BRIEFING PAPER
429
January 2026

The limits of Kazakhstan's foreign policy balancing

Domestic authoritarianism and linkages to Russia

Kristiina Silvan

FIIA
FINNISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

FIIA FINNISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

BRIEFING PAPER 429 January 2026

The limits of Kazakhstan's foreign policy balancing

Domestic authoritarianism and linkages to Russia

Summary

- Kazakhstan aspires to conduct a multi-vector foreign policy, but in practice, this approach is uneven: its relations with Russia are stronger than its partnerships with other actors.
- Astana's multi-vectorism is limited by Kazakhstan's economic dependency on Russia, Russia's post-imperial posturing towards Kazakhstan, and Kazakhstan's authoritarian mode of governance.
- Since Russia launched its full-scale war in Ukraine, Kazakhstan's economic interactions with Russia have increased further. Local businesses have capitalized on Kazakhstan's geoeconomic middle ground between Russia and the West, while Kazakhstani elites have continued to view Russia as a suitable partner, even in the most strategic sectors of the economy.
- The future of Kazakhstan's foreign policy balancing will depend on multiple domestic, regional, and international developments, many of which cannot currently be predicted with precision or fully integrated into the analysis. For this reason alone, the West will need to pay constant attention to this key Central Asian country and adopt a cautious political approach towards it.

Author

Kristiina Silvan
Postdoctoral Fellow
Russia, EU's Eastern Neighbourhood and Eurasia
Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Introduction

On 6 January 2022, 2,500 troops of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) entered Kazakhstan at the request of the country's president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. The intervention, framed as a "peacekeeping operation",[1] was in response to a domestic crisis in Kazakhstan. Tokayev's authoritarian regime was challenged on two fronts: average citizens were participating in mass protests initially triggered by a gas price hike, and the political elite was hesitant, to say the least, to consolidate its support for the president.

Although the CSTO troops were withdrawn from Kazakhstan only 13 days after their arrival and had played a rather symbolic role, patrolling strategic sites rather than suppressing protests, the intervention prompted a robust debate about the future of Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy. Some observers argued that there was no way for Tokayev to continue balancing between China, Russia, regional powers like Iran and Turkey, as well as the West. They believed that Tokayev's personal debt of gratitude to Russian President Vladimir Putin would be reflected in a policy shift towards closer alignment with Russia. Other analysts, however, pointed to the structural foundations of Kazakhstan's multi-vectorism and the political will of Kazakhstan's elite, Tokayev included, which ought to enable Astana to continue the previous policy.

The launch of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine less than two months after Kazakhstan's "bloody January" was arguably the first test of Kazakhstani multi-vectorism after the CSTO intervention. Kazakhstan responded to Russian aggression by adopting a neutral stance, which suggested that Tokayev's indebtedness was insufficient to bring Astana into full alignment with Moscow.

Instead, Kazakhstan's apparent distancing from Russia became the new focal point of debate. At the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2022, Tokayev publicly stated that Kazakhstan would not recognize Russia's annexation of Donetsk and Luhansk. At home, Kazakhstani authorities tacitly welcomed grassroots-level provision of humanitarian aid to Ukraine, while individuals publicly displaying symbols of Russian aggression were fined. When thousands of Russians crossed the border into Kazakhstan following Russia's announcement of mobilization in autumn 2022, Tokayev called on Kazakhstanis to provide care for people who had been "forced" to leave Russia.[2]

That being said, not everyone is convinced that Kazakhstan is indeed "distancing" itself from Russia. As critics have pointed out, Kazakhstan has become one of the key gateways through which sanctioned Western goods continue to reach the Russian market. They also point to Russia's continued influence in critical sectors of Kazakhstan's economy, especially energy infrastructure, as well as in the security sphere. In their assessment, these ties have

1 Serdyukov, Andrei (2022), quoted in "Russian-led forces begin withdrawing from Kazakhstan". *Euronews*, 13 January. https://www.euronews.com/2022/01/13/russian-led-forces-begin-withdrawing-from-kazakhstan.

