

**ENERGY DIPLOMACY OF RUSSIA IN KAZAKHSTAN (2018-2025): GEOPOLITICAL
IMPLICATIONS FOR CHINA**

BY

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DEDICATION

I owe a great debt of gratitude to my parents who gave me unconditional love, prayers and sacrifices which have been the pillars of my journey. They have helped me the most by encouraging me all the time. Lastly, I would like to thank my siblings who have supported me by providing love, patience, and support throughout my life, motivating me to never give up and reach my goals.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EAEU: Eurasian Economic Union

BRI: Belt and Road Initiative

SREB: Silk Road Economic Belt

CPC: The Caspian Pipeline Consortium

CU: Custom Unions

SCO: Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

SEZ: Special Economic Zone

EU: European Union

ICBC: International Center for Cross-Border Cooperation

OIC: Organisation of Islamic Cooperation

CSTO: Collective Security Treaty Organization

KTZ: Kazakhstan Temir Zholy

CIS: Commonwealth of Independent States

OPEC: Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries

CNPC: China National Petroleum Corporation

KEY TERMINOLOGIES

- **Energy Diplomacy:** Energy diplomacy is a foreign policy instrument and sub-discipline of international relations that nations employ to fulfill their energy requirements, meet their energy-related objectives, and deal with the geopolitical implications of energy systems.
- **Energy politics:** The tactical exploitation of energy resources, including natural gas, petroleum, and pipelines, to impose influence, form alliances, and pursue national interests, will shape how trade works in the region and geopolitical alignments.
- **Regional Connectivity:** Regional connectivity refers to the intentional connection of geographically dispersed parts of a region via infrastructure, networks, policies and frameworks, with the aim of allowing import exports, information and resources. It increases economic integration, encourages collaboration, decreases differences, and sustainable and cohesive development through functional and interconnected regional ecosystems.
- **Special Economic Zone:** SEZ is either a geographically designated area within the national boundaries of a country, where the business and trade laws differ from the country, to promote foreign and domestic investment and exportation.
- **Geopolitical Dynamics:** The interplay of political, economic and strategic forces, which dictate international relations and affect trade patterns such as territorial conflicts, alliances, and power plays.

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the energy politics of Russia in Kazakhstan, 2018-2025, and how it affects the Chinese geopolitics. It states that Russia having its control over the energy export infrastructure of Kazakhstan, especially via the pipelines, for example the CPC and Uzen-Atyrau-Samara, makes Moscow a gatekeeper in the region, allowing it to restrict the sovereignty of Kazakhstan and the influence of China. Although Beijing has invested in the Belt and Road Initiative and developed direct oil and gas pipelines, its energy security is still limited by structural reliance on routes traditionally controlled by Russia. As a nation with a multi-vector foreign policy, Kazakhstan hopes to balance out Russian pressure with Chinese investment and partners of the West, thus allowing it to have greater strategic freedom. As the analysis has pointed out, energy, in this case, is not only an economic commodity, but also a means of diplomacy and projection of power. The findings indicate the key role of Kazakhstan as a road and a battleground in the wider conflict over control of Eurasia. The research design is grounded on qualitative research, and thematic analysis of secondary sources (scholars' books, journal articles, government reports and policy papers) will be carried out, with the main data sources being represented by the publications of the Russian and Kazakh governments. The proposed method will permit the close examination of the application of energy diplomacy as a geopolitical tool in the region.

Key words: Energy Diplomacy, Regional Connectivity, Special Economic Zone, Geopolitical Dynamics.

INTRODUCTION

This study aims to investigate the geopolitical implications of energy diplomacy of Russia in Kazakhstan for China. The study examines energy interests of Russia and Kazakhstan's dependence on Russian infrastructure for its energy exports and its effects on relations with China. After the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, fifteen independent countries emerged on the world's map. The Republic of Kazakhstan was one of them.¹ It is the largest state by land in Central Asia which shares close ties with The Russian Federation. Russia and Kazakhstan share close bilateral relations with each other with a blend of cooperation and level of independence. Kazakhstan is one of the resource rich states in the region mainly energy resources which makes it very important for Russia. Russia and Kazakhstan both heavily rely on energy exports for their economy.²

Kazakhstan is a major power generator within the Central Asia. It is a large exporter and producer of uranium ore in the world, major producer and exporter of oil, gas and coal, and one of the largest producers of coal. Kazakhstan produces 40 percent of Uranium of the world.³ Its energy sector is quite significant to the economy, and it is a significant participant in regional and global energy markets. Kazakhstan is endowed with the oil and gas reserves but has no infrastructure to transport these resources to the market. As part of various energy partnerships, Kazakhstan sells its oil through Russia to the European markets. Kazakhstan is the patron of Russian spearheaded initiatives such as European Economic Community, Collective Security treaty organization and is involved in Shanghai Cooperation organization. Kazakhstan has close military ties with Russia and enjoys benefits from Russian military equipment. Both states collaborate on civil nuclear energy to strengthen their relations. As Kazakhstan was part of the Soviet Union, it shares soviet history. Since the 19th century, there has been a large community of Russian Kazakhstanis or simply Russians residing in Kazakhstan as their nation and citizen. They are still noticeable today in the Kazakh society even though their numbers have been diminished since the collapse of the USSR.

