

Between the bear and the dragon: multivectorism in Kazakhstan as a model strategy for secondary powers

RACHEL VANDERHILL, SANDRA F. JOIREMAN AND
ROZA TULEPBAYEVA*

In March 2019, Nursultan Nazarbayev announced his resignation as president of Kazakhstan. While it is not surprising that he would want to resign after 30 years in this role, the timing was unexpected. Nazarbayev had been Kazakhstan's only president until then and had led the country since independence in 1991. His departure provides an opportunity to reflect on his tenure as a leader and on the unusual foreign policy trajectory that Kazakhstan has followed in comparison to its central Asian neighbours. While many will note the mixed legacy that Nazarbayev leaves, in this article we focus on a distinguishing characteristic of his governance, with the emphasis on the organizing principle of Kazakhstan's foreign policy—multivector diplomacy or, more simply, multivectorism.¹ Over the past 30 years Kazakhstan has achieved economic and diplomatic success in a difficult region of the world, caught between Russia and China. In this period Kazakhstan sustained its independence, grew economically through the export of its natural resources, and established a respected international reputation for diplomacy.

The experience of Kazakhstan presents a theoretical puzzle. Kazakhstan is a secondary power—a state with moderate regional influence and moderate international recognition—that has negotiated relationships with its Great Power neighbours without becoming a client state. It shares a border with China, with which it has positive trade and diplomatic relationships, yet it is not dominated by China. Similarly, it is adjacent to Russia, and has a large ethnic Russian population, yet it is not controlled by Russia. In 2014 Russia invaded Crimea, sending ripples of concern throughout the post-Soviet region. Even long-time allies of Russia, such as President Lukashenko of Belarus, have expressed concerns about Russian influence following the seizure of Crimea.² It is noteworthy that under these circumstances Kazakhstan has both asserted its sovereignty and maintained positive relations with Russia.

In this article we have two goals: (1) to analyse the success of Kazakhstan's multivectorism; and (2) to engage in the related theoretical discussion as to how

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¹ The terms multivector foreign policy, multivectorism and multivector diplomacy are employed interchangeably in this article.

² Andrew Higgins, 'As Putin pushes a merger, Belarus resists with language, culture and history', *New York Times*, 29 June 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/29/world/europe/russia-belarus-putin-lukashenko.html>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 28 March 2020.)

this secondary power has been able to manage its Great Power neighbours in such a way as to promote its own economic, political and diplomatic interests. The article also addresses gaps in the literature, as the foreign policy strategy of secondary powers is under-theorized, and there is even less theoretical analysis of the foreign policy of central Asian states. Several factors contribute to explaining the absence of theoretical analysis of central Asia. First, scholars have generally treated 'post-Soviet central Asia' as a bloc,³ imposing a false unity on the countries of the region, which differ in terms of their resources, population size and composition, level of economic development, strategies and goals.⁴ Second, since 2001 much of the international interest in the area has revolved around the problem of combating terrorism, especially in relation to the war in Afghanistan. Third, apart from its natural resources, the region has simply not been perceived as strategically important. But things are changing, and there are several reasons why a theoretical discussion of Kazakhstan is timely: the rise of China has made central Asia more significant internationally;⁵ Nazarbayev's departure marks a pivotal point in the country's history and creates a potential for vulnerability, owing to the complex situation surrounding the transition of power; and a foreign policy pursued consistently over a period of 30 years has left a legacy which can now be effectively analysed and possibly applied by other states.

This article proceeds in four stages. We begin by defining multivectorism and identifying how we might understand it from the realist perspective and the theoretical model of omni-enmeshment suggested by Evelyn Goh in her work on south-east Asia. In the second part we consider how Kazakhstan's foreign policy of multivectorism models omni-enmeshment and the complex balancing of power suggested by Goh.⁶ We do this by examining the variety of ways in which Kazakhstan has defended its sovereignty in the region and used highly visible and targeted diplomatic efforts to manage the interests of the Great Powers while avoiding their regional and international agendas. In the third part we use a case-study of Kazakhstan's complex balancing with regard to its energy resources to further illustrate our argument. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of omni-enmeshment and complex balancing as a strategy for secondary powers.

What is 'multivectorism'? How does IR theory explain it?

Kazakhstan has followed a multivector foreign policy, a term used to describe 'a policy that develops foreign relations through a framework based on a pragmatic,

³ With the exception of some regional and country experts.

⁴ As Marlene Laruelle notes, Kazakhstan is the 'economic engine' of the region, producing more than 50% of regional GDP, and is therefore in a different category from any of its much poorer neighbours: Marlene Laruelle, 'Kazakhstan's dilemma on Eurasian and central Asian integrations', in Daniel L. Burghart and Theresa Sabonis-Helf, eds, *Central Asia in the new era of sovereignty* (New York: Lexington, 2018), p. 400.

⁵ Rosemary Foot, 'Remembering the past to secure the present: Versailles legacies in a resurgent China', *International Affairs* 95: 1, Jan. 2019, pp. 143–60.

⁶ Evelyn Goh, 'Great powers and hierarchical order in Southeast Asia', *International Security* 32: 2, Winter 2007–2008, pp. 113–57.

non-ideological foundation'.⁷ In explaining the goals of this strategy, President Nazarbayev stated that a multivector foreign policy means the development of friendly and predictable relations with all states that play a significant role in world affairs and are of practical interest to the country.⁸ Its essence lies in the establishment and development of mutually beneficial cooperation with all countries. This idea undergirded the Strategy on the Formation and Development of Kazakhstan as a Sovereign State, published in May 1992. According to this document, the main goal of foreign policy is to create a favourable external environment and provide support for the stable development of the country through political and economic reforms.⁹ In practice, multivectorism has become a 'form of relational power allowing a weaker state to mitigate the dilemmas of dependence while engaging in an asymmetrical relationship'.¹⁰ Alexander Cooley argues that Kazakhstan, along with other central Asian states, has used the competition among Russia, China and the United States to serve its own interests by playing the Great Powers off against one another and thereby to 'extract increased benefits, assistance, and better contractual terms'.¹¹ Kazakhstan has used multivectorism to manage its challenging geopolitics.

How does current foreign policy theory explain Kazakhstan's choice of multivectorism? Moreover, can existing theory explain the country's success in developing and maintaining a multivector foreign policy? Given the apparently rational, strategic approach of multivectorism and its involvement of Great Powers, realism is a logical place to look first for theoretical explanations. Balance of power theory argues that states form alliances with other states to protect themselves from the superior capabilities of a potential hegemon.¹² Bandwagoning is the opposite strategic choice, involving aligning with the stronger power.¹³ Stephen Walt argues that balancing is the more prevalent strategy, and that states will only bandwagon when

⁷ Reuel R. Hanks, "Multi-vector politics" and Kazakhstan's emerging role as a geo-strategic player in central Asia', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 11: 3, 2009, p. 259; see also Raikhan Kaliyeva, 'Kazakhstan v global'nom mire: obzor situazii', *Diplomatiya Zharshysi* [Kazakhstan in the global world: situation review, *Diplomatic Herald*] 1: 11, 2007, pp. 181–6.

⁸ Nursultan Nazarbayev, *Era nezavisimosti* [Era of independence] (Astana: B. I., 2017), pp. 168–75, <https://elbasy.kz/sites/default/files/pagefiles/2019-06/423d7253d66cad2c6f68758bcdf33782.pdf>. See also *Mnogovektornaya diplomatiya na praktike—Kazakhstan* [Multivector diplomacy in practice—Kazakhstan], Central Asian Analytical Network, 20 April 2018, <http://caa-network.org/archives/12956>.

