of the country in question is a preliminary requirement (Ravenhill 1998, 320; Ungerer 2007, 539). A choice that can have a multitude of origins: be it ideology, identity, national role conception, leaders' personality, or a given configuration of the interests of the dominant socio-economic groups (Ungerer 2007, 540; Jordaan 2003: 166). In this light, middle power comes down to a foreign policy doctrine, or a “grand construct” (Painchaud 1966, 29). In other words, it represents first and foremost a political symbol, only subsequently becoming an explanatory concept (David; Roussel 1996-7: 43).

Provided we have a valid working definition, the concept can be used to make sense of the foreign policy of an entire class of actors. Although hierarchical, behavioral, or functional definitions can be found (Chapnick 1999, 73); in practice, the three benchmarks overlap, each merely capturing a single facet of the phenomenon. The literature broadly understands that middle ranking economic, military and diplomatic capacities can predict the broad type of foreign policy behavior a country will display. Thus, a middle power denotes a “state whose *resources* are not comparable to those of the great powers, but which are able nevertheless to *exert* significant international influence”.

Just like great power status implies recognition by the international community (Larson, Paul and Wohlforth 2014), so does the status of middle power. This imposes the need for leaders to stand certain trials as they strive to connect their strategic vision to a series of tactical choices. Therefore, adequate *behavior*, whether in one or more policy areas (i.e. the *functional* aspect) or across the board, is what helps translate the *hierarchical* element of capabilities into status. In this light, it can be useful to think of the notion of middle power as a *role*. The latter term ties the part one plays to the broader script from which it acquires meaning. That script being the strategic vision of political élites and the stage, the international system. In this meta-

phor, the international community represents the audience making the final call about a country's status claims.

The literature emphasizes particular behaviors, which, exhibited in a combined, systematic and recurrent manner, denote a middle power. Such behaviors include the "adoption of policies directed to favor international system stability, a tendency toward specialization, the implementation of mediation policies... and, lastly, a pronounced engagement in multilateral institutions" (David; Roussel 1996/1997, 44). This resonates with Robert Cox's argument according to which some of the main characteristics of a middle power are: "an ability to keep a distance from major conflicts, a degree of autonomy from the major powers, a dedication to international stability, and a commitment to gradual world change" (1989, 827). In a similar vein, Holbraad (1984, 25) saw four roles of middle powers: balancers of the state system, mediators between two opposing states, bridges between rich and poor states, and promoters of international understanding across culturally different states. Conversely, Ungerer (2007, 542-3) reduced the middle power "policy style" to the adherence to just three key principles: nationalism, activism and internationalism. Because these three concepts actually subsume all of the salient behaviors found in the literature, this contribution is fruitful for building a practical analytical framework as is the one developed below.

Nationalism	Activism	Internationalism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sovereignty and Independence • Diversification • Prestige 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership and Sectoral diplomacy • Problem-solving & Mediation • Dialogue and Understanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multilateralism and Regionalism • International law • Status quo and Enforcement of collective security norms
Summary of middle power attributes		

Nationalism

Expressing a perspective that would later find wider support, Glazebrook (1947, 308) considered the choice to pursue middle power status as the reflection of a prior will to eschew great power control. A middle power possesses a greater capacity to attain its interests, to make autonomous decisions and to "maintain overall independence in the affairs of the state" (McInnis 1960). Such a posture implies a "rational strategic behavior" (Ungerer 2007, 540) dictating a degree of equidistance vis-à-vis the extant power poles, and the pursuit of an "all-azimuth" foreign policy in a logic of diversification (see Contessi 2015). Such attitude underscores a perspective on "the international environment as a source of opportunities for action rather than

strictly a source of constraints" (Mace; Belanger 1997, 166). This is why, from the beginning, the middle power research program developed within the realist school (Chapnik 2000).

The nationalism pillar also suggests a concern for national prestige and the cultivation of the national brand as a means to increase status.