¹ Anja Mihr, Kashif Hasan Khan, *Europe-Central Asia Relations: New Connectivity Frameworks*. Germany: Springer Nature Singapore, 2023, 26.

² Meena Singh Roy. "Russia and Central Asia: Problems and Prospects." *Strategic Analysis* 25 (3) 2001: 64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700160108458968>.

³ Timur Onzhanov, *The Role of Kazakhstan as a Global Energy Supplier in the 21st Century: Analysis of Opportunities and Risks*. Bern, 2013, 30.

Energy diplomacy is a tool of foreign policy. Energy diplomacy is meant to protect the economic and security interests of the state using economic means and trade relations with other states or organizations. Energy diplomacy is the central element of Russian foreign policy.⁴ Since Vladimir Putin became President, he emphasizes energy relations with the neighboring countries through agreements and joint ventures. Russia and Kazakhstan created integrated energy transportation systems between both countries. Gazprom which is Russia's state-owned multinational energy cooperation played a key role in Kazakhstan gas sector. Kaz Roz Gaz is a joint venture of Gazprom and Kaz Munai Gaz (Kazakhstan national oil and gas company) which ensures stable system of transportation.⁵ Because of the availability of rich resources in the Caspian Sea, the law structure was significant to the exploitations of the seabed among the neighboring nations. The republic of Kazakhstan deposits the convention on the legal status of the Caspian Sea in 2018.

The study explores the geopolitical consequences of Russia in Kazakhstan concerning the Energy diplomacy of China. The strategy of energy diplomacy has made Russia stronger in geopolitical control in Kazakhstan, and consequently, Central Asia. This challenges China's SREB which relies on Central Asia as a critical transit route. Russian control over Kazakh energy infrastructure could limit China's influence, as Moscow may leverage its ties to maintain Kazakhstan's alignment with the Russian-led EAEU. China attempts to foster deeper economic ties with Kazakhstan might face limitations if Russia holds over critical sectors, including energy.

Energy diplomacy, particularly in regions rich in natural resources, has become a crucial aspect of modern international relations, shaping geopolitical strategies, alliances, and conflicts. Central Asia as an oil and gas-rich region is a significant player in the world energy markets, and relations between Russia and Kazakhstan are at the heart of the analysis of the emerging dynamics of energy diplomacy in the area.⁶ The study examines the intricate interplay between energy diplomacy

⁴ Angeliki Menegaki, *Elgar Encyclopedia of Energy Economics*, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025, 66.

⁵ Raikhan Zhanbulatova, Miras Zhiyenbayev, Maira Dyusembekova, and Roza Nurtazina. 2020. "The Energy Vector of Kazakhstan-Russia Relations in the Context of Global Changes on the International Energy Market." *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 21, 121. <https://doi.org/10.37178/ca-c.20.2.11>.

⁶ Laura Guercio, *Current Conflicts and Energy Research in the Contemporary Global System: A Political and Social Analysis*. Ethics International Press Limited, 2025. 56.

between Russia and Kazakhstan and its geopolitical implications for China which is economically involved in Central Asia through its projects for example Silk Road Economic Belt.

Russia produces energy in large quantities. The nation has been a power bully in the territories it shares boundaries with, and Central Asia is no exception. Kazakhstan is an oil-rich and gas-rich nation that is strategically important to Russian energy security and geopolitical interests.⁷ Nevertheless, despite the economic advantages of this alliance, there are doubts that Kazakhstan can continue with its independent foreign policy and provide security in the region. The energy dominance of Russia as a resource and at the same time as a possible point of leverage can be a barrier to the ability of the country to pursue independent policies, putting Kazakhstan in a balancing act between the need to cooperate economically and the need to act independently in political matters.

China is employing economic instruments to dominate region of Central Asia. This region is important to China specially Kazakhstan because Kazakhstan is a major nation to ferry its exports into the markets of Europe where there are major railways and international highways between China and the other countries in Asia and Europe. Even though China asserts that Russia is its ally, it is exercising its economic influence to make its mark in Central Asia. In the China Central Asia pipeline (2009), China has invested 30 billion dollars in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan is also attempting to diversify its economy under the BRI of China to minimize its reliance on the infrastructure of Russia for its energy exports.⁸

This research has adopted a theoretical framework of energy diplomacy by Edward L. Morse and James Richard. Their study titled "The Battle for Energy Dominance" focusing on the power dynamics and strategies in global energy supply. Energy resources, particularly oil, are portrayed as central to a country's influence on global affairs. States with energy resources can use these as instruments to strengthen alliances, ensure economic stability, and exert influence over other nations.⁹

⁷ Alexandros Petersen, Katinka Barysch, Russia, China and the Geopolitics of Energy in Central Asia. United Kingdom: Centre for European Reform, 2011, 8.

⁸ Linda Yin-nor Tjia., "Kazakhstan's Leverage and Economic Diversification amid Chinese Connectivity Dreams." *Third World Quarterly* 2022, 97. doi:10.1080/01436597.2022.2027237.

⁹ Edward L. Morse, and James Richard. "The Battle for Energy Dominance." *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 2 (2002), 16. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20033081>.

This study is important from an academic and applied standpoint. Kazakhstan and its giant oil and gas deposits are a significant world power in the energy market. To understand how the geopolitical landscape of the region is evolving, it is important to understand how Russia has been strategically leveraging energy diplomacy since 2018 to continue exercising its influence over Kazakhstan.¹⁰ The effects of Russia's energy diplomacy on China need more examination as the geopolitical rivalry in Central Asia heats up, especially with China's increasing sway and the attention of Western nations.