⁹ Meirambek Bagarin, 'Strategiya stanovleniya i razvitiya Kazahstana kak suverenno gosudarstva—vernny kurs, zadanny prezidentom N. Nazarbayevim' [The strategy of formation and development of Kazakhstan as a sovereign state is the right course set by the President N. Nazarbayev], *Kazinform*, 1 Sept 2010, https://www.inform.kz/ru/strategiya-stanovleniya-i-razvitiya-kazahstana-kak-suverenno-gosudarstva-vernny-kurs-zadanny-prezidentom-n-nazarbaevym_a2299544.

¹⁰ Nicola P. Contesti, 'Foreign and security policy diversification in Eurasia: issue splitting, co-alignment, and relational power', *Problems of Post-Communism* 62: 5, July 2015, p. 301.

¹¹ Alexander Cooley, *Great games, local rules: the new Great Power contest in central Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 9; Christopher Layne, 'The US–China power shift and the end of the Pax Americana', *International Affairs* 94: 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 89–112; Astrid H. M. Nordin and Mikael Weissmann, 'Will Trump make China great again? The Belt and Road Initiative and international order', *International Affairs* 94: 2, March 2018, pp. 231–50.

¹² Stephen M. Walt, *Origins of alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 18. See also Seng Tan, 'Consigned to hedge: south-east Asia and America's "free and open Indo-Pacific" strategy', *International Affairs* 96: 1, Jan. 2020, pp. 131–48.

¹³ Randall Schweller, 'Bandwagoning for profit: bringing the revisionist state back in', *International Security* 19: 1, 1994, p. 74.

they are weak, when there are no other allies available, and when they believe it is possible to appease the rising hegemon. However, these arguments about balancing and bandwagoning do not adequately explain Kazakhstan's foreign policy strategy, which has involved some aspects of both balancing against and bandwagoning with three different Great Powers (China, Russia, the United States) and occasionally engages with the EU on economic matters, all at the same time—a strategy seemingly counter to realist predictions. The 'simplistic dichotomy' of balancing or bandwagoning fails to account for the complexity of Kazakhstan's approach to foreign policy and its strategic preferences.¹⁴ In addition, with its narrow focus on military power and economic wealth, realism fails to account for the variety of mechanisms with which Kazakhstan, and other secondary powers, can engage the Great Powers. Realism is theoretically most persuasive in explaining the actions of Great Powers, tending to underexplain the choices and methods of other states.

An alternative theoretical approach stems from Evelyn Goh's work on the foreign policy strategies of south-east Asia in relation to the United States and China. Both the south-east Asian and central Asian states share the characteristic of being secondary or tertiary states in a region involved in Great Power competition. Goh argues that, in response to the rise of China, the south-east Asian states have followed strategies of 'omni-enmeshment' towards major powers and a complex balance of influence. Omni-enmeshment refers

to the process of engaging with a state so as to draw it into deep involvement into [*sic*] international and regional society, enveloping it in a web of sustained exchanges and relationships, with the long-term aim of integration. In the process, the target state's interests are redefined, and its identity possibly altered, so as to take into greater account the integrity and order of the system.¹⁵

In Goh's view, the south-east Asian states are trying to avoid an unstable multipolar world and being forced to choose between the United States and China.¹⁶ In doing so, they seek to include all the major powers in the region's issues and affairs, with the goal of creating 'overlapping spheres of influence in the region that are competitive but positive-sum' and that avoid violent competition between major powers.¹⁷ Furthermore, south-east Asian states hope that through drawing Great Powers into participation in regional organizations they will be able to create 'greater strategic interdependence' among them, making direct conflict

¹⁴ Goh, 'Great powers and hierarchical order', p. 118.

¹⁵ Goh, 'Great powers and hierarchical order', p. 121. Robert A. Pape argues that weaker states unable to balance through military power may instead engage in 'soft balancing'. We argue that omni-enmeshment explains Kazakhstan's foreign policy better than 'soft balancing' because the country has a complex foreign policy aimed at multiple Great Powers, not just the one discussed in the 'soft balancing' literature. 'Soft balancing' is also an inadequate explanation because Kazakhstan's multivectorism involves more than balancing behaviour, including elements of bandwagoning. See Goh, 'Great powers and hierarchical order', p. 132; Robert A. Pape, 'Soft balancing against the United States', *International Security* 30: 1, 2005, pp. 7–45.

¹⁶ Kai He and Mingjiang Li, 'Understanding the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific: US–China strategic competition, regional actors and beyond', *International Affairs* 96: 1, Jan. 2020, pp. 1–8; Rajesh Rajagopalan, 'Evasive balancing: India's unviable Indo-Pacific strategy', *International Affairs* 96: 1, Jan. 2020, pp. 75–94; Brendan Taylor, 'Is Australia's Indo-Pacific strategy an illusion?', *International Affairs* 96: 1, Jan. 2020, pp. 95–110.

¹⁷ Goh, 'Great powers and hierarchical order', p. 129.

too costly.¹⁸ This strategy involves indirect military balancing against China, by seeking continued US military dominance in the region, and regional balancing that involves multiple players and non-military forms of influence, such as in the political and economic arenas. As Goh argues,

the notion of complex balancing in south-east Asia takes into account nonmilitary tools, and it is not pegged rigorously to the goal of redressing the balance of military capability. Rather, it is aimed at increasing the number of major states that have a stake in regional security.¹⁹

In pursuit of this goal, states may use a variety of mechanisms to gain influence, such as membership in intergovernmental and regional organizations, declarations of national sovereignty, foreign investment deals and diplomatic manoeuvres.

Observation of central Asian states' behaviour and their investment of political resources suggests that omni-enmeshment and complex balancing offer better explanations of Kazakhstan's foreign policy than realism. In the following sections we will identify the ways in which Kazakhstan has sought to create a web of political and economic relationships with the Great Powers engaged in the region. Rather than engaging in direct balancing or bandwagoning behaviour, which would constrain the actions of the state in a clientelistic manner, Kazakhstan has made a consistent and multifaceted effort to form ties with all the Great Powers. This policy involves more than Kazakhstan trying to 'hedge its bets' and avoid choosing alliances.²⁰ Instead, Kazakhstan has a strategic preference for 'enmeshing' Great Powers in complex exchanges and positive-sum relations with the region through building regional institutions and pursuing multilateral approaches.²¹ Moreover, these ties with the Great Powers are not clientelistic in nature. Kazakhstan uses its valuable natural resources to engage in successful complex balancing. We argue below that this strategy resembles the omni-enmeshment and complex balancing that Goh observes in south-east Asia, where states are facing a similar struggle to maintain autonomy in a region of Great Power competition. Indeed, we conclude that omni-enmeshment, and its more narrow articulation in Kazakhstan's multivectorism, may be an effective strategy for secondary states seeking to assure their autonomy in regions where they are caught between the interests of Great Powers.

Multivectorism as a form of omni-enmeshment

Kazakhstan has strong cultural, linguistic and historical ties with Russia, and since independence Moscow has been a valued strategic partner. However, Kazakh-

¹⁸ Goh, 'Great powers and hierarchical order', p. 123.

¹⁹ Goh, 'Great powers and hierarchical order', p. 139.

²⁰ Anar Valiyev and Narmina Mamishova argue that Azerbaijan's foreign policy towards Russia is one of 'hedging', moving back and forth between balancing against and bandwagoning with Russia; see Anar Valiyev and Narmina Mamishova, 'Azerbaijan's foreign policy towards Russia since independence: compromise achieved', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 19: 2, 2019, pp. 269–91. However, Kazakhstan's multivectorism is more than 'hedging', as the policy engages multiple Great Powers, not one, and has been relatively consistent over time, not fluctuating between balancing or bandwagoning with Russia.