Activism

Middle powers pride themselves as being "good citizens of the international community" and stakeholders in the maintenance of international order, showing keenness to take responsibilities. However, they typically lack the material resources sufficient to autonomously affect the systemic trends of international politics. Nonetheless, they can often count on a competent and relatively large foreign service, allowing them to support major diplomatic initiatives. Thanks to adequate resources and initiative, they can afford to promote an activist foreign policy and "contribute" to steering and occasionally arbitrating some of those international processes. Thus, middle powers have tended to interpret their position as problem-solvers, for example as mediators, catalyzers or intermediaries (Ungerer 2007, 541), by promoting dialogue and understanding, or by seeking leadership positions within *issue-areas* or international organizations.

Internationalism

Because they acquire their status from an international or regional system in which they are but "minority shareholders", middle powers tend to act as backers of the status quo and its principal institutions.

First, this takes the shape of a strong diplomatic engagement within multilateral organizations. The latter offer unparalleled visibility and "voice opportunities" for a middling state (Grieco 1996), which can benefit from such a platform to protect their interests, spread their message or achieve other goals.

Second, middle powers tend to act as advocates for international law, which they regard as a guarantee of stability and predictability (Ungerer 2007, 539). The latter allows them to safeguard their interests, preserve their independence especially vis-à-vis the great powers. This propensity for multilateralism in a multitude of functional regimes often takes a regional scope and sees them as catalysts for integration projects (Wood 1988, 19).

Third, middle power internationalism can find expression in the participation in international efforts aimed at enforcing norms of collective security, which allows them to contribute to the maintenance of international order within reasonable costs.

3 Nationalism: Positioning on the International Scene

The first component of the nationalist pillar in Kazakhstan's foreign policy is the so-called "multivector diplomacy": a term whose coinage is attributed to Nazarbayev himself (Hanks 2009, 257). Over the years, this approach has taken the meaning at once of an "organizing principle" in the formulation and implementation of foreign policy, and of a "powerful domestic political symbol" of Kazakhstan's recent national independence (Clarke 2015). But more aptly, it has come to describe an approach to statecraft driven by the search for "strategic dividends" (Aris 2010; Indeo 2010), through the "diversification" of partnerships enabling the regime in power to pursue both national interest and political survival, while eschewing great power control (Contessi 2015). This represents not only a response to the concern for preserving sovereignty and independence vis-à-vis the great powers, but also to the requirements of economic development. Hence, Kazakhstan has been able to knit equally deep and strategic relationships with all of the major power poles extracting considerable political and economic benefits. While Russia, China, the EU and Turkey are the traditional "vectors" of this policy, Asian (Contessi 2016) and Gulf (Anceschi 2014; Savicheva and Shaar 2014) countries are also increasingly represented.

Despite occasional frictions and a wish for emancipation from its former metropole, Russia remains Kazakhstan's foremost partner. The two countries have one of the deepest bilateral relationships, supported by a net of about 300 treaties and agreements (Chufrin 2008). A multitude of action plans in disparate areas completes the legal framework, such as the current Economic Cooperation Program 2012-2020. Their relationship spans aerospace – mainly around the joint use of the Baikonur spaceport – the use and protection of the Caspian Sea, electric power, hydrocarbons and their transportation, as well as nuclear industries; not to mention a very close military partnership. Kazakhstan is Russia's *de facto* number two in the Collective Security Treaty Organization and in the CIS joint air defense system, and plays a key role in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) launched in 2015, in the economic field. The two countries are also cofounders of the CIS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Kazakhstan's other major partner is China. Their relations began in 1992 when the two needed to demarcate their frontiers following the dissolution of the USSR, resulting in a border agreement two years later. Their partnership has since been broadened to include a great variety of sectors leading to China becoming Kazakhstan's largest trading partner. The agreement for a pipeline between the two countries was made in 1997. Built by China National Petroleum Corporation and KazMunayGas, the pipeline went into function in 2006,

and Chinese interests now control about 25% of Kazakh reserves. Another sector is the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking, notably in the framework of the SCO. But the two have also established strong synergies in the area of economic development, particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative, in which the Central Asian country plays a primary role. It was during his 2013 visit to Astana that Chinese president Xi Jinping announced his signature project.