Statement of the Problem

Russia's energy diplomacy in Kazakhstan works as a powerful tool for asserting geopolitical dominance, positioning Russia as a gatekeeper of regional energy routes.¹¹ The close energy partnership between Kazakhstan and Russia strengthens Russian influence in the region but it also introduces new strategic challenges for China's regional ambitions. Russia is utilizing its energy diplomacy to limit Chinese dominance in the region by leveraging its significant control over Kazakhstan's energy export infrastructure, which restricts Kazakhstan's ability to engage with other energy partners. This thesis revolves around the question that how does Russia's energy diplomacy in Kazakhstan geopolitically impact China?

Objectives of the Study

- To determine the importance of Kazakhstan for Russia in maintaining its influence over China.
- To explore the dependence of Kazakhstan on Russian infrastructure for its energy exports and its impacts on its relations with China.
- To analyze the inclusive geopolitical implications of Russia's energy diplomacy in Kazakhstan for China's regional influence.

¹⁰ Linda Yin-nor Tjia., “Kazakhstan’s Leverage and Economic Diversification amid Chinese Connectivity Dreams.” *Third World Quarterly* 43 (4) 2022, 98.
doi:10.1080/01436597.2022.2027237.

¹¹ Stanislav Z. Zhiznin, “Russian Energy Diplomacy and International Energy Security (Geopolitics and Economics).” *Baltic Region*, no. 1 (January) 2010, 17.
<https://doi.org/10.5922/2079-8555-2010-1-2>.

Research Questions

- 1- Why is Kazakhstan important for Russia to exert its influence over China?
- 2- How does Kazakhstan dependence on Russian infrastructure for its energy exports affect its relations with China?
- 3- What are the broader geopolitical implications of energy diplomacy of Russia in Kazakhstan for China?

Literature Review

To carry out this research, I have consulted a substantial number of articles, journals, official reports and chapters of various books that address the energy diplomacy of Russia in Kazakhstan and the direction it is taking geopolitically towards China. The current literature abounds in varying types of views on energy diplomacy being a tool to conduct foreign policy. The energy diplomacy of Russia in Kazakhstan is characterized by the tactical exploitation of energy resources as the instruments of geopolitical influence that has a strong influence on China. By controlling the pipelines and infrastructure through which Kazakhstan exports its vast oil and gas reserves, Russia maintains a level of economic and political dominance over Kazakhstan. This creates a complex dynamic where Kazakhstan, while seeking to enhance its energy partnerships with China, remains heavily relies on Russian infrastructure. The following are the critical analyses of chapters, articles and journals for literature review. Following are the four themes discussed in the literature review.

Energy: Tool of Russian Foreign Policy

The book Russia and Energy Markets by Theresa Sabonis-Helf provides an extensive examination of the relationship between Kazakhstan and Russia, highlighting Kazakhstan's significant role in the region due to its large reserves of oil and gas. Russia's focus on maintaining its influence over Kazakhstan's energy exports is critical to its broader geopolitical strategy. Russia uses its energy sector as a form of diplomatic and economic leverage, not only in Kazakhstan but also across Central Asia. This is seen in how it works to maintain control over energy pipelines and exports

that flow through the region, effectively making countries like Kazakhstan reliant on Russian infrastructure.¹²

Kazakhstan has tried to offer itself diversification of foreign policy choices by referring to the West and China to compensate Russian pressure. But still, Russia has held on its leadership position because of the geographical position and historical connections. Russian-Kazakh energy relations are linked directly to the wider regional security problems. The control of energy infrastructure and transit routes by Russia has significant influence on Kazakhstan and the region in question that shapes the dynamics of regional security. The energy security and the national security-related issues determine the relations between Russia and Kazakhstan and the other post-Soviet states of Central Asian region. This Russian-Chinese rivalry over the Kazakh resources also makes the issue of security of this region even more difficult.

A.Sait Sonmez contents that The Russian country uses its enormous energy resources especially natural gas and oil as a foreign policy tool to preserve and increase its geopolitical power. It describes some of the dominant strategies through which Russia seeks to dominate energy flows and influence the foreign policies of its dependents, especially in the post-Soviet space.¹³

Energy resources of Russia serve as a fundamental tool in its foreign policy, especially under President Vladimir Putin. The use of energy to manipulate both economic and political outcomes in neighboring states is a well-documented strategy.¹⁴ This is particularly evident in Russia's control over the energy infrastructure of former Soviet states, including Kazakhstan, where the existing pipelines and energy corridors give Russia considerable leverage. Kazakhstan relies on Russian pipelines to export its oil and gas. This dependency gives Russia significant leverage, potentially restricting Kazakhstan's sovereignty and diplomatic flexibility. The theme of "energy blackmail" described in the article applies here, as Kazakhstan's attempts to diversify its energy exports face Russian resistance. The fear of retaliation from Russia, as seen in other cases like

¹² Theresa Sabonis-Helf, "Russia and energy markets." *new realities: energy security in the 2010s and implications for the U.S. military*. Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2015, 12. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11987.5>.

¹³ A. Sait Sonmez, and Sedat Cobanoglu. "The Use of Energy Resources as Foreign Policy Tools: The Russian Case. " *European Scientific Journal* (2016), 78.