²¹ Alexander Libman and Anastassia V. Obydenkova, 'Regional international organizations as a strategy of autocracy: the Eurasian Economic Union and Russian foreign policy', *International Affairs* 94: 5, Sept. 2018, pp. 1037–58.

stan also has an interest in preventing Russia from restoring a 'sphere of privileged interests', especially following the seizure of Crimea.²² Multivectorism, as a form of omni-enmeshment, involves several factors, including clear assertion and protection of state sovereignty to avoid becoming a client state of any of the Great Powers, but especially of Russia, given its historical role as a colonial power in the region. Indeed, while Kazakhstan is seeking to engage with the Great Powers, it is not trying to build a central Asian society similar to the EU. China has generally been seen as less of a threat to Kazakhstani sovereignty because it unwaveringly protects its own sovereignty (including that claimed over Taiwan) and the sovereignty of other states. Since the 1950s, China has engaged with African and Asian countries according to its five principles of peaceful coexistence, which emphasize respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference in a country's internal affairs.²³ Kazakhstan has used a diverse range of mechanisms to maintain the delicate balance entailed in protecting state sovereignty while ensuring positive relations with Russia, China, the United States and the EU. While Russia and China border on Kazakhstan and are necessarily of most immediate concern, the influence of the EU and US is significant and requires management, particularly in the areas of security and trade. An important mechanism in this process has been the development of regional institutions and multilateral approaches to regional problems in such a way as to draw the Great Powers into sustained, regularized positive-sum engagement with central Asia.

Assertions of sovereignty and independence

The Kazakhstani government advocates a distinct view of its identity as a Eurasian state that asserts its sovereignty and identifies a historic narrative in which its identity is not dependent on Russia. Through this 'Eurasian' identity, embraced in the early post-Soviet years, Kazakhstan was able to recognize both its proximity to, and its separation from, Russia. Over time, the Kazakhstani and Russian understandings of what it means to be Eurasian diverged. The Russian definition emphasizes the history of the Mongol empire in the centre of Eurasia and identifies Russia as the successor power. This narrative highlights the role of the Soviet Union in 'creating' Kazakhstan through the Kazakh Socialist Republic in the Soviet era.²⁴ Kazakhstan, meanwhile, identifies a different foundational political entity in the Turkic khaganate preceding both the Mongol empire and the Soviet Union. In this view, the Kazakh identity is both a separate civilization and a different ethnicity within Eurasia. In other words, while the Russians see Eurasia as an area with a monolithic history dominated by the Soviet era, which constructed the central Asian states, the Kazakhstani perspective is that of a Eurasia encompassing both Russian and Kazakh civilizations as 'two different

²² *Mnogovektornaya diplomatiya na praktike* [Multivector diplomacy in practice].

²³ Yunling Zhang, 'China and its neighbourhood: transformation, challenges and grand strategy', *International Affairs* 92: 4, July 2016, p. 838.

²⁴ Dmitry Shlapentokh, 'Kazakh and Russian history and its geopolitical implications', *Insight Turkey* 18: 4, Fall 2016, pp. 143–63.

cultural and geopolitical universes'.²⁵ These were united for a brief time, but had separate histories before and after the Soviet era. Kazakhstan has been willing to defend this idea of a separate history both within and outside its borders. In 2015, officials arrested Kazakhs who claimed that 'Russian and Kazakh history are closely integrated and that therefore Kazakhstan should be geopolitically and economically close to Russia'.²⁶ The Kazakh understanding of Eurasia also has an ideological component that separates it from the Russian understanding of the term. Eurasianism within Kazakhstan incorporates the notion of cultural ties with Europe and the West, linkages that promote values of multi-ethnicity, tolerance and religious understanding.²⁷ This ideological understanding of Eurasianism supports both multivectorism and an inclusive understanding of Kazakh national identity. That said, multivectorism is a foreign policy strategy, not an ideology.

The Kazakhstani government invests in promoting this narrative. In 2015, it sponsored a massive celebration of Kazakhstan's 550-year history as a nation, marking its origin with the Kazakh khanate founded by two khans, Kerei and Zhanibek, in 1465.²⁸ According to the government, 'the Kazakh khanate' became known in western Europe around 1562. It appeared as 'Cassackia' on a map drawn by Anthony Jenkinson, an English diplomat and traveller, to fill in the area between 'Tashkent' and 'Siberia'.²⁹ What makes this anniversary of interest is that prior to 2015 it had never been commemorated. Indeed, on the English-language website of the Kazakhstani Embassy in Washington DC, a justification for the celebration notes the importance of the occasion in uniting the multi-ethnic populations of Kazakhstan and teaching younger generations about their history.³⁰ Consistent with Eric Hobsbawm's idea of the use of ancient materials for novel purposes, this 'invention of tradition' promoted social cohesion—a clearly articulated goal of the government—and legitimized institutions and authority.³¹ While there is no doubt that remembrance and a territorial identity are important in terms of developing an identity for a nation,³² in this case the intended audience was as much external as internal, especially given that this celebration came only a year after the Russian annexation of Crimea. While we do not give credence to the notion that northern Kazakhstan will be the next Crimea,³³ there are other ways in which Russia pushes the boundaries of Kazakhstani sovereignty. For example, in 2014, at a summit in Shanghai, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that 'the

²⁵ Shlapentokh, 'Kazakh and Russian history', p. 147.

²⁶ Shlapentokh, 'Kazakh and Russian history', p. 143.

²⁷ Golam Mostafa, 'The concept of "Eurasia": Kazakhstan's Eurasia policy and its implications', *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 4: 2, 2013, pp. 160–70.

²⁸ 'Kazahskoi gosudarstvennosti v 2015 gody ispolnitsya 550 let—Nazarbayev' [Kazakh statehood in 2015 will mark 550 years—Nazarbayev], *Tengri News*, 22 Oct. 2014, https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/kazahskoy-gosudarstvennosti-2015-godu-ispolnitsya-550-let-263876/.

²⁹ *Why celebrate 550 years of Kazakh statehood?* (Washington DC: Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, n.d.), <https://kazakhembus.com/about-kazakhstan/history/khanates>.

³⁰ *Why celebrate 550 years of Kazakh statehood?*

³¹ Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: inventing tradition', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds, *The invention of tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 9.

³² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, extended edn (New York: Verso, 1991; first publ. 1983), pp. 163–86.

³³ See n. 43 below.

Kazakhs never had any statehood',³⁴ a comment which led President Nazarbayev to threaten to leave the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

The opening of a new National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan in July 2014 was another assertion of national identity separate from Russia. The Hall of History in the museum emphasizes a long, independent narrative of Kazakhstan, focusing on its history from the fifteenth century to the twentieth. The exposition reveals the main stages of the formation and development of the Kazakh khanate, and the national liberation wars and uprisings of the Kazakh people. The museum is a reflection of the holistic historical image of Kazakhstan as the cradle of the great steppe civilization.³⁵

In April 2017, President Nazarbayev introduced a cultural programme entitled 'Looking into the future: modernization of public consciousness',³⁶ which was later transformed into a 'Programme on modernization of national identity' (*rukhani zhangyru*, which may also be translated as 'spiritual revival'), to initiate the cultural and spiritual awakening of Kazakhstan, helping the nation to connect with its roots and, at the same time, to adapt and succeed in the modern world.³⁷ The programme aimed to introduce the wider world to the cultural richness of modern Kazakhstan through tours of the country's prestigious opera and ballet companies, and promotion of the work of Kazakh musicians, writers, film-makers and artists.³⁸

Another interesting facet of the Kazakhstani effort both to articulate its independence from Russia and strengthen its modern image is the 2017 decision to shift from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet. Kazakhstani officials believe that adoption of the new alphabet will allow the country to integrate into the global economy faster, boost national identity, make it easier to communicate with the outside world, and help children learn English faster. According to President Nazarbayev, the transition to the Latin alphabet meets an internal need for the development and modernization of the Kazakh language.³⁹

This is not, however, the first change of alphabets in Kazakhstan, nor is it the only one to be influenced by external political events. The Latin alphabet was used

³⁴ Farangis Najibullah, 'Putin downplays Kazakh independence, sparks angry reaction', RFE/RL, 3 Sept. 2014, www.rferl.org/content/kazakhstan-putin-history-reactionnation/26565141.html.