2 Tokayev, Kassym-Jomart (2022), quoted in "Glava gosudarstva provel vstrechu s obshchestvennostyu Turkestanskoi oblasti" [Head of state meets with members of the public in the Turkestan region]. *Akorda.kz,* 27 September. https://akorda.kz/ru/glava-gosudarstva-provel-vstrechu-s-obshchestvennostyu-turkestanskoy-oblasti-2784832.

strengthened rather than weakened, partly due to decisions made by the Kazakhstani government since 2022.[3]

This Briefing Paper contributes to this ongoing – and at times exceedingly dichotomous – discussion of Kazakhstan's contemporary foreign policy by shifting the focus from events pertinent to foreign policy-making to the parameters of Kazakhstan's balancing act. It argues that Kazakhstani multi-vectorism is not a matter of "either – or" or "yes or no", but rather a question of degree and dynamism. Awareness of the current limits of Astana's multi-vectorism, and of how these limits may evolve over time, should be integrated into decision-making when seeking to deepen cooperation with Kazakhstan. The European Union and its member states, Finland included, have pursued such cooperation in recent years and intend to continue doing so in the near future.

Kazakhstan's multi-vectorism

The narrative of multi-vector foreign policy emerged in the Kazakhstani policy community in the early 1990s and has since then made its way into the vocabulary of various post-Soviet states. A country that practices multi-vector foreign policy is typically a small state or a medium power that seeks to maintain good relations with multiple global and regional powers without depending on any single one, thereby maximizing its autonomy and bargaining power. Multi-vectorism is, in essence, a foreign policy balancing act, but it is also a strategy of hedging that involves crafting partnerships with states that have conflictual relations with one another. This is why it has also been described as a form of omni-enmeshment, a strategy in which a small or secondary state establishes complex webs of political and economic cooperation with multiple great and regional powers.[4]

Although Kazakhstan's preference for multi-vectorism has been demonstrated consistently since the state's independence, the practice of this approach has been uneven. Russia has dominated from an early stage, not only due to the Soviet legacy but also because of the decisions made by Kazakhstan's elites, especially Nursultan Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan's autocratic first president, who only stepped down in 2019. Most importantly, Kazakhstan has not refused to join any of the institutions set up by Russia to preserve its influence in the post-Soviet space, and remains a member of the CSTO, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), as well as the frameworks of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

In the spirit of omni-enmeshment, Kazakhstan's leadership has likely envisioned its strong partnership with Russia as part of a win-win situation rather than a zero-sum game, in which the strength of each "vector" increases rather than decreases the room for independent decision-making in Astana. Indeed, in the trade sector, Russia's strong footprint is on a par with those of the West, China, and others, as shown in Figure 1. However, as the following section details, the broader structures of the Kazakhstani economy impose limits on Astana's multi-vector foreign policy.

Economic limits to Kazakhstan's multi-vectorism: Transit, trade, and investment with Russia

Kazakhstan's economy is endowed with considerable oil, gas, and mineral resources. Crude oil is the leading export commodity, accounting for up to 53% of Kazakhstan's export revenues in 2024.[5] Not only is Kazakhstan's national economy heavily dependent on oil exports, it is also dependent on a single export route, since over 80% of its crude oil is transported to global markets through a single pipeline, the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC), which runs through Russia's territory. While a considerable share of the energy infrastructure linking Kazakhstan to Russia is a legacy of the Soviet era, the CPC is not. It was

3 See e.g. Grantseva, Vera and Rakhimbek Abdrakhmanov (2025) "Kazakhstan After the Double Shock of 2022: Political, Economic and Military Consequences". *Russie.Eurasie.Visions, No. 140*, October 2025, IFRI. https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/2025-10/ifri_grantseva_abdrakhmanov_kazakhstan_2025_en.pdf.

4 Vanderhill, Rachel, Sandra F. Joireman, and Roza Tulepbayeva (2020) "Between the bear and the dragon: multi-vectorism in Kazakhstan as a model strategy for secondary powers". *International Affairs* 96 (4): 975–993.