¹⁴ Naval Postgraduate School. *Russian Energy Policy Vis-à-vis Europe: Natural Resources as a Means of Foreign Policy*. United States: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014.

Ukraine and Georgia, places Kazakhstan in a delicate position, balancing between regional security and autonomy.¹⁵

Kazakhstan Dependence and Strategic Vulnerability

The article named Energy, economics and security in Central Asia: Russia and its rivals explain Russia's energy diplomacy in Kazakhstan primarily revolves around its control of pipelines and energy infrastructure. Kazakhstan, despite its vast energy reserves, is landlocked and reliant on Russian pipelines for energy export. This puts Kazakhstan in a vulnerable position, as Russia can and has used its control of these pipelines to exert pressure.

Russia's goal is to maintain Kazakhstan's dependence on its infrastructure, thus keeping Kazakhstan politically and economically within its sphere of influence. The manipulation of energy flows through price adjustments, oil-for-debt swaps, or cutting off energy supplies allows Russia to assert economic dominance over Kazakhstan.¹⁶ This has significant regional security implications, as it limits Kazakhstan's autonomy and increases Russian influence over Central Asian geopolitics. Russia's broader strategy involves reintegrating former Soviet states economically and politically, often using energy as a coercive tool. In case of Kazakhstan, Russia applies pressure for dual citizenship for Russians in Kazakhstan and forces preferential treatment for Russian companies like Lukoil in Kazakh oil projects. This raises Kazakhstan's reliance on Russia while diminishing its sovereignty.

Kazakhstan has tried to diversify its energy partnerships, engaging with China, Western countries, and multinational corporations. This is a strategic move to balance Russia's overwhelming control. However, Russia has responded by blocking or delaying major energy projects, including the Chevron-Tengiz oil project, which affected Kazakhstan's economic development.¹⁷ The struggle between Kazakhstan's attempts at diversification and Russia's efforts to maintain dominance creates instability, raising the risks of regional conflicts.

¹⁵ A. Sait Sonmez, and Sedat Cobanoglu. "The Use of Energy Resources as Foreign Policy Tools: The Russian Case." *European Scientific Journal*, (2016), 78.

¹⁶ Stephen Blank, "Can East Asia dare to tie its energy security to Russia and Kazakhstan?" *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* 21, no. 1 (2007), 137. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23258000>.

¹⁷ Murat M Bakhadirov, P L Dash and Anita Sengupta, *Central Asia and Regional Security*. India: KW Publishers, 2014, 34.

Russia's energy control translates into significant strategic advantages, as control over energy means control over political and security decisions.¹⁸ Russia has repeatedly used energy as a bargaining chip not only to maintain influence over Kazakhstan but also to manipulate regional dynamics, ensuring that Kazakhstan remains tethered to Russian interests in broader security matters. This control affects regional alliances, Kazakhstan's military dependence on Russia, and the region's overall stability.

Russia's strategy of controlling the transit routes for energy in the former Soviet Union is a recurring theme. By ensuring that pipelines pass through Russian territory or through friendly states, Russia prevents alternative routes that could undermine its dominance. This control extends to Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, where Russia has historically managed to keep oil and gas exports of Kazakhstan routed through its infrastructure, limiting Kazakhstan's capacity to negotiate better terms with other foreign powers.

The article also highlights the competition between Russia and other powers, particularly the EU and China, over control of Central Asia's energy resources. Kazakhstan, as a key player with significant oil and gas reserves, is at the center of this rivalry. Russia's attempts to prevent Kazakhstan from developing alternative energy export routes particularly those involving China are part of its broader effort to maintain hegemony in the region.¹⁹

As the article points out, Russia's energy diplomacy faces a serious challenge from China, which has huge investments in energy sector of Kazakhstan. This not only threatens Russia's monopoly but also introduces a new axis of competition that could further destabilize regional security. Kazakhstan's balancing act between these two major powers is critical for its long-term stability. Energy is used by Russia not just for economic profit but as an instrument of political control. This dual use of energy resources has allowed Russia to exert outsized influence over countries that are energy dependent.²⁰ In Kazakhstan, this control manifests in Russia's ability to influence domestic

¹⁸ Gintaras Bagdonas, and Patricia Orglerova, "NATO Energy Security Centre of Excellence." *National Security and the Future* 17 (April) 2016, 34. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/251951>.

¹⁹ Sebastian Krapohl and Alexandra Vasileva-Dienes, the region that isn't: China, Russia and the failure of regional integration in Central Asia. *Asia Eurasian Journal*-18 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-019-00548-0>

²⁰ Ariel Cohen, Kevin Rosner, Kazakhstan: Energy Cooperation with Russia - Oil, Gas and Beyond. Kogan Page Business Books, 2006.

and foreign policy, limiting Kazakhstan's ability to fully align with Western powers or develop independent security policies.