³⁵ See the YouTube video presenting the new National Museum of RK, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urmSN1gZT28>; also materials regarding museums in Kazakhstan on the page of the Kazakhstan Embassy in Russia, https://www.kazembassy.ru/rus/interesnoe_o_kazaxstane/stati/?cid=0&rid=169.

³⁶ Nursultan Nazarbayev, 'Vzglyad v budushee: modernizatsiya obshestvennogo soznaniya' [A look into the future: the modernization of public consciousness], president's article delivered at press conference, 12 April 2017, http://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/akorda_news/press_conferences/statiya-glavy-gosudarstva-vzglyad-v-budushchee-modernizaciya-obschestvennogo-soznaniya.

³⁷ *Rukhani zhangyru* comprises a range of different projects, such as *Aul—el besigi* (to improve infrastructure and quality of life of rural residents), *Oz zheringdi tanip bil'* (to expand and deepen the knowledge of Kazakh history, literature and traditions), *Sacred geography of Kazakhstan* (to identify and protect the cultural and geographical belt of shrines in Kazakhstan), *100 new faces of Kazakhstan* (to identify true heroes of modern society and use them as role models) and so on. See Meirambek Baigarin, 'Programma Rukhani zhangyru—resultati i novije proekti' [Ruhani zhangyru program—results and new projects], *Kazinform*, 26 Oct. 2018, https://www.inform.kz/ru/programma-ruhani-zhangyru-rezul-taty-i-novye-proekty_a3437371.

³⁸ Todd Wood, 'Kazakhstan offers spiritual revival—not "multiculturalism"', *Washington Times*, 25 July 2018, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/jul/25/kazakhstan-moves-toward-spiritual-revival-instead-/>.

³⁹ Yekaterina Suslova, 'Kuda yazik dovedet: pochemy Kazhstan pereshel na latinitzy' [Where the language will lead: why Kazakhstan switched to Latin alphabet], *Gazeta.ru*, 21 Feb. 2018, https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2018/02/20_a_11657323.shtml.

between 1929 and 1940, when it was known as the Yanalif or New Turkic alphabet.⁴⁰ In 1940, a growing fear of pan-Turkic sentiment among Kazakhs, Uzbeks and other Turkic peoples in the Soviet Union influenced Moscow's decision to adopt the Cyrillic script for Kazakh and other Turkic languages in order to promote Russian culture and prevent the development of a shared non-Soviet common identity. Thus some political experts, such as Dossym Satpayev, see Cyrillic as part of Russia's colonial project, and thus the recent switch to the Latin alphabet can be seen as anti-imperial and anti-Russian.⁴¹

Kazakhstan also asserts its sovereignty through its economic relationships. It was one of the founding members of the Russian-led EEU, launched in 2014. Kazakhstan joined the EEU because of its economic and political ties with Russia, notably a 7,000-kilometre shared border and robust bilateral trade.⁴² In addition, the Russian minority in Kazakhstan makes up a larger percentage of the population than in any other post-Soviet state.⁴³ In the earlier years of his presidency, Nazarbayev had proposed a more expansive vision for a Eurasian union: for example, during a meeting in 1994 with the staff and students of M. V. Lomonosov Moscow State University he outlined a vision for a Eurasian union with a common citizenship, joint parliament, council of defence ministers and monetary union.⁴⁴ However, by 2014, and especially after Russia's seizure of Crimea, the Kazakhstani government became more cautious about the EEU project and supported a more limited idea of the grouping, rejecting Russia's plan to establish a monetary union.⁴⁵ The EEU founding treaty, adopted in 2014, was according to Vieira 'less comprehensive' than that originally proposed and more of an economic than a political union, reflecting the positions of both Belarus and Kazakhstan.⁴⁶ Marlene Laruelle argues that since the Russian annexation of Crimea

⁴⁰ 'Kazakhstan perehodit na latinskii alfavit' [Kazakhstan switches to the Latin alphabet], BBC News (Russian edn), 27 Oct. 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-41773674>.

⁴¹ Andrew Higgins, 'Kazakhstan cheers new alphabet, except for all those apostrophes', *New York Times*, 1 Jan. 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/15/world/asia/kazakhstan-alphabet-nursultan-nazarbayev.html>.

⁴² 'Kazakhstan trade at a glance: most recent values', *World Integrated Trade Solution*, 2017, <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountrySnapshot/en/KAZ>.

⁴³ As of 2019, ethnic Russians constituted 19% of the population of Kazakhstan: see Pavel Zlobin, 'Bolshe—ne luchshe. Chem grozit Kazahstany demograficheskii bum?' [More is not better. How demographic boom may threaten Kazakhstan?], online edition of *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 15 Oct. 2019, <https://www.kp.kz/daily/27043.3/4107445/>; also 'Etnicheskaya karta Kazahstana: Kazahov bolshe, Evropeizev men'she, tretii mononatsional'nii region' [Ethnic map of Kazakhstan: more Kazakhs, fewer Europeans, third mono-ethnic region], *Vlast*, 30 April 2019, <https://vlast.kz/obsshestvo/32977-etnicheskaa-karta-kazahstana-kazahov-bolse-evropejcev-mense-tretij-mononatsionalnyj-region.html>. Given its large Russian minority, there have been claims that northern Kazakhstan could be the next Crimea. However, Marlene Laruelle argues convincingly that Kazakhstan is not Ukraine and concerns about Russian irredentism in Kazakhstan are overblown. As she says, the Russian government has not supported any secessionist or nationalist claims by Russians in Kazakhstan; many Russian minorities in Kazakhstan are grateful for the economic stability in the country; and as a result of demographic shifts and immigration, the Russian population has been shrinking. For more information on this topic, see Marlene Laruelle, 'Why no Kazakh Novorossiia? Kazakhstan's Russian minority in a post-Crimea world', *Problems of Post-Communism* 65: 1, 2018, pp. 65–78.

⁴⁴ Nursultan Nazarbayev, *Strategiya vechnoi druzhbi: Kazahstan—Rossiya* [The strategy of eternal friendship: Kazakhstan—Russia] (Moscow: Tipografiya Novosti, 2000), pp. 380–87.

⁴⁵ Alena Vysotskaya Guedes Vieira, 'Eurasian integration: elite perspectives before and after the Ukraine crisis', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32: 6, 2016, p. 571.