Kazakhstan has strong relations with the European Union (EU) likewise dating to the early 1990s. Since the adoption of the 2007 EU Central Asia Strategy, relations have focused on the key sectors of trade and investment, development aid, and energy and transport – notably through initiatives like TRACECA and INOGATE respectively. Taken together, the EU is one of Kazakhstan’s main trading partners, and in 2014 was its first client, attracting 36% of its exports (93% of which in the hydrocarbon sector). At the same time, the EU is its third source of imports (19%), and the first for FDI with 50% of investments (European Union 2015). Many European companies own large stakes in Caspian oil and gas, including ENI and BP. With the adoption of the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in 2015 and the EU’s new Central Asia Strategy in 2019, the relationship appears destined to enter a new phase.

Turkey is another relationship Astana has developed, partly in the context of the wider rediscovery of its Turkic identity. The shared Turkic roots are its glue, and have also favored the opening in the country of several Turkish educational institutions, both secondary and post-secondary. Overall, the two countries have built a dynamic relationship in the political, cultural, economic, humanitarian and defense sectors, leading to the signing in 2009 of a Strategic Partnership Agreement, and to a succession of joint economic programs. The two countries jointly promote the Turkic Council and coordinate their reciprocal positions within multilateral bodies. Turkey supported Kazakhstan in the selection to host the 2017 Expo and in the election to the UN Security Council (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015). All that being said, the common identity has not always born the expected fruits (Sasley 2012).

The second component is the promotion of the national brand. Since the creation in 2007 of a Department for International Information within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kazakhstan has undertaken plenty of initiatives aimed at presenting the country in a positive light, underscoring its identity as a crossroad of civilizations and as the “Heart of Eurasia”. Event diplomacy, for instance with the hosting of the 2011 Asian Winter Games or the 2017 Winter Universiade and International Expo, as well as other more minor events; or the fielding of professional teams competing in international sports tournaments serve the same goal. Behind the obsessive image-consciousness is not merely the concern with offering a positive interpretation

of the country for global audiences following the embarrassment perceived from the blockbuster film *Borat* (Stock 2009), but also that of promoting Kazakhstan on international markets and in foreign capitals. Moreover, the image and symbols propagated for international consumption also serve the indirect purpose of promoting the regime and especially the former president, with internal audiences, thanks to campaigns designed to explain his goals and achievements (Marat 2009; Matveeva 2009).

Sovereignty and Independence	Diversification	Prestige
“Multivector diplomacy”	“Multivector diplomacy”	Nation branding
Nationalism in Kazakhstan’s foreign policy		

In sum, the nationalist prong in Kazakhstan’s foreign policy is visible in its trademark multivector diplomacy, embodying its own approach to diversification. The latter represents a calculated choice driven by the objective of preserving equidistance from the main powers while maintaining sovereignty and independence in the Eurasian geopolitical context where the country is enmeshed, sandwiched between some of the leading contemporary great powers. The cultivation of national prestige also adheres to the nationalist component because it contributes to elevate the country’s status in the eyes of foreign leaders and improve Kazakhstan’.

4 Activism: A Responsible Actor of the International Community

Kazakhstan has consistently striven to play a constructive role in an effort to affirm a reputation as a reliable partner of the international community. Rather than promoting liberal values, however, Astana has sought to do this primarily by touting the universal validity of some of its contextual experiences, for example putting forward the complex nature of its multiethnic and multi-confessional social mosaic; the country’s position at the crossroads of civilizations; or even its past as a former nuclear testing ground. Drawing on such experiences, Kazakhstan poses as honest broker in mediation and conflict resolution, as an intermediary for the dialogue between cultures and religions, and as leader in and advocate for denuclearization.

As a mediator at the service of international peace and security, Astana has played an active role in many files. For example, Astana has facilitated the reconciliation between Russia and Turkey following the downing by the Turkish air force, in November 2015, of a Russian bomber in action over the border between Turkey and Syria. The role

played by Nazarbayev in the rapprochement is amply recognized (Putz 2016; Daly 2016), with the attribution to the latter of the good offices which led to the Turkish president's August 2016 visit to Saint Petersburg. It's been reported that Nazarbayev would have himself suggested the wording for the letter Erdogan sent to Putin (Astana Times 2016).