Adrian Dellecker and Thomas Gomart through their editorial work *Russian Energy Security and Foreign Policy* tried to explore the complicated interconnections between the energy resources and foreign policies of Russia especially in the Eurasia context. The energy resources in Russia are a cornerstone of foreign policy in Russia. It also explores the geopolitical consequences of Russian relations with their neighbors and Europe, asserting that Russia leverages its energy wealth to consolidate its domestic affairs and influence abroad. Concrete examples support this approach well: the relations of Russia with Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and its European clients provide a lot of insight into the interaction of energy and politics in this part of the world. The book does not simply view Russia as an energy-driven foreign policy alone and presents a more detailed view of how Russia has used energy as a means of influence. The discourse is sometimes rather Eurocentric, although the editors attempt to prevent this tendency. There is a lot of emphasis on how Europe relies on Russian gas and how European Union manages its relationship with Russia. Although it also covers relations with Central Asian states, the increased focus on energy relations between Russia and China could have provided a more global perspective. It offers an in-depth analysis of energy policy in Russia, with particular emphasis on the ways Russia uses energy as a foreign policy instrument.²¹

Russia China Competition for Influence in Kazakhstan

The paper *Geopolitics of Energy in Kazakhstan: Implications for China* provides a detailed discussion of the energy industry in Kazakhstan as well as its geopolitical importance, especially concerning China. Kazakhstan's strategic position and vast resources such as oil, gas and uranium. It underscores the importance of the country as a crossroad between the continents of Russia, China and the United States. Such framing makes Kazakhstan a center of the energy game in the world as it connects Asia with Europe. One concept that is addressed is the foreign policy tactic of Kazakhstan, which seeks to maintain a balance in its relations with Russia, U.S., and China. The

²¹ Adrian Dellecker, and Thomas Gomart. *Russian Energy Security and Foreign Policy*. Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis, 2011, 207.

author argues that this policy has helped Kazakhstan maintain strategic autonomy while leveraging its resources for economic development.²²

The author examines BRI and its "March West" strategy, designed to pivot China's focus from the Asia-Pacific region to Central Asian region, thus strengthening energy ties with Kazakhstan.²³ The analysis connects China's domestic energy needs and regional security interests. By forming strong economic and infrastructure links with Kazakhstan, China aims to reduce dependence on Middle Eastern oil and vulnerabilities associated with maritime energy routes controlled by the U.S. Navy. The article argues that this cooperation between China and Kazakhstan is mutually beneficial, aiding China in securing stable energy supplies while offering Kazakhstan a source of investment and economic growth. However, it also notes domestic concerns in Kazakhstan regarding China's growing economic dominance.

Mariya Y. Omelicheva and Ruoxi Du through their work explores the way Kazakhstan is handling the conflicting interests of China and Russia. The article posits that Kazakhstan foreign policy has played the central role in reducing the tensions between Russia and China even though they have conflicting interests in Central Asia. Kazakhstan has been lucky to balance its relationship with the two powers to remain free and not be controlled by any of them. The authors emphasize that Kazakhstan is following a multi-vector strategy to attract various powers (Russia, China, U.S., and Europe) without becoming too attached to any of them. This approach is based on realistic and versatile diplomacy, using the resources of the country in terms of energy and location. This has enabled Kazakhstan to gain economically without political wrangles with either Russia or China.²⁴

The paper presents an effective argument as to why the approach of foreign policy in Kazakhstan has worked to ensure that the interests of both Russia and China have been balanced. It points out how a smaller, more strategically situated nation can assert agency and control over other large nations with a keen diplomatic approach and tactical compromises. The analysis would be more

²² Ghodratollah Behboudi Nejad, "Geopolitics of Energy in Kazakhstan: Implications for China" *International Journal of New Political Economy* 2022, 12.

https://jep.sbu.ac.ir/article_101178.html.

²³ Alfred Gerstl, and Wallenböck Ute, *The Belt and Road Initiative in Kazakhstan: Does the geopolitics of China's outward investments put the brakes on decarbonisation?* London: Routledge, 2020.

²⁴ Mariya Omelicheva, and Ruoxi du. "Kazakhstan's Multi-Vectorism and Sino-Russian Relations." *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 4 (2018): 95. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26542175>.

solid with a further discussion of domestic issues and a reflection of the long-term sustainability of this strategy, though, especially in the face of changing geopolitical dynamics.²⁵

Kazakhstan's Strategic Balancing

The article Untangling the Puzzle of “Russia’s Influence” in Kazakhstan by Marlène Laruelle, Dylan Royce, and Serik Beysembayev explores the dynamics of Russian dominance in Kazakhstan. This influence is examined through various vectors, including economic ties, military cooperation, the Russian minority, language, media, and networks.

The article identifies that while analysts frequently attribute Kazakhstan's pro-Russian behavior to direct influence or manipulation from Moscow, the reality is more complex. It distinguishes between exogenous factors (influences originating from Russia) and endogenous factors (those developing from within Kazakhstan), providing a clear understanding of the Russo-Kazakh relationship.²⁶ This typology is a more advanced account of the actions taken by Kazakhstan and does not limit itself to the hard and soft power theories, but encompasses the passive and active factors. The article serves as a valuable addition to the body of literature because it positions Kazakhstan as a country that receives no Russian influence but is able to shape its relations with Russia. Although the explanatory categories of exogenous and endogenous influence are advantageous in the article, the analysis sometimes falls short in exploring the internal politics of Kazakhstan and their elite groups in particular.

Overall, it provides analysis of the factors shaping Russia Kazakhstan relationship. Its key strength lies in the distinction between different types of influence and in recognizing Kazakhstan as an active agent. However, the article could benefit from more empirical data and a deeper exploration of how generational and political changes within Kazakhstan might alter this dynamic in the future.²⁷

Scholars and analysts have explored how Russia employs energy as a tool of foreign policy, Kazakhstan's strategic balancing between Russia and China, and the evolving implications for

²⁵ (Omelicheva and Du 2018)

²⁶ Marlène Laruelle, Dylan Royce, and Serik Beysembayev “Untangling the Puzzle of ‘Russia’s Influence’ in Kazakhstan.” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 2019, 43.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2019.1645033>.