⁴⁶ Vieira, 'Eurasian integration', p. 571.

the Kazakhstani government has resisted further integration within the EEU.⁴⁷ Kazakhstan refused to support increased duties on Ukrainian exports within the EEU or any negative economic measures against Ukraine after the 2014 war;⁴⁸ it also declined to join Russia in imposing retaliatory economic sanctions on the EU and recognized the Ukrainian government of Petro Poroshenko.⁴⁹ Even its strong political and economic ties with Russia were not sufficient to compel Kazakhstan's cooperation with Moscow within the EEU in any actions that supported the seizure of Crimea. Indeed, President Nazarbayev publicly stated that Kazakhstan would leave the EEU if membership threatened its independence.⁵⁰

Kazakhstan's resistance to Russian dominance and broader regional cooperation is also evident in other matters. On 15 March 2018, Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov proposed that Kazakhstan reconsider its visa-free regime for US citizens, saying that agreements of this type should be 'coordinated' with the EEU. In response, the Kazakhstani foreign ministry spokesman Anuar Zhainaqov defended Kazakhstan's right to independent action, saying that 'introducing or abolishing visa requirements for foreign citizens is the right of any sovereign country'.⁵¹ He then added that the '*EEU is not a political alliance but a group created to tackle economic issues ... When they outlined the agreement on the creation of the EEU, member states agreed that issues related to national sovereignty be excluded from the group's competence.*'⁵²

Kazakhstan has followed a similar strategy of asserting independence within the UN. Again, we can see this most clearly in relation to the Crimea situation. On 27 March 2014 the UN General Assembly passed a resolution stating the Crimea referendum on Russia's seizure of the peninsula was invalid. On this important vote, the Kazakhstani government abstained rather than vote in support of Russia.⁵³ During its two years on the UN Security Council (2017–2018), Kazakhstan chose not to vote with Russia 15 times; indeed, on most occasions when the UN Security Council failed to achieve a unanimous vote, Kazakhstan did not vote with Russia. Kazakhstan even abstained on a Russian resolution condemning US air strikes in Syria. In fact, Kazakhstan rarely voted with Russia on resolutions related to Syria, one of the most important foreign policy issues in the UN Security Council involving Moscow.

Kazakhstan has also expressed its independence from Russian interests by conducting regular joint military exercises with NATO, known as Steppe Eagle.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ Laruelle, 'Kazakhstan's dilemma', p. 399.

⁴⁸ Vieira, 'Eurasian integration', p. 573.

⁴⁹ Vieira, 'Eurasian integration', p. 572.

⁵⁰ Micha'el M. Tanchum, 'Kazakhstan's western rebalancing: the changing strategic contours of Eurasian connectivity', *Journal of Central Asian and Caucasian Studies* 10: 20, 2015, p. 2.

⁵¹ 'Astana rejects Lavrov's statement on visa-free travel to Kazakhstan for Americans', RFE/RL, Kazakh service, 16 March 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/astana-rejects-lavrov-statement-visa-free-travel-americans/29104597.html>.

⁵² 'Astana rejects Lavrov's statement on visa-free travel' (emphasis added).

⁵³ UN General Assembly, 'General Assembly adopts resolution calling upon states not to recognize changes in status of Crimea region', press release, 27 March 2014, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2014/ga11493.doc.htm>.

⁵⁴ As the United States is a leading member of NATO, Kazakhstan's relationship with NATO is also in part a reflection of its relationship with the United States.

Kazakhstan participates in NATO's Partnership for Peace programme and in 2006 signed an individual partnership action plan with the alliance.⁵⁵ The Kazakhstani government has reduced its dependence on Russian weapons by increasing its interoperability with NATO and purchasing more weapons and military equipment from Europe.⁵⁶ Given Russia's animosity towards NATO, the dominant role of the US within the alliance, and Russian anger at the expansion of NATO membership in central Europe and the Baltic states, it is remarkable that Kazakhstan is able to actively work with NATO without repercussions on its relationship with Russia. Kazakhstan's actions within the EEU and the UN, along with its positive relations with NATO, all demonstrate its success in establishing a foreign policy independent of Russia. Kazakhstan has been able to maintain a close, positive relationship with Russia while making foreign policy choices counter to Russian interests.

Despite growing important economic ties with China, the Kazakhstani government has also repeatedly asserted its independence in relation to Beijing. As of 2018, 'China is Kazakhstan's second-largest trading partner' and its largest source of commercial loans.⁵⁷ By 2017, China had invested almost US\$30 billion in the Kazakhstani oil industry and its mining, transportation and agricultural sectors.⁵⁸ As part of the 'Belt and Road Initiative', China has invested in infrastructure developments in Kazakhstan, including railway improvements and an expressway running from the Caspian Sea to the border between the two countries. China is clearly an important economic partner to Kazakhstan, which has used this economic relationship strategically to reduce its economic dependence on Russia. That said, the Kazakhstani government continues to restrict Chinese ownership of land and does not offer tourist visas to Chinese citizens.⁵⁹ Another example of recent pushback against Chinese influence is the arrest in 2019 of a senior government adviser on charges of spying for China. The decision to leak information about the arrest to the Kazakhstani media can be viewed as a possible warning to Beijing.⁶⁰

We see similar behaviour with regard to the EU and the United States, even though the location of these Great Powers means that they do not pose the same threat as Russia and China. The EU is the largest foreign investor in Kazakhstan and its largest trading partner,⁶¹ and is viewed by the Kazakhstani government as a major partner in its multivector foreign policy.⁶² Kazakhstan's primary export to Europe is energy resources, and it has an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation

⁵⁵ Tanchum, 'Kazakhstan's western rebalancing', p. 10.

⁵⁶ Tanchum, 'Kazakhstan's western rebalancing', p. 12.

⁵⁷ Xing Xiaojing, 'Belt and Road boom', *Global Times*, 26 Sept. 2018. See supporting statistical data at <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/KAZ/Year/2018/TradeFlow/EXPIMP/Partner/by-country> and <https://globalede.msu.edu/countries/kazakhstan/tradestats>.

⁵⁸ Azhar Serikkaliyeva, Aidarbek Amirbek and Eftal Sukru Batmaz, 'Chinese institutional diplomacy toward Kazakhstan: the SCO and the new Silk Road initiative', *Insight Turkey* 20: 4, 2018, p. 139.

⁵⁹ Xiaojing, 'Belt and Road boom'.

⁶⁰ Thomas Grove, 'A spy case exposes China's power play in central Asia', *Wall Street Journal*, 10 July 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-spy-case-exposes-chinas-power-play-in-central-asia-11562756782>.

⁶¹ European Commission, *Kazakhstan*, <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/kazakhstan/>.

⁶² Luca Anceschi, 'The tyranny of pragmatism: EU-Kazakhstani relations', *Europe-Asia Studies* 66: 1, 2014, p. 8.

Agreement with the EU. Although the United States is a less important trading partner (less than 5 per cent of Kazakhstani imports or exports are with the US), American energy companies are major investors in Kazakhstan's oil and gas sector.⁶³ Yet despite the significance of these commercial relationships, Kazakhstan has managed to avoid instituting some governance reforms sought by the EU and the United States. Although the Kazakhstani government has rhetorically supported anti-corruption measures and other reforms promoted by the EU and the United States, actual change has been limited.⁶⁴ For example, in 2007 the Kazakhstani foreign minister, Marat Tazhin, presented to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) a comprehensive plan to 'further Kazakhstan's democratic progress, known as the "Madrid Commitments"'.⁶⁵ However, the 2011 Kazakhstani presidential elections and every subsequent election have violated those commitments.⁶⁶ Despite these violations, the United States and the EU have maintained positive diplomatic and economic relations with Kazakhstan and have imposed no sanctions on the country for failing to develop democracy.⁶⁷ Furthermore, over time the Kazakhstani government has made things harder for foreign investors by repeatedly increasing the local content requirements for foreign companies and failing to comply with international arbitration rulings.⁶⁸ Therefore, even in the economic realm the Kazakhstani government has resisted pressure to bring about substantive domestic reforms that would bring it into line with EU and American policies.

Diverse mechanisms

Omni-enmeshment involves engaging with Great Powers in such a way as to integrate them into regional or international society through multiple and diverse interchanges with the goal of preventing Great Power conflict or domination of a region. Kazakhstan, through its multivector foreign policy, has used a variety of mechanisms to 'enmesh' Great Powers in its region in ways that are positive for its purposes. It is clear that Kazakhstan has felt its survival as a state to be under threat, and has engaged in regional and international cooperation to protect its sovereignty and demonstrate its value as an independent state to the broader international community. For example, at the opening of the International Congress of Industrialists and Engineers in 1993, Nazarbayev noted:

I have often been asked why I consistently campaigned for economic integration between the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States] members ever since the Commonwealth was created. I was certainly aware that a lot of the integration initiatives were somewhat

⁶³ 'Kazakhstan imports', *Trading Economics*, 2019, <https://tradingeconomics.com/kazakhstan/imports>.