5 "Foreign trade turnover of the Republic of Kazakhstan (January–December 2024)", Bureau of National Statistics, Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan. 17 February 2025. https://stat.gov.kz/en/industries/economy/foreign-market/publications/315588/.

Figure 1. Kazakhstan's top trading partners (2024)

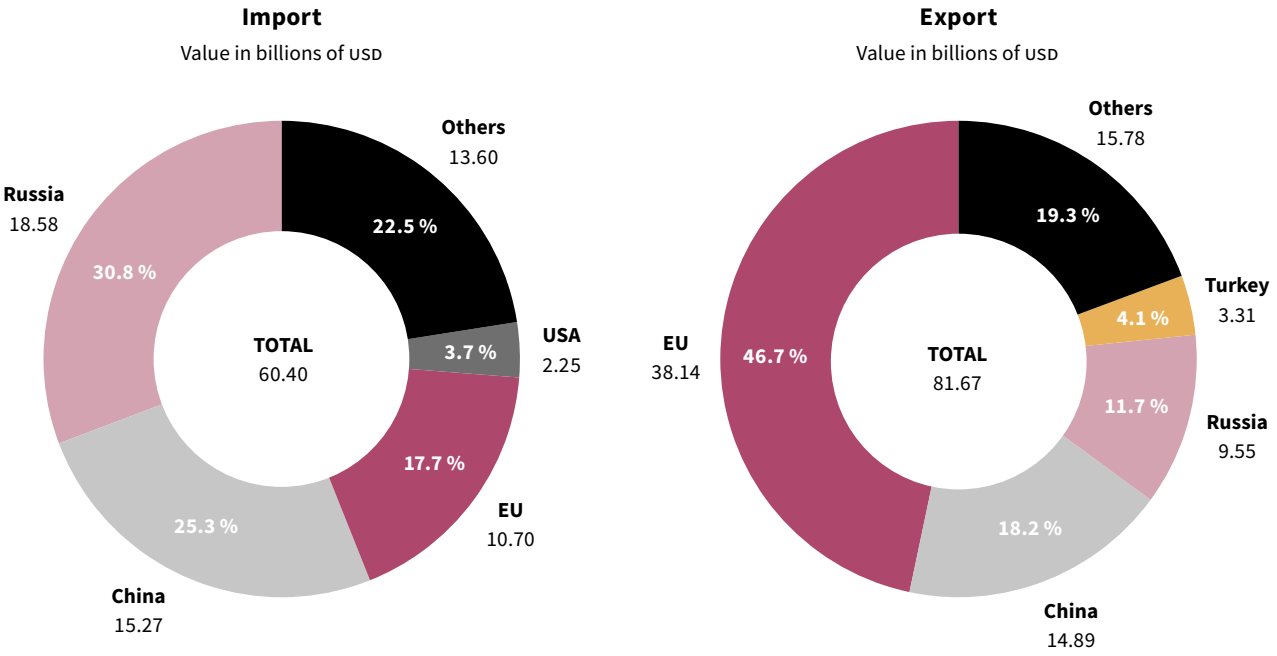

Figure 1. Kazakhstan's top trading partners in 2024.
Source: Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2025) "Main indicators of foreign trade of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2024", 25 July. https://stat.gov.kz/api/iblock/element/425975/file/en/.

constructed as an international joint project in the early 2000s but came to be operated in practice by Russia's state pipeline company Transneft in 2020.[6]

The number one destination for Kazakhstani oil is now Europe, following the EU's decision to stop purchasing crude oil from Russia after the start of its full-scale war in Ukraine. At the same time, the CPC has proved vulnerable to disruptions since 2022. In the first year of the war, Russian authorities suspended the CPC's operations, citing environmental concerns and allegedly seeking to demonstrate their leverage over both Kazakhstan and the EU, while in 2025, several Ukrainian drone strikes damaged CPC infrastructure in Russia. Kazakhstani authorities have sought to develop alternative oil export routes to the CPC, but there seems to be no solution to the transit dependency on Russia. In December 2025, Kazakhstan's Energy Minister, Yerlan Akkenzhenov, explicitly stated: "To date, there is no alternative to the CPC; we must admit this. Other routes cannot match the volume it transports".[7]