Kazakhstan also played a part in the negotiations that led to the Iranian nuclear deal, hosting in Almaty two rounds of talks between Iran and the P5+1 (China, United States, France, United Kingdom, Russia, and Germany). Though the final accord rested on a collective endeavor, Kazakhstan was able to project an image as a mediator, facilitating the eventual adoption of the *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action* (Fitch & Norman 2015), from which the U.S. subsequently withdrew. The latter foresaw, among other things, that, under the supervision of the P5+1, the UN and the IAEA, Kazakhstan supply the natural uranium for Iran's civilian nuclear programme. This condition served to secure Teheran's consent to the transferring its enriched uranium to Russia for it to be disposed (Astana Times 2016).

President Nazarbayev then declared his willingness to act as a mediator in the Ukraine crisis, notably thanks to its good relations both in Moscow and Kiev (RFE/RL 2014). However, little has followed from this initial overture, which some saw more as a signal of Astana's autonomy from Russia intended for Western audiences, rather than as a real desire to intercede (Malaschenko 2015).²

Lastly, Kazakhstan has hosted the peace talks on Syria in the format of the Astana Process bringing together Russia, Iran, and Turkey.

In connection with international dialogue and understanding, the city of Astana has been the stage, since 2003, of the Congress of World Religions. This forum was inaugurated by president Nazarbayev, who had a dedicated "Peace Palace" built for the purpose, as a way of promoting interreligious tolerance following 9/11. Analogous initiatives have been undertaken within multilateral organizations like the OIC and the UN. What is more, Astana militates for causes such as the Universal prohibition against the deployment of weapons of mass destruction in outer space, on the ocean floor, in high seas, and in the Arctic; for the adoption of an International instrument on the prohibition of the use of new scientific discoveries for weapons of mass destruction. The Kazakhstani élan was further displayed in the *Peace in the 21st Century Manifesto*, aimed to bring stability in the international system by eliminating the root causes of conflicts.

With regards to leadership and sectoral diplomacy, Kazakhstan has been a champion for non-proliferation since the early 1990s: a

² One cannot discard the possibility that such a position may have been suggested by calculations linked to the bid for a non permanent seat in the Security Council that Kazakhstan was engaged in at that time.

principled position justified with reference to the utilization of the country's territory as a nuclear testing ground for the USSR.³ Having inherited some 1,410 nuclear warheads, independent Kazakhstan became a de facto nuclear power. However, by acceding to the non-proliferation regime, it committed to its own gradual denuclearization. Kazakhstan played this card skillfully to accredit itself as a responsible stakeholder and to knit a strategic relationship with the United States (US) (Socor, Weitz and Witt 2016).

In 1991, Kazakhstan signed the Alma-Ata Declaration on strategic forces with his counterparts from Belarus, Russia and Ukraine. The latter decided the supervision mechanism for the nuclear arsenal of the former USSR extending its obligations in the reduction of strategic offensive weapons. Then, with the adoption of the 1992 Lisbon Protocol, Kazakhstan acceded to the Non-proliferation Treaty and accepted to transfer the inherited warheads to Russia. It became, in this way, also a party to the *Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty* between the Soviet Union and the US (START).⁴ Once completed the repatriation of its nuclear stock to Russia in April 1995, Kazakhstan acceded, in 2002, to the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty and to the Nuclear Suppliers Group becoming the world's largest uranium exporter by 2011. Astana then signed the Additional Protocol of the IAEA in February 2004 subsequently joining the Proliferation Security Initiative.

Astana has likewise propelled several diplomatic initiatives in this field. In March 2009, it was instrumental to the establishment of the Nuclear Weapons-free Zone in Central Asia, following the ratification of the 2006 Semipalatinsk Treaty signed with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. That treaty was complemented in 2014 by a Protocol signed by United Kingdom, US, France, China, and Russia, and committing them not to use nuclear weapons against the zone's five members. It also militates for the establishment of a Nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East.

Lastly, in 2010, Astana offered to host the IAEA Light Enriched Uranium (LEU) bank, resulting in the *Host State Agreement* eventually being signed in 2015. The facility was opened in August 2017 within the Ulba metallurgical complex in Öskemen, where it is managed by Kazakhstan according to its national rules and regulations but under IAEA supervision. The bank holds a 90 metric tons reserve

³ This refers to the eastern oblast of Semipalatinsk used between 1949 and 29 August 1991. In 2009, the UN General Assembly declared that date the international day against nuclear tests.