⁶⁴ Rachel Vanderhill, Sandra F. Joireman and Roza Tulepbayeva, 'Do economic linkages through FDI lead to institutional change? Assessing outcomes in Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan', *Europe-Asia Studies* 71: 4, 2019, pp. 1–23.

⁶⁵ OSCE, *Kazakhstan and the so-called Madrid Commitments*, background documents, review conference, Warsaw, 30 Sept.–8 Oct 2010 (Vienna, 1 Oct. 2010).

⁶⁶ Anceschi, 'The tyranny of pragmatism', p. 16.

⁶⁷ Vanderhill et al., 'Do economic linkages through FDI lead to institutional change?'

⁶⁸ Vanderhill et al., 'Do economic linkages through FDI lead to institutional change?'

premature, but I consciously continued to put them forward ... I am firmly convinced that without effective integration not one of the ex-Soviet republics can achieve significant economic results.⁶⁹

In the same year, Nazarbayev used even stronger language to emphasize that state survival for Kazakhstan was dependent on its economic and regional ties:

I believe that the CIS is necessary in the interests of securing a normal life for all people, guaranteeing their social protection, preventing forced migration, creating the conditions for economic stabilization, and the realization of large-scale programmes of development.⁷⁰

At the same time as Nazarbayev defended regional economic ties, he balanced this emphasis with a strong defence of sovereignty:

Kazakhstan consistently defends the idea of economic integration. However, there mustn't be any encroachment on our sovereignty or interference in each other's internal affairs, and the right of each people to determine the social system in its own country must be respected.⁷¹

We believe that Kazakhstan's concern with state survival has led to two strategies of omni-enmeshment within its multivector foreign policy. The first is evident in the assertions of sovereignty and independence discussed above with regard to Kazakhstan's relations to the Great Powers. The second is expressed in multilateral diplomacy at the regional and international levels. In this section we will explore the second of these strategies.

Multilateral diplomatic efforts might be seen as reflecting Kazakhstan's desire to be a good international citizen, but it is clear that it has more invested in its efforts than good citizenship alone. As we will demonstrate below, Kazakhstan views its diplomatic efforts as a means to develop a web of sustained relationships with regional states and Great Powers and thereby to prevent regional conflict that would threaten its sovereignty and security. Thus these diplomatic 'enmeshments' both assert Kazakhstani sovereignty and seek to build multiple, interconnected ties with other states. In considering these engagements, it is worth reflecting on how unusual it is to see this sort of diplomatic activity from a central Asian state. Enmeshment as we conceive of it here is not a type of central Asian supranational project, but a Kazakhstani foreign policy strategy based on the preservation of sovereignty and the autonomy of the state.

Regionally, Kazakhstan has played an important role in organizations concerned with the political, economic and cultural spheres. For example, it has strengthened its relationship with Europe through its membership of the OSCE, and actively lobbied the United States and European members to become the first central Asian and former Soviet state to obtain the rotating chair of the organization in 2010. The Kazakhstani government saw its chairing of the OSCE as a sign of international legitimacy and a successful example of its multivector approach

⁶⁹ Nazarbayev, *Strategiya vechnoi druzhbi* [The strategy of eternal friendship], pp. 371–4.

⁷⁰ Nazarbayev, *Strategiya vechnoi druzhbi* [The strategy of eternal friendship], pp. 363–5.

⁷¹ Nazarbayev, *Strategiya vechnoi druzhbi* [The strategy of eternal friendship], pp. 387–9.

to foreign policy. Responding to the OSCE's announcement of the appointment, the Kazakhstani foreign minister stated that

since the first days of independence, Kazakhstan has made a conscious choice in favour of balanced approaches in foreign policy, and the strategy of multilateral partnership became its core . . . Kazakhstan has recommended itself as a supporter of active participation in resolving the problems of international security.⁷²

While chairing the OSCE, Kazakhstan hosted the first OSCE summit in eleven years and oversaw the adoption of the Astana Commemorative Declaration, which restated support for OSCE principles.⁷³ Kazakhstan's continued valuable role in the OSCE was recently noted by the 2019 OSCE chairperson-in-office Miroslav Lajčák, who stated that 'thanks to its balanced and pragmatic domestic and foreign policy, Kazakhstan is a reliable and trustworthy partner of the organization'.⁷⁴

Kazakhstan also values its membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), of which it was one of the six founding members. In 2006, Nazarbayev stated that 'Kazakhstan attaches huge significance to SCO and regards its interaction with it as one of the priority trends in its foreign policy'.⁷⁵ Kazakhstan has sought to play a leadership role in the SCO, which it chaired in 2011; it has also used the organization to support regional efforts to combat terrorism and, through the shared threat of terrorism, further build its relations with China: 'Beijing appreciates Astana's understanding and tacit support regarding the antigovernment activities of some Uyghur groups in Xinjiang. This commonality of understanding is reflected in their declared goal of combating the "three evils"—terrorism, extremism, and separatism.'⁷⁶ This 'commonality of understanding' is at least partially motivated by the fact that Kazakhstan also has a Uighur minority and concerns about Muslim militancy.⁷⁷ Robert N. McDermott argues that Kazakhstan uses the SCO to help it avoid having to choose between Russia and China.⁷⁸ Nazarbayev himself stated that the 'SCO was designed to eliminate the possibility of the transition of existing and actualized border problems with China into a real military threat' to Kazakhstan.⁷⁹ Furthermore, in the event of a crisis in central Asia, the SCO provides an avenue through which Kazakhstan could have a voice in the Chinese or Russian response, and might enable it to prevent either state from acting unilaterally.⁸⁰ Kazakhstan's approach to the SCO is a form of

⁷² 'Kazakh OSCE presidency testament to democracy building', BBC Worldwide Monitoring, 1 Dec. 2007.

⁷³ OSCE, 'Astana Declaration adopted at OSCE summit charts way forward', press release, 2 Dec. 2010, <https://www.osce.org/cio/74236>.

⁷⁴ 'Kazakhstan i OBSE sovmestniye usiliya dlya obespecheniya global'noi bezopasnosti' [Kazakhstan and OSCE: joint efforts to ensure global security], press release of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, 8 April 2019, <http://www.mfa.kz/ru/content-view/kazakhstan-i-obse-sovmestnye-usilia-dla-obespechenia-globalnoj-bezopasnosti>.

⁷⁵ 'Nazarbayev says SCO proves itself as powerful and promising organization', Interfax, 14 June 2006.

⁷⁶ Rouben Azizian and Elnara Bainazarova, 'Eurasian response to China's rise: Russia and Kazakhstan in search of optimal China policy', *Asian Politics and Policy* 4: 3, 2012, p. 388.

⁷⁷ Marcel De Haas, 'Kazakhstan's security policy: steady as she goes?', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 28: 4, 2015, p. 631.

⁷⁸ Roger N. McDermott, 'The Shanghai Cooperation Organization's impact on central Asian security: a view from Kazakhstan', *Problems of Post-Communism* 59: 4, July–Aug. 2012, pp. 56–65.

⁷⁹ Nursultan Nazarbayev, *Kriticheskoye desyatiletie* [Critical decade] (Almaty: Atamyra, 2003), p. 197.

⁸⁰ McDermott, 'The Shanghai Cooperation Organization's impact on central Asian security', p. 64.