In addition to being dependent on Russia's territory for oil export transit, the Kazakhstani economy is also highly dependent on Russian capital. Trade with Russia has increased year on year since 2022. The amount of annual foreign direct investment from Russia has more than doubled since 2021,[8] and Russian companies now account for 40% of all foreign companies operating in the country,[9] tapping into a variety of privileges granted to them by Kazakhstan's membership in the EAEU. What is more, Russian state-owned and Kremlin-connected

6 Freedberg, Sydney P., Agustin Armendariz, Tanya Kozyreva and Thomas Rowley (2024) "Putin's pipeline: How the Kremlin outmaneuvered Western oil companies to wrest control of vast flows of Kazakhstan's crude". Caspian Cabals investigation, International Consortium of Investigative Journalists. https://www.icij.org/investigations/caspian-cabals/kazakhstan-caspian-oil-pipeline-russia-chevron/.

7 The Caspian Post (2025) "Kazakhstan Seeks Alternatives to Russian Oil Routes". 12 December. https://caspianpost.com/energy/kazakhstan-seeks-alternatives-to-russian-oil-routes.

8 National Bank of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2025) "Gross inflow of direct investment in Kazakhstan from foreign direct investors". 30 September. https://nationalbank.kz/file/download/115635.

9 Grantseva and Abdrakhmanov 2025, 21.

enterprises are present in strategic sectors of the economy. For example, Russia's state-owned atomic energy company Rosatom has increased its share of Kazakhstan's uranium reserves to 58% through joint ventures with Kazakhstani companies via its subsidiary Uranium One Group, and has secured a contract to lead the construction of Kazakhstan's first nuclear power plant.[10]

Kazakhstani officials have spoken consistently about the need to diversify the country's trade and transit routes, which currently constitute a major point of vulnerability for Kazakhstan's economy. Yet this stated objective coexists with continued reliance on Russia, which officials still view as a suitable partner even in the most strategic sectors of the economy. Moreover, it is not only officials in Astana that stand in the way of diversification away from Moscow. As a result of the sanctions imposed on the Russian economy since 2022, Kazakhstani businesses have been presented with a unique opportunity to profit from increased Russian capital inflows, expanded trade, and growing investment. In this sense, the readiness to deepen economic engagement with Russia can be interpreted as Kazakhstan's attempt to reap the maximum benefits from being one of the few remaining allies and thus an increasingly important partner for wartime Russia.

"As a result of the sanctions imposed on the Russian economy since 2022, Kazakhstani businesses have been presented with a unique opportunity to profit from increased Russian capital inflows, expanded trade, and growing investment."

Curiously enough, however, the deepening economic interactions with Russia have not translated into impressive economic growth figures. Instead, the Kazakhstani economy is showing signs of overheating. Given the intertwined nature of Kazakhstan's economy with that of Russia, echoes of Russia's macroeconomic problems are felt in Kazakhstan. Investors from countries other than Russia have started to withdraw from the country. Meanwhile, citizens are increasingly relying on loans, which contributes to rising prices alongside high inflation – a development that has not gone unnoticed by the general population.[11] According to a survey conducted in autumn 2024, inflation was the greatest source of anxiety among Kazakhstanis, with 89% of respondents expressing concern about it.[12]

Political limits to Kazakhstan's multivectorism: Authoritarian governance

A troubled economy is a source of unease for governments across the world, but because of Kazakhstan's authoritarian mode of governance, it is a particular cause for concern for Astana. Ever since the early 1990s, Kazakhstan's authoritarian elite has sought to legitimize its rule by delivering economic growth and prosperity. Paradoxically, this messaging has been self-defeating: it appears not only to have shaped public expectations but also to have turned socio-economic concerns into a legitimate object of protest. As a result, many protests against the Kazakhstani government in recent years have been framed primarily in terms of socio-economic grievances.[13]