⁴ The United States, United Kingdom and Russia signed the *Memorandum of Security Assurances* at the OSCE Summit in Budapest of 5 December 1994 in return for Kazakhstan's accession to the NPT as a denuclearized state. China and France subsequently also provided guarantees.

allowing it to act as a supplier of last resort that member states can access when their regular supply chains are disrupted (IAEA 2017). This mechanism introduces a further safeguard against proliferation removing the need for countries with civilian nuclear industries to develop enrichment capabilities (IAEA 2015).

Problem-solving and Mediation	Dialogue and Understanding	Leadership & Sectoral diplomacy
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Iranian Nuclear Deal• Russia-Turkey relations• Astana Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Congress of World Religions• Prohibition of Weapons of Mass Destruction• Peace in the 21st Century Manifesto	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Denuclearization and Non proliferation• Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in Central Asia• IAEA LEU Bank

Activism in Kazakhstan's foreign policy

In sum, the activist prong in Kazakhstan's foreign policy is an well articulated set of measures that take three further facets. In regards to problem-solving and mediation, Nur-Sultan was involved in the Iranian nuclear deal, and played a critical role in facilitating the reconciliation between Russia and Turkey, which was followed by a significant role in the Syrian peace process as the host and facilitator of the Astana Process.

In regards to the promotion of dialogue and understanding, the country is a regular advocate for such principles, as highlighted by initiatives like the Congress of World Religions, the Peace in the 21st Century Manifesto, or the backing given to a draft UNGA Resolution on the Prohibition of Weapons of Mass Destruction. Lastly, Kazakhstan has consistently exercised leadership and advocacy in a key issue area like denuclearization. This is witnessed by the country's role in the non-proliferation regime, in the establishment of a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in Central Asia and the creation on its territory of a LEU Bank under the auspices of the IAEA.

5 Internationalism

Nur-Sultan is not only member of numerous international organizations, but has also successfully bidden to secure leadership positions in some of these. The foreign policy concept 2014-2020 identifies multilateral diplomacy as a major priority, and Kazakhstan actively participates in regional and global organizations, and has even founded one in the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA).

The country is a member of the United Nations since 1992 sitting on two of its regional commissions (UNECE and UNESCAP). Moreover, the country has sat on the executive boards of UNICEF, UNESCO, and UNWomen, and been a member of ECOSOC and the Human Rights Council. In the period 2017–2018, Astana was a member of the Security Council. In this role, it sought to contribute to efforts to reinforce regional and global security while advancing its interests through decision-making, the promotion of initiatives, and UN cooperation with regional organisations (KazISS 2016). Stressing the themes of food, water, energy, and nuclear security, the electoral campaign contributed to reinforcing the country's diplomatic muscle. New embassies were opened in Brazil, Ethiopia, Kuwait, Mexico, South Africa, and Sweden; several special envoys were appointed; and the Permanent Mission in New York was reinforced with extra personnel and the appointment as permanent representative of the person who had served as permanent representative to the OSCE before and during Kazakhstan's chairmanship: Kairat Abdrakhmanov, subsequently promoted to Minister of foreign affairs between 2016 and 2018.

This exploit followed the one Kazakhstan obtained within the OSCE, another important platform for its international policy. The country acceded the organization in 1992, becoming in 2010 the first post-soviet state to hold its rotating chairmanship. Whereas the early steps in this direction date back to 2004, Astana's efforts were only rewarded three years later. The opposition of the United Kingdom, US, France, and several NGOs, who opposed the idea of an authoritarian government heading an organization whose mandate includes human rights, caused a one-year lag in the election initially anticipated for 2009. The additional year was meant to allow the adoption of reforms in the fields of media freedom, elections and local governance.⁵ During its term, Astana attempted, with little success, to solve the frozen conflicts in the Caucasus and put forward some other initiatives. For example, it tried to improve the organization's "incident prevention capacities" to better respond to regional conflicts (OSCE Chairmanship 2010). It also worked to develop the OSCE's engagement with Afghanistan, as well as in the 2010 Kyrgyzstan crisis. Moreover, Kazakhstan pushed to revamp the organization into a strategic forum for dialogue between euro-Atlantic and euro-Asian worlds, such as conveyed in the Astana Commemorative Declaration (Contessi 2010).