‘soft balancing’, which avoids direct confrontation with a Great Power and instead seeks to use international institutions to restrain its actions.⁸¹

Kazakhstan further seeks to manage regional relations through its membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a collective defence organization founded in 2002. Unlike the SCO, it includes only post-Soviet states as members and focuses on security issues; Russia has by far the largest military capabilities of these states, making it the dominant actor in the CSTO. Moscow sees the CSTO as a way to legitimize Russia’s military presence in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and also as a way to counterbalance NATO and US military activities in the post-Soviet region.⁸² Therefore, Kazakhstan’s active membership in both the SCO and the CSTO may reflect efforts to ‘enmesh’ both China and Russia in regional institutions, and to use those institutions to help increase interdependence among Great Powers and reduce conflict. Kazakhstan’s consistent commitment to regional organizations stands in marked contrast to other central Asian states’ approaches to foreign policy, especially those of Turkmenistan, which has not joined any regional organization, and Uzbekistan, which pulled out of the CSTO in 2012.

Internationally, Kazakhstan is known for the renunciation of its nuclear arsenal, which it inherited after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This step earned Kazakhstan the status of a ‘global advocate of arms control and nuclear non-proliferation’, and the UN General Assembly has recognized 29 August, the day when ‘Kazakhstan shut down the Semipalatinsk testing ground, as the official International Day against Nuclear Tests’.⁸³ Other proposals made and actions taken by Kazakhstan related to nuclear non-proliferation make it a leader in nuclear disarmament.⁸⁴ In his recent address during a meeting of the UN General Assembly, President Tokayev reaffirmed the country’s commitment to eliminating nuclear weapons from the world and offered to host a new regional UN centre for sustainable development goals in Almaty.⁸⁵

Another example of the country’s contribution to peace and security was its diplomatic role in hosting peace talks on the Syrian conflict. In 2015, Kazakhstan began the Astana Process, providing an international forum for talks attended by countries including Iran, Russia and Turkey in addition to the Syrian government

⁸¹ Christopher Layne, ‘America’s Middle East grand strategy after Iraq: the moment for offshore balancing has arrived’, *Review of International Studies* 35: 1, 2009, p. 9.

⁸² B. Zh. Somzhurek, A. M. Yessengaliyeva, Zh. M. Medeubayeva and B. K. Makangali, ‘Central Asia and regional security’, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 51: 2, 2018, p. 168.

⁸³ Erzhan Kazykhanov, ‘Kazakhstan: building a nuclear-safe world’, *American Ambassadors Review*, Fall 2017, <https://www.americanambassadors.org/publications/ambassadors-review/fall-2017/kazakhstan-building-a-nuclear-safe-world>.

⁸⁴ Kazakhstan played a leading role in the creation of the central Asian nuclear weapons-free zone, established on its territory a reserve bank for low-enriched uranium under the auspices of the IAEA, showcased its mediation efforts in resolving the Iranian nuclear issue and spearheaded the Universal Declaration on a Nuclear-Weapons-Free World at the UN General Assembly. See Gultai Hasenova, ‘Proekt ATOM: 27 let bez yadernogo orujiya’ [ATOM project: 27 years without nuclear weapons], *Strategy2050*, 29 Aug. 2018, <https://strategy2050.kz/ru/news/51895/>; UN Secretary General’s message to conference on ‘Building a nuclear-free world’, 28 Aug. 2016, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2016-08-28/secretary-generals-message-building-nuclear-free-world-conference>.

⁸⁵ ‘Kazakh President affirms support for multilateralism in “a world of disquiet” during first address to UNGA’, *Astana Times*, 7 Oct. 2019, <https://astanatimes.com/2019/10/kazakh-president-affirms-support-for-multilateralism-in-a-world-of-disquiet-during-first-address-to-unga/>.

and opposition. Nazarbayev proudly emphasized this initiative in his 2018 annual address to the nation: ‘The Astana Process on Syria is nearly the only effective working format of talks on a peaceful settlement and recovery of this country from the crisis!’⁸⁶ Though the Kazakhstani government is not a direct participant in the talks,⁸⁷ its role as host branded the negotiations with the former name of the capital city and raised its profile as an international actor.

These regional and international diplomatic efforts highlight Kazakhstan’s ability to act within the region and across the world to lead, convene and participate in diplomacy on a par with the Great Powers and in ways that draw them into a web of political and economic relationships—omni-enmeshment. There are, indeed, few states at a comparable level of development and size that play such a significant role in regional and international organizations. We argue that these efforts developed out of an initial need for state survival and have proved highly effective over time. In the wake of the seizure of Crimea, state survival has once again been an issue for Kazakhstan, and one that significantly influences its relations with Russia. The foreign policy strategy of multivectorism has ensured state survival via the assertion of a clear state identity and the pursuit of a complex set of relationships with both regional powers and Great Powers. As Raikhan Kaliyeva argues, a multivector foreign policy has enabled Kazakhstan to address the challenge of survival with dignity and to initiate a number of ambitious projects, such as launching a campaign on its entry into the top 50 most competitive countries in the world.⁸⁸ In the next section we provide an example of the way in which Kazakhstan has been able to use its relationships with Great Powers to engage in complex balancing for its own benefit.

Pipeline politics: an example of complex balancing

Along with pursuing strategies to ‘enmesh’ Great Powers in regional and international order, Kazakhstan has also adopted complex balancing. As Goh explains, complex balancing is not focused on military alliances or balancing coercive power but rather uses other means, such as economic agreements, to increase the number of Great Powers that have a stake in regional security. Kazakhstan’s policy of seeking investment and engagement in its energy industry from all Great Powers is an example of complex balancing.

At the time of independence, Kazakhstan’s pipelines all flowed towards Russia. Initially this made Kazakhstan dependent on Russian pipelines in order to access foreign markets. This was a problem especially for natural gas, as the Russian company Gazprom had a near monopoly over the pipelines, giving it the ability to control prices and reducing Kazakhstan’s revenues. However, since then Kazakh-

⁸⁶ President Nursultan Nazarbayev’s annual address to the nation, 5 Oct. 2018, http://www.akorda.kz/en/addresses/addresses_of_president/state-of-the-nation-address-of-president-of-the-republic-of-kazakhstan-nursultan-nazarbayev-october-5-2018.

⁸⁷ ‘Astana process: Kazakhstan will not be involved in talks—Vasilenko’, *Kazinform*, 23 Jan. 2017, https://www.inform.kz/en/astana-process-kazakhstan-will-not-be-involved-in-talks-vasilenko_a2991731.

⁸⁸ Kaliyeva, ‘Kazakhstan v global’nom mire’ [Kazakhstan in the global world], p. 186.

stan has been able to use China's strong desire to secure energy supplies to reduce Russian leverage over its vital energy exports.⁸⁹ The Kazakhstan–China pipeline, opened in 2005, brings oil from Kazakhstan's deposits in the Caspian Sea directly to China, while the pipeline between central Asia and China, inaugurated in 2009, carries natural gas from Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to China. The combination of these two pipelines provided access to foreign markets that bypassed Russia, granting Kazakhstan greater autonomy and enabling it to balance economically against Moscow.⁹⁰ The planned development of the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline (TCGP) could give Kazakhstan access to the European market via Azerbaijan and Turkey. Kazakhstan's international negotiations on the TCGP and the larger Southern Gas Corridor (an EU initiative to supply natural gas to Europe from the Caspian region) demonstrate its successful use of its valuable energy resources to gain concessions from different players. For years Nazarbayev was non-committal about whether or not Kazakhstan would participate in the TCGP, giving it leverage with both the EU and Russia. The EU, wanting to reduce its energy dependence on Russia, generally avoided exerting pressure on Kazakhstan about governance, democracy or human rights because it wanted access to Kazakhstani natural gas.⁹¹ In turn, Kazakhstan used the possibility of establishing the TCGP to gain concessions from Russia in relation to Gazprom and to move towards selling Kazakhstani natural gas to Europe.⁹² Omelicheva and Du argue that Kazakhstan follows a 'strategy of inclusion', which involves seeking foreign investment in its energy sector from Russian, Chinese, EU and US companies.⁹³ This inclusive strategy enables Kazakhstan to play off the various countries against one another and gain concessions from all of them, especially when they are weakened by other circumstances. Moreover, Kazakhstan has repeatedly managed to use its energy resources not only to gain such concessions, but also to ensure that Russia, China, the EU and the United States all have an interest in maintaining regional security. This strategy of complex balancing helps Kazakhstan to attract foreign investment for its essential energy industry and prevents any one Great Power from being economically dominant in the country.