²⁷ (Laruelle, Royce, and Beysembayev 2019)

regional stability and China's energy security. The literature review identifies four key themes. Firstly, energy as a tool of Russian foreign policy, a dominant theme across the literature is that energy functions as a core instrument of Russian foreign policy, allowing Moscow to exert economic and geopolitical leverage over its neighbors. Secondly, Kazakhstan's Dependence and Strategic Vulnerability, another central theme in the literature concerns Kazakhstan's reliance on Russian-controlled energy routes and the vulnerabilities this dependence creates. Thirdly, the Russia China competition for influence in Kazakhstan, the literature identifies the emerging competition between Russia and China over access to Kazakhstan's energy resources as a defining feature of Central Asian geopolitics. And lastly, Kazakhstan's strategic balancing, A fourth recurring theme, which seeks to balance relations among Russia, China, the West, and other global actors.

Research Gap

The existing literature covers Russia's supremacy in Kazakhstan's energy sector and its geopolitical maneuvers. There is a need to investigate how Russia's energy diplomacy in Kazakhstan operates as a geopolitical gatekeeping mechanism, deliberately preserving Russian influence while limiting China's energy access.

Core Argument

Russia's energy diplomacy in Kazakhstan works as a powerful tool for asserting geopolitical dominance, positioning Russia as a gatekeeper of regional energy routes. Energy diplomacy of Russia in Kazakhstan serves as a foreign policy tool to preserve its influence there while limiting China's influence.

Theoretical Framework

The energy ties between Kazakhstan and Russia not only enhances the Russian influence in the region but also places new strategic strains upon Chinese regional ambitions. Energy diplomacy was proposed by Edward L. Morse and James Richard. in "The Battle for Energy Dominance" focusing on the power dynamics and strategies in global energy supply.²⁸ Energy resources, particularly oil, are portrayed as central to a country's influence on global affairs. States with energy resources can use these as instruments to strengthen alliances, ensure economic stability,

²⁸ Edward L. Morse, and James Richard. "The Battle for Energy Dominance." *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 2 (2002), 29. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20033081>.

and exert influence over other nations. The theory also addresses how states use energy exports as a tool of diplomacy and influence. Energy resources serve as a form of soft power.

Energy diplomacy refers to the strategic use of energy resources, infrastructure, and market influence as instruments of foreign policy. Its core features include the ability of states to employ oil, gas, and transit routes as both hard and soft power tools ranging from coercive leverage through supply control and pricing to the cultivation of goodwill through preferential terms and investments.²⁹ Energy infrastructure such as pipelines functions as a long-term geopolitical asset that creates durable dependency and enhances a state's regional influence. Energy diplomacy also exploits vulnerabilities arising from resource dependency, market fluctuations, and price politics, allowing dominant suppliers or transit states to shape the behavior of others. It fosters alliances by linking economic and political interests through long-term contracts, joint ventures, and interdependent networks. At the same time, it becomes an arena for great-power competition, where rivals seek access to the same resources and transit corridors while occasionally cooperating to stabilize markets. Ultimately, energy diplomacy operates at the intersection of domestic strategy and foreign engagement, enabling states to influence regional dynamics and global energy governance.

The study suggests that the dependency on oil revenue makes states vulnerable to market shifts, price fluctuations, and the influence of dominant players. The study illustrates a global landscape where nations with significant energy resources use them as powerful tools in both foreign policy and economic strategies.

Russia's involvement in energy sector of Kazakhstan reflects use of energy assets to extend influence, especially in neighboring regions, as it leverages energy investments and infrastructure to solidify its regional influence.³⁰ This aligns with the theory of energy diplomacy, use of energy resources as instruments of influence, where control or influence over Kazakhstani energy resources gives Russia leverage over its neighbor, strengthening its regional position. Russia and Kazakhstan relations are largely due to the supply of energy for instance oil and gas. Russia's

²⁹ Steven Griffiths, Steven. "Energy Diplomacy in a Time of Energy Transition." *Energy Strategy Reviews* (26 July 2019): 86. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esr.2019.100386>.

³⁰ Natalie Koch, and Veli-Pekka Tynkkynen, "The Geopolitics of Renewables in Kazakhstan and Russia." *Geopolitics* 26 (2) 2019: 521. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2019.1583214>.

involvement in Kazakhstan's energy sector may position it as a major regional player, affecting both Kazakhstan's autonomy and its alignment with other powers, particularly China. Russia's energy diplomacy in Kazakhstan could serve to limit China's direct access to the region.³¹

A critical point in the study highlighted is how countries use energy infrastructure such as pipelines as part of their diplomatic strategy. Russia's development of pipelines through Kazakhstan to access markets directly impacts China, which has its own energy infrastructure investments in the region.³² The way in which Russia operates or integrates its pipelines in Kazakhstan can affect China in energy and influence in the region, which is why the infrastructure is both an economic, but also a strategic and geopolitical project. Russian energy diplomacy in Kazakhstan, is directed at influencing Kazakhstan and at manipulating its complex relationship with China since cooperation and competition are the defining features of their interaction in regional energy markets.

