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Kazakhstan's Multi-vector Foreign Policy: Focus on China and Russia

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After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan had to build their foreign policy from scratch. Accepted on October 25, 1990, the declaration “On State Sovereignty” was the first historical document to secure the country as a subject of international law with the right to an independent foreign policy. Speaking about the initial stages of forming the country’s foreign policy, Kasymzhomart Tokayev, the Kazakhstan former Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1994–1999, stated that from December 1991 to 1993 the basic principle of a multi-vector diplomacy was laid and is now the core of the country’s foreign policy [Tokayev 2001: 41–43]. Following Tokayev’s statement, the Kazakh researcher, Murat Laumulin, also stressed that Kazakhstan’s decision to start aiming for a multi-vector foreign policy was the best way to survive that harsh time.

A flexible policy of multi-vector diplomacy was encouraged by the geographical location of the country, with features such as a common border with major powers like Russia and China, the lack of direct access to sea lines of communications, and by Kazakhstan’s abundant natural resources. These resources have attracted great interest from neighbors, albeit the relatively small size of Kazakhstan’s economy in comparison to the size of territory [Tokayev 2001: 41–43]. For these reasons, Kazakhstan needed to have friendly relations with as many neighboring states as possible. Kasymzhomart Tokayev stressed that “from the start Kazakhstan sought out a foreign policy which would allow for stable and mutually beneficial friendly relations based on the principles of complete trust with neighboring countries and all others” [Tokayev 2003: 158].

Since Kazakhstan’s independence up until the present day, the country’s multi-vector foreign policy went through several stages of development. Kazakhstan’s government issued the Concept of Foreign Policy, approved three times respectively in 1995, 2001,

and 2014.

The most important document was that issued on March 15, 2001. It shifted the country's foreign policy direction from maintaining balanced relations with countries worldwide to focusing on targeting specific states. The leadership saw this shift as serving the country's long-term interests. Against the background of this policy shift in 2001 was Russia's presence.

Since Putin's arrival as the President of Russia in 2000, Russia's foreign policy has shifted noticeably towards a stronger emphasis on relations with Central Asia. Thus, Kazakhstan decided to pursue a conditional multi-vector foreign policy: a focused strategy to keep a friendly relationship with Moscow while simultaneously securing independence from Russia. An example of this is its hydrocarbon development policies. Since its independence, the development of the oil sector was crucial for Kazakhstan. In those days, however, Russia was the only export option for Kazakhstan's oil due to its interconnected infrastructure, a by-product of the Soviet Union. Kazakhstan wanted to secure more independence from Russia by diversifying export routes. Therefore, Kazakhstan put great effort into energy cooperation with China.

The 2014 Concept of Kazakhstan's foreign policy emphasizes China's importance as a strategic partner in energy, investment, trade cooperation, and interaction in the transit and transport sector. After Xi Jinping's proposal to build the Silk Road Economic Belt on September 7, 2013, Kazakhstan was among the first countries to welcome his initiative. The collaboration between Kazakhstan and China had the potential to become the driving force for Central Asia's economic security and bring different advantages to Kazakhstan.

The SREB project was among the most discussed topics in China and overseas during 2016, and it was the most frequent subject of articles in China's official daily newspaper, the People's Daily [Laruelle 2018: 10]. A total of seven belts have been planned in various fields, including transport, energy, trade, information, science, agriculture, and tourism. This project has the potential to become a large-scale, free-trade zone spanning from Central Asia to the north-western provinces of China, and then on to Eastern and Central Europe.

The reason why Xi Jinping delivered his speech in Kazakhstan was because, in comparison to other Central Asian states, Kazakhstan offers key geographical advantages. China will have been well aware of Kazakhstan's capacity to open new cargo routes,

access markets in the Customs Union, and the country's favorable investment climate.

Kazakhstan's goal to access international markets is laid out in the state '100 Concrete Steps' program, which is in line with China's plans to implement infrastructure projects for the New Silk Road. Indeed, the adoption in November 2014 of the new economic policy 'Nurly Zhol – Path to the Future', focusing on infrastructure development was, in fact, consistent with the Chinese 'Silk Road Economic Belt' initiative and aimed at maximizing the benefits of its implementation. The main cargo of the "New Silk Road" will be carried out from East to West.

In order to implement this new economic policy, Kazakhstan joined the China-led Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) on October 24, 2014, which was initiated by President Xi Jinping in 2013. The main purpose of the AIIB was to promote economic development, create wealth, and improve the interaction of infrastructure in Asia.

China is currently the biggest trade partner of Kazakhstan. The 2022 trade volume between China and Five countries of Central Asia registered a record of over 70 billion US dollars and has been increased by about 40% from the previous year. Among these Five Central Asian countries, the most significant trade volume occurred with Kazakhstan, amounting 30 billion US dollars.

Kazakh-Chinese investment cooperation has been upgraded to a new level. Previously, the majority of Chinese investment companies investing in Kazakhstan have been associated with the fuel sector – oil and natural gas, as well as the construction of pipelines. Nowadays, the interaction is more in the non-primary sector. Kazakhstan has supported the proposal of the Chinese program for the transfer of production capacity to its territory, such as the production of glass, cement, and processing of agricultural products. This, in turn, might provide powerful impetus to the development of non-primary sectors of Kazakhstan's economy such as transport and logistics, production of building materials, and processing of agricultural products.

In summary, we can see that the multi-vector foreign policy has gone through different stages of development since its establishment. However, the most significant change was the 2001 shift from a general approach without any specific target countries towards a specific approach targeting Russia due to proactive Russian policy in Central Asia. Putin's arrival as the president of Russia in 2000 represented a fundamental turn of Russian foreign policy towards the Central Asian region. In those circumstances, Kazakhstan had

to protect its national interests and reduce the consistently increasing economic influence of Russia. Thus, the multi-vector foreign policy of Kazakhstan from 2001 up to the present was an elaborated strategy towards the reduction of economic dependence on Russia through enhanced economic cooperation with China.

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