Most recently, the tragic events of January 2022 started with spontaneous street protests triggered by a sudden rise in gas prices, a development resulting from Astana's decision to lift a government-enforced price cap. The initial economic grievances were quickly intertwined with political ones, such as the prevalence of corruption as a systemic feature of Kazakhstani authoritarianism. Although Tokayev managed to quell the protests with the use of force, their quick escalation and magnitude constituted a serious warning for him. As long as Tokayev remains committed to upholding authoritarianism in

10 Grantseva and Abdrakhmanov 2025, 22.

11 Kumenov, Almaz (2024) "Russia's economic woes starting to overflow into Kazakhstan". *Eurasianet*, 11 December. https://eurasianet.org/russias-economic-woes-starting-to-overflow-into-kazakhstan.

12 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2025)"Kazakhstan". *Security Radar 2025 Europe – Lost in Geopolitics*. https://peace.fes.de/security-radar-2025/country-profiles/kazakhstan.html.

13 Cornell, Svante (2022) "Learning from Kazakhstan's January Crisis". *The Central Asia – Caucasus Analyst*, 18 April. https://cacianalyst.org/resources/pdf/220418-FT-Kazakhstan.pdf.

Kazakhstan – as evidenced by the latest round of civil society repression[14] – he is likely to view protests as a threat to the stability of his regime and, thus, as events to be avoided.

As the previous section demonstrated, the deepening of interactions with Russia is pursued both because it is beneficial for Kazakhstan's economy and because decoupling from Russia is expected to be costly, at least in the short term. Given Kazakhstan's dependence on Russia for trade and transit, and the strong presence of Russian actors in the most strategic sectors of the Kazakhstani economy, Moscow could easily wreak havoc on Kazakhstan's economy if it chose to do so. This would have an immediate destabilizing effect on the authoritarian status quo of the Tokayev regime. Russia could theoretically intervene in support of Tokayev's regime again, either on its own or under the aegis of the CSTO, but this is a scenario that the Kazakhstani elite now prefers to avoid at all costs. Pleading with Putin to save one's regime once can still be portrayed as an exception, but resorting to his support twice would establish a pattern, with a devastating effect on Kazakhstan's carefully crafted image as a modern and stable middle power.

"If Tokayev continues to reject calls for democratization and relies on economic prosperity for legitimacy, Kazakhstan is unlikely to pursue a form of multi-vector foreign policy that would meaningfully reduce its dependence on Russia."

If Tokayev continues to reject calls for democratization and relies on economic prosperity for legitimacy, Kazakhstan is unlikely to pursue a form of multi-vector foreign policy that would meaningfully reduce its dependence on Russia. Additionally, in the event of a worsening economic situation, the government can be expected to increase the level of repression in the hope that this would deter citizens from taking to the streets to protest. However, given the relatively high level of repression before the eruption of protests in January 2022, it is highly uncertain whether such "protest-proofing" would be successful, even if attempted.

Geopolitical limits to Kazakhstan's multi-vectorism: Russia's foreign policy posture

The third source of limits to Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy stems from the current foreign policy posturing of its northern neighbour, the Russian Federation. From the vantage point of the Russian elite, Kazakhstan is not an equal partner but rather an instrumental ally within Moscow's sphere of influence. Given this post-imperial outlook on the post-Soviet neighbourhood, Russian decision-makers believe they have a say in Kazakhstan's domestic and foreign policy. If Astana does something that is not to Moscow's liking, it can expect to be corrected.