Russia has significant dominance over the main pipeline networks for example CPC, Uzen Atyrau Samara pipeline can jeopardise the Kazakh's energy exports. Kazakhstan relies on Russian transportation facilities to export to international markets, especially Europe.³³ This gives birth to a dependency relationship whereby Russia can be subtly dictatorial or exert pressure especially in terms of issuing terms. In China, this is geopolitical point of tension: Chinese are interested in reliable acquisition of oil and gas in Kazakhstan, delivered by the China-Kazakhstan pipeline, but Russian infrastructure influence continues to mediate shaping of flows. Energy resources are applied to strengthen regional alliances, construct spheres of influence. Russia has been pushing EAEU membership on Kazakhstan and has consumed a large part of the reinforced economic

³¹ Ghodratollah Behboudi Nejad, "Geopolitics of Energy in Kazakhstan: Implications for China." *International Journal of New Political Economy* 2 (2021).

https://jep.sbu.ac.ir/article_101178.html.

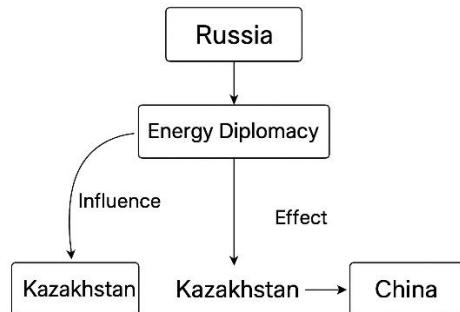
³² Justyna Misiagiewicz, "Energy Infrastructure Cooperation Between China and the Caspian Region States." *Athenaeum Polskie Studia Politologiczne* 83 (3) 2024, 55.

<https://doi.org/10.15804/athena.2024.83.08>.

³³ Hemant Merchant, *The New Frontiers of International Business: Development, Evolving Topics, and Implications for Practice*. Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2022.

integration through energy dependence.³⁴ Russia employs preferential terms of the provision of gas and oil to retain Kazakhstan politically tethered.

In the case of China this brings about a twofold reality. China stands to gain on Kazakhstan resources through the direct pipelines to the East avoiding Russia. However, China is not assured of complete influence by the fact that all these balancing of interests fall within the field of action of Kazakhstan. Besides coercion, energy exports are soft power- the ability to influence and shape preferences as well as goodwill. Russia attempts to play the role of a big brother in the post-Soviet space exemplifying technical skills, investments, and political insurance in exchange of allegiance in energy associations. It has Russian influence down to a structural level through its Russian companies involved in the Kazakhstan energy industry. In China, the influence of Russian soft power restrains the possibilities of Beijing to export its economic and political model into Kazakhstan despite the BRI mega-energy projects.³⁵ Oil/gas-dependent countries are exposed to price fluctuation and policies of the dominant players. Kazakhstan is an eminent victim of international oil prices, and it is too much dependent on the pipelines of Russia, which will increase their risk exposure to Russian political action. Russia itself is also subjected to sanctions, and swings in demand, which could be tempted to reinforce control over the energy flows of Kazakhstan to offset.³⁶



Energy diplomacy is not limited to bilateral arrangements but framing global hegemony. Russia exploits the fact that Kazakhstan is a land bridge to dominate in Central Asia and to play an

³⁴ Jan Strzelecki, “The Eurasian Economic Union: a time of crisis. Commentary Number 195/27.01.2016.” *Center for Eastern Studies*, February 2016, 55. <http://aei.pitt.edu/72328/>.

³⁵ Vincent Artman, *Soft Power in Central Asia: The Politics of Influence and Seduction*. United States: Lexington Books, 2021, 57.

³⁶ Bud Coote, *Impact of Sanctions on Russia's Energy Sector*. United States: Atlantic Council, 2022, 23.

important role in the overall world energy system. Kazakhstan is viewed by China as an important node in its West-East energy transmission line, one of the most significant projects of BRI, as well as of minimizing dependence on maritime oil supplies, which are controlled by the U.S.³⁷ Therefore, the geopolitical ramifications of Russian diplomacy to Kazakhstan have specific implications to the rise of China. Russia can be both an ally and a rival of Beijing to the issue of secure access to energy sources. Russia also makes use of the energy dominance strategy on the grounds of extension of dependency of Kazakhstan on infrastructure, alliances and networks. China, on the one hand, acquires a direct pipeline in Kazakhstan and, on the other hand, is in a state of strategic dependence on Russia. Kazakhstan itself is squeezed between three points of a geopolitical triangle: it is dependent on the routes of Russia, on the Chinese market, and on global fluctuations in the oil market. The Morse & Richard model underscores the fact that energy diplomacy is more than economics- it forms the backbone of geopolitical power Russia holds over Central Asian ambitions of China.³⁸

Research Methodology

The study is qualitative research methodology based primarily on secondary data, primary data has also been incorporated. A qualitative approach involves primary data from official websites of Russia and Kazakhstan on different projects related to natural gas, oil and other energy infrastructures. The analysis of books, articles, journals and newspapers is also considered in this research as secondary data. However, the statistical data has been taken from the progress reports of the projects signed between Russia and Kazakhstan. For data analysis, thematic analysis is used, and themes are identified.