5 By virtue of this compromise Kazakhstan approved a series of reforms affecting media, elections, the registration of political parties, religious freedom, the representation of national minorities and human rights (Engvall; Cornell 2015). However, most of them have since been reversed.

Another example is the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, which Kazakhstan joined in 1995. Though Astana only contributes 1% of the organization's budget, it played an energetic role during its 2011-12 chairmanship. The organization saw a total of 40 events, including ten ministerial meetings. As underscored in the Astana Declaration, Kazakhstan also promoted dialogue with the West and the opening of the Islamic world to modernity (Akhmet 2012),⁶ and greater prominence for the Central Asian countries, as reflected in the adopted *Plan of Action for Cooperation with Central Asia* (Akorda 2017). Kazakhstan wrapped up its chairmanship in 2012 with the proposal for an Islamic Food Security Organization, whose charter was signed and adopted the following year by 19 countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014). Its headquarters were opened in Astana in October 2018.

Kazakhstan is also active in the Turkic Council, bringing together the Turkic-speaking countries of Anatolia, the Caucasus and Central Asia,⁷ as the umbrella organization for a family of agencies active in the spheres of culture, scholarship, parliamentary cooperation and business. While these various entities were created over the years at Turkey's initiative, the Council itself, founded with the 2009 Nakhichevan Treaty, was actually strongly wanted by the former Kazakh president. Kazakhstan, which hosts the Turkic Academy, has also lobbied to widen the scope of cooperation, with the inclusion of tourism, media and information, also advocating the creation of a common satellite channel (Engvall; Cornell 2015, 22).

But the most salient example of Kazakhstan's multilateralism is probably the CICA. This little-known organization headquartered in Astana is actually the embodiment of a personal initiative of former president Nazarbayev. His dream in 1992 was to create a dialogue and security mechanism for Asia modelled on the OSCE. However, the organization has never been very active, as demonstrated by its modest impact and low productivity in terms of concrete measures. Its first meeting was only held in 1996, when its 15 members' deputy-ministers of foreign affairs met in Almaty. Three years later, the first ministerial meeting adopted the *Declaration on Principles Guiding Relations between CICA member states*. This was followed, in 2002 by the Almaty Summit - its very first - which adopted the Charter. In 2014, Nazarbayev used the fourth summit in Shanghai to call for the CICA's revamping into the Organization for Security and Development in Asia, which however has yet to see the day.

The second facet of Nur-Sultan's internationalism is support for the status quo and for the enforcement of collective security norms. On one hand, it allows it to lend support for an international system

⁶ Moreover, the organization gave itself a Special Commission on Human Rights.

⁷ Its members are Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey.

premised on international law and the letter of the UN Charter. The country's 2014-2020 foreign policy concept assigns to the United Nations a central place in the international system as the coordination node of an "equitable and democratic" international order.

On the other hand, the country has taken a role, albeit modest, in peacekeeping. In 2013, the Majilis - the country's lower house - passed a law permitting the deployment of some 20 military personnel to UN missions in Haiti, Ivory Coast, Liberia and Western Sahara. To increase its contribution, the country's Ministry of defense is studying the possibility of sending contingents of up to 150 soldiers at a time, and working with the Majilis to table a law clarifying rules of engagement in combat and peacekeeping operations.

The third facet is integration into the global economy and the world trading system. Various initiatives adhere to this goal, such as the accession to the World Trade Organization and membership in the EAEU, both in 2015. The idea for the EAEU was actually put forth by Nazarbayev himself in a speech given in Moscow in the distant 1994. EAEU is a customs union and free trade area whose other members are Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan and Russia. Although accession determined an initial loss of competitiveness due to the new customs duties modelled on Russia's, Kazakhstan has seen intra-bloc exports grow in successive years. Furthermore, Nur-Sultan is turning the country into a transit centre for intercontinental trade along the East-West and North-South routes. Massive investments have gone into roads and railways as well as ports and Special Economic Zones to expand intermodal connectivity (Contessi 2018). The opening of the Astana International Financial Centre in 2016 was another significant step designed to position the country as a regional hub for the global financial system and develop the national service industries (Chakabarti 2016).