Conclusion

Since the 1990s Kazakhstan has followed a foreign policy strategy of multivectorism. With this strategy, Kazakhstan has sought to build mutually beneficial relations with all the Great Powers engaged in central Asia—Russia, China, the EU and the United States. As seen from 2019, Kazakhstan had succeeded in maintaining its independence, attracting foreign investment and developing positive diplomatic relations with all the Great Powers. Although having an

⁸⁹ Cooley, *Great games, local rules*, p. 91.

⁹⁰ Cesar B. Martinez Alvarez, 'China–Kazakhstan energy relations between 1997 and 2012', *Journal of International Affairs* 69: 1, Fall–Winter 2015, p. 62.

⁹¹ Anceschi, 'The tyranny of pragmatism', p. 9.

⁹² Anceschi, 'The tyranny of pragmatism', p. 9.

⁹³ Mariya Y. Omelicheva and Ruoxi Du, 'Kazakhstan's multi-vectorism and Sino-Russian relations', *Insight Turkey* 20: 4, 2018, p. 102.

economy dependent on natural resources can be problematic, these resources have helped Kazakhstan to achieve foreign policy success, as it has been able to use access to natural resources to exert leverage in its relations with Russia, China and the EU. We may say, then, that Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy is effective in protecting the state's autonomy and achieving its goals.

Kazakhstan's multivectorism has important theoretical implications. As noted above, there has been a general lack of theorizing about the foreign policy strategies of secondary powers. Realism does not focus on secondary powers and underexplains their actions.⁹⁴ Also, Kazakhstan's strategic choices do not align with the predictions of balance of power theory, which argues that it should be engaged in forming alliances against the more powerful, geographically proximate and possibly aggressive Russia and the threat of a rising China. Instead, we see Kazakhstan maintaining strong, positive military and economic relations with Russia as well as developing important economic ties with China. Moreover, Kazakhstan follows a strategy of bandwagoning and balancing at the same time. In contrast, Goh's theory of omni-enmeshment and complex balancing, developed in the context of south-east Asia where states face similar challenges, offers a good explanation of Kazakhstan's multivector strategy. Kazakhstan has combined clear assertions of its sovereignty with deliberate efforts to 'enmesh' Russia, China and the EU in regional organizations to prevent Great Power conflict in central Asia. The celebration of the 550th anniversary of the Kazakh nation, independent voting in the UN and the refusal to support an expansive vision of the EEU are a few of the methods by which Kazakhstan has signalled its independence *vis-à-vis* Russia while at the same time maintaining Moscow as a valued strategic partner. Kazakhstan's active promotion of regional organizations, such as the SCO and CSTO, is evidence of its desire to use these groupings to manage Great Power relations in the region.

The most remarkable aspect of this strategy is that Kazakhstan has maintained positive relations with all the Great Powers. The ability of secondary states to act independently and not just be subject to the demands of Great Powers is especially evident with Kazakhstan's complex balancing around natural resources. Kazakhstan has been able to use the competing interests of Great Powers to its benefit, extracting concessions and avoiding economic dependence on any one market. Kazakhstan's natural resources, geographic size and relatively high level of economic wealth have enabled it to follow a path of omni-enmeshment and complex balancing more successfully than its poorer, weaker central Asian neighbours, especially Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which have been forced into more dependent relationships with Russia and China.⁹⁵ Cross-regional evidence from south-east Asia and Kazakhstan suggests that omni-enmeshment and complex balancing constitute a compelling theory of secondary states' foreign policy strategies. Indeed, they represent a strategic approach that should compel the attention

⁹⁴ Doug Lieb, 'The limits of neorealism: marginal states and international relations theory', *Harvard International Review* 26: 1, 2004, pp. 26–9.

⁹⁵ For example, Russian soldiers have been stationed in Tajikistan since the 1992–7 civil war and Kyrgyzstan, under Russian pressure, ended an American lease at the Manas military base and instead agreed to allow Russia to lease a military base in the country.

of any state that is not a Great Power, given that when Kazakhstan embarked on its multivector strategy it did not have its current level of resource wealth and economic development.

Kazakhstan, along with the rest of central Asia, is in a period of transition. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have their first new presidents since independence, a development which has contributed to closer, more positive relations between the two states. Moreover, the significant increase in China's economic and military power, along with its Belt and Road Initiative, is changing the balance of power in central Asia. Under these changing circumstances, will Kazakhstan continue its strategy of multivectorism? Will that approach to foreign policy remain effective? Early evidence suggests that the new Kazakhstani President, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, will sustain multivectorism.⁹⁶ In March 2020, Tokayev approved the new Foreign Policy Concept of Kazakhstan for 2020–2030, which is based on the principles of multivectorism, pragmatism and proactivity, aimed at developing friendly, equal and mutually beneficial relations with all states, and engaging in interstate associations and international organizations of practical interest for Kazakhstan.⁹⁷ Moreover, Tokayev is now being given credit for 'inventing' the concept of multivector foreign policy back in 1996.⁹⁸ Tokayev has already stated his support for more Kazakh-language education as part of a plan to reduce the use of Russian, a clear assertion of Kazakh independence in relation to Russia. With China now pursuing a more assertive foreign policy and having an increased interest in central Asia, we may see rising concerns within Kazakhstan about Chinese influence and power. A real test of Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy will come with the challenge of negotiating successfully with both a more aggressive Russia and a more assertive, powerful China.

⁹⁶ 'Mnogovektornaya strategiya budet ostavatsya prioritom—President Tokayev' [Multivector strategy will remain a priority], 2 April 2019, *Zakon.kz*, <https://www.zakon.kz/4964074-mnogovektornaya-strategiya-budet.html>; see also 'Tokayev vstretilsya s rukovoditelyami inostrannykh dipmissii' [Tokayev met with the heads of foreign diplomatic missions], press release by information agency *Khabar*, 26 Nov. 2019, <https://khabar.kz/ru/news/item/117483-k-tokaev-vstretilsya-s-rukovoditelyami-inostrannykh-dipmissij>; Assel Nazarbetova, 'Zaslugi Tokayeva pered stranoi kak diplomata neozenimi' [Tokayev's service to the country, as a diplomat, is invaluable], *KazISS* (online publication by Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies), 17 May 2019, <http://www.kisi.kz/index.php/ru/publikatsii/180-nazarbetova-asel-kozhakhmetovna/2700-zaslugi-tokaeva-pered-stranoj-kak-diplomata-neozenimi>.

⁹⁷ Decree of the President of Kazakhstan on the Foreign Policy Concept of Kazakhstan for 2020–2030, 6 March 2020, https://www.akorda.kz/ru/legal_acts/decrees/o-koncepcii-vneshnei-politiki-respubliki-kazahstan-na-2020-2030-gody; see also 'Kazahstan prodlit mnogovektornuyu vneshnyuyu politiku' [Kazakhstan to extend multivector foreign policy], *RIA Novosti*, 12 June 2019, <https://ria.ru/20190612/1555506307.html>.

⁹⁸ S. Frederick Starr, 'First glimpses of Tokayev's Kazakhstan: the listening state?', Atlantic Council, 17 Sept. 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/long-take/first-glimpses-of-tokayevs-kazakhstan/>.