There is evidence to suggest that, during the first two decades of independence, the Kazakhstani political elite at large did not view Russia as an existential threat. However, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 caused alarm in Astana, given the analogous comments by various members of the Russian establishment regarding Northern Kazakhstan as "historically Russian territory". To this day, some Kazakhstani officials may genuinely believe that Ukraine brought the war upon itself by "provoking" Russia and that, as long as Kazakhstan distances itself from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), its territorial integrity will not be threatened. However, given Kazakhstan's reaction to even discursive challenges to its independence,[15] it is evident that Russia's image as a security provider for Kazakhstan's statehood has been shattered by its full-scale war in Ukraine.

If there was a way to balance Russia "out" with the help of other partnerships at no cost, Kazakhstan would probably take the chance. However, as pointed out in previous sections of this paper, Kazakhstan's entanglement with Russia

14 See e.g. Human Rights Watch World Report (2025) "Kazakhstan: Events of 2024". https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/kazakhstan.

15 On Russian citizens who have been barred from entering Kazakhstan after making "unfriendly" statements about the country, see e.g. Drobny, Nikita (2025) "Russian Historian Andrei Grozin Reported to Have Been Stopped from Entering Kazakhstan", *Orda*, 29 April. https://en.orda.kz/russian-historian-andrei-grozin-reported-to-have-been-stopped-from-entering-kazakhstan-6184/.

is at such a high level that decoupling would not be frictionless, even if Russia could be expected to behave as a benevolent regional hegemon rather than an aggressive, irredentist great-power aspirant. As a result of Russia's post-imperial unpredictability, Kazakhstan's current balancing act leaves little room to expand its multi-vector foreign policy. As long as Russia remains an actor that not only treats the post-Soviet space as its sphere of influence but also has the leverage to destabilize the Tokayev government, Astana will tread carefully, ensuring that its foreign policy causes nothing more than slight irritation to Moscow.

Kazakhstan has only one partner with the economic and political weight to counter that of Russia if need be – China. However, from the Kazakhstani viewpoint, it would make little sense to break ties with Moscow only to fall into a new dependency on Beijing. Instead, both China and Russia are needed for a balance to emerge, as that is when Kazakhstan's own position would be at its strongest.

Conclusions

This Briefing Paper has analyzed the state of Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy after the CSTO intervention in January 2022 and nearly four years of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine. It has argued that Kazakhstan's determination to pursue geopolitical balancing is genuine, but that it has its limits. These constraints are shaped by Russia's post-imperial view of Kazakhstan, the vulnerability of Kazakhstan's economy to pressures from Russia, as well as Kazakhstan's authoritarian mode of governance. For now, Kazakhstan is boxed in, as demonstrated by Tokayev's adherence to the foreign policy status quo, which has come to include the reproduction and even further deepening of economic dependence on Russia.

There is no reason to suspect the sincerity of Kazakhstani officials when they speak of their desire to forge closer ties with Western actors and to serve as a trusted ally in the sphere of energy security. However, decision-makers in Brussels and Washington would be wrong to interpret these words as a sign of Kazakhstan's readiness to take decisive action to decouple from Russia. If a serious signal were to come from Moscow, Astana would not think twice about walking back any of its agreements with the EU or other partners.

Although the scope for Kazakhstan to conduct a truly balanced, multi-vector foreign policy in pursuit of its national interests is currently limited, this situation may change in the future. A range of developments not only in Kazakhstan or Russia, but also in the Central Asian region or the international system at large, has the potential to alter the calculus laid out in this paper. The limits of Kazakhstan's multi-vectorism are dynamic and may shift in ways that would either increase or decrease the room for Astana's balancing act. For instance, the outcome of Russia's war in Ukraine and the future shape of US–China relations are factors that will have an impact on the scope of Kazakhstani multi-vectorism in the years to come. ⬢

BRIEFING
PAPER
429
January 2026

ISBN 978-951-769-847-4
ISSN 1795-8059
Language editing: Lynn Nikkanen
Graphic design: Otso Teperi
Cover photo: Andrey Orekhov / iStock

FIIA
FINNISH
INSTITUTE OF
INTERNATIONAL
AFFAIRS

Arkadiankatu 23 b
POB 425 / 00101 Helsinki
Telephone +358 (0)9 432 7799
www.fiia.fi