Multilateralism & Regionalism	Status quo and Enforcement of collective security norms	Globalization
UN	International Law	WTO accession
OSCE	Peacekeeping	EAEU
OIC		AIFC
Turkic Council		International connectivity
CICA		

Internationalism in Kazakhstan's foreign policy.

Lastly, Kazakhstan has been taking steps to integrate into the global economy, by joining both global (WTO) and regional (EAEU) free trade agreements and by positioning itself as a hub for global finance and logistics, respectively through the creation of the Astana International Financial Center and by joining multiple transport corridors.

In sum, the internationalist prong in Kazakhstan's foreign policy has three facets. In regards to multilateralism and regionalism, Nur-Sultan is an active member of the UN, having served on the governing bodies of several UN agencies and sitting on the Security Council for the 2017-18 term. Kazakhstan's engagement with multilateralism is mirrored at the regional level in the country's role in the OSCE, the OIC, the SCO, the Turkic Council and the CICA.

In regards to support for the status quo and enforcement of collective security norms, Nur-Sultan is a strong supporter of international law as premised in the letter of the UN Charter and other entrenched and consensual principles. Moreover, Nur-Sultan has been exploring the role of military contributor to UN peacekeeping operations to enforce collective security norms.

6 Conclusion

Although it is unusual to apply the middle power framework to an authoritarian developing country, the foregoing reveals the unexpected adherence of Kazakhstan's external policy to the doctrine's main tenets.

The nationalist element is perhaps the most recognizable. Kazakhstan's efforts to maintain its sovereignty and independence, primarily, through diversification is one of the country's foreign policy hallmarks. Though some analysts thought that the return of great power competition in the mid 2010's would undermine the viability of diversification (Clarke 2015; Noonan 2016; Roberts 2015; Standish 2014), this point of view excessively discounted the approach's structural roots. Since the outset of geopolitical turbulence, Kazakhstan's diversification efforts have - if anything - ticked up, resulting in rekindled and enhanced strategic partnerships with all key partners. Conversely, its branding efforts are generally well received, although the authoritarian and personal nature of the regime has been somewhat of a handicap at least with Western audiences.

As far as activism, Astana has shown the undisputed ability to find a seat at prestigious tables. However, Astana's ability to act as a mediator is limited by the means and the scope of its diplomatic network, and this notwithstanding the opening of new embassies in recent years. At most, Astana can provide a platform and facilitate dialogue, perhaps as part of efforts concerted with other partners (Tengri 2015).

As to internationalism, Astana's support for multilateralism has earned it the chairmanship of several international organizations and election to the UN Security Council. However, Astana's impact has been somewhat constrained by its ability to place items related to its priorities on the agenda. Whereas action in support of international law is harder to pin down, Kazakhstan has effectively been

able to fill a niche in the global economy as a significant player in energy, logistics, and trade. Commercial, financial and infrastructural indicators are usually positive.

Because advancing a middle power agenda requires support and cooperation from the international community, Nur-Sultan achievements denote a degree of recognition in spite of its authoritarian character. Perhaps its ability to interpret a possible dialogue between East and West has persuaded international stakeholders on both sides. Nonetheless, this does not in and of itself make of Kazakhstan a full-fledged middle power.

The country faces challenges, especially as it undergoes an engineered but slow political transition. The project was closely associated with the paternalistic figure of former president Nazarbayev and whether his successor(s) – for the time being Kassym-Jomart Tokayev – will have the skills and the vision to stay the course remains to be seen. Moreover, the state apparatus was fundamentally tributary to the former president's will and charisma, and its ability and discipline to further that project is unknown, though Nazarbayev remains behind the scenes influence even in retirement.

Second, whereas attempts to use foreign policy for domestic goals are frequent, the country's resources are limited and must often be redirected to face domestic needs. Although the look of cities like Almaty and Nur-Sultan may give it away, the recognition as a middle-income country does not entail the end of the country's socio-economic challenges. Notwithstanding the rapid development, the World Bank finds that Kazakhstan's economy remains dependent on extractive industries, and has weak agricultural, environmental and service sectors.

Third, governance remains sclerotic and bureaucratic in both the public and private sectors, sometimes posing an obstacle to the achievement of the very objectives the regime sets for itself. Evidently, its authoritarian nature both enables and restricts the country's ability to fully achieve its goals.

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