The thesis explains Russia's energy diplomacy as an independent variable, geopolitical implications for China as an independent variable while taking China's counter engagement in Kazakhstan as an intervening variable. Russia uses its energy leverage control over pipelines, transit routes, pricing, and investments in Kazakhstan's oil and gas sector as an independent variable to shape Kazakhstan's political decisions and keep it aligned with Russian regional structures such as the EAEU. However, China's counter-engagement through direct pipelines,

³⁷ Christopher Schagerl, and Lana Soldo. 2023. "The Impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on Kazakhstan." *MAP Social Sciences* 3 (1): 40. <https://doi.org/10.53880/2744-2454.2023.3.1.33>.

³⁸ Edward L. Morse, and James Richard. "The Battle for Energy Dominance." *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 2 (2002): 27. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20033081>.

investment under the BRI, and alternative market access acts as an intervening variable that partially reduces Kazakhstan's dependence on Russia, complicates Moscow's influence, and forces Kazakhstan to balance between both powers.

Case study research methods are commonly used in qualitative research because they allow for an in-depth, contextualized, and holistic understanding of complex social, political, or economic phenomena. Rather than focusing on generalizations or statistical patterns, case studies aim to explore and explain how and why particular situations occur in their real-life contexts. Influence and method help to reach the core findings of the study by allowing a deep contextual analysis of Russia's actions in Kazakhstan, revealing relationships between energy control and geopolitical influence, and providing evidence-based conclusions on how Russia's energy diplomacy reshapes China's regional strategy. Further, this method is used to check Russia's efforts to exert its influence in the entire central Asian region. Since, Energy diplomacy is a tool for Russia's political endeavors to be dominant and relevant actor in the region, therefore, checking Russia's position in Kazakhstan has made the analysis easier for the future researchers to examine Russia's position in this region.

Significance of Study

This study is useful for the students of International Relations as this study bridges a substantial gap in the literature by concentrating on the years after 2018, which saw notable advancements in Kazakhstan's energy politics. This study offers a viewpoint on the use of energy resources as a tool for geopolitical dominance by examining the relationship between energy diplomacy and its impacts on China. Although China claims that Russia is an ally of China but also China is using its economic power to influence the region which is Russia's backyard for years. What is unique about the study is that the book highlights the intricate relationship between Russia and China in the context of energy diplomacy.

Understanding this issue is critical for policymakers and scholars because energy is not just an economic thing in Central Asia, it is a geopolitical tool that shapes alliances, conflicts, and security. Failure to address these dynamics may lead to increased instability in the region, with potential ramifications for global energy markets, regional conflicts, and international diplomacy.

This study is important from an academic and applied standpoint. Kazakhstan is a giant in global energy market with its huge reserves of oil and gas. To understand how geopolitics of the region

is evolving, it is important to know how Russia has been unrelentingly employing energy diplomacy since 2018 to ensure that it can continue its influence over Kazakhstan. The effects of Russia's energy diplomacy in China need more examination as the geopolitical rivalry heats up, especially with China's increasing sway.

Delimitation

This thesis explores the energy diplomacy of Russia in Kazakhstan and its geopolitical implications for China; certain delimitations are necessary to ensure so that the research remain focused and feasible. Firstly, the time duration of this study is taken from 2018 till 2025 to keep it focused. The research only focused on Russia's energy diplomacy in Kazakhstan since 2018 and bilateral relations between these countries and how China is impacted by energy diplomacy of Russia is explored. Secondly, while acknowledging that Central Asia is resource rich region, but this research primarily focuses on Kazakhstan energy resources and why they are important for Russia. Thirdly, energy diplomacy of Russia has political, economic and security implications on the region. This study explores the geopolitical implications on China only to make it clear and focused. Last but not least, although an attempt to apply a thorough research methodology is made, such limitations as the availability of the needed data, access to the stakeholders, and time constraints might require some methodological restrictions or simplifications in the analysis. Such limitations are necessary to keep the study focused, relevant, and feasible and to also give a clear outline of the research.

Organizational Structure

The study has been organized in six chapters.

- The first chapter expresses and explains the Research Objectives, Research Significance, Problem Statement, Literature review, Research Questions, Core Argument and Research methodology along with Theoretical Framework.
- Chapter two titled Kazakhstan's Strategic Role in Russia-China Relations emphasizes on the strategic role of the state of Kazakhstan in determining the dynamics of the relationship between Russia and China in the region. It also throws light at the diplomatic tactics of Kazakhstan in ensuring independence whilst ensuring collaboration between the two superpowers.

- Chapter three titled Kazakhstan's dependence on Russian infrastructure and Its Impact on China Relations examines the impact of the dependency of Kazakhstan on the Russian infrastructure, especially the energy pipelines, transport corridors, and communication networks on its relationship with China.
- Chapter four titled Geopolitical Implications of Russia's Energy Diplomacy in Kazakhstan for China highlights geopolitical implications of the energy diplomacy of Russia in Kazakhstan and how it relates to the Chinese regional strategy. It also discusses the changing impact of Russian control over the energy infrastructure in China on the formulation of Chinese investment, trade, and partnership policies in Central Asia.
- Chapter five titled Strategic Challenges for China amid Energy Diplomacy of Russia in Kazakhstan explores the strategic obstacles China faces because of Russia's entrenched energy diplomacy in Kazakhstan.
- Finally, the conclusion section contains the precise and meaningful conclusion with findings and recommendations of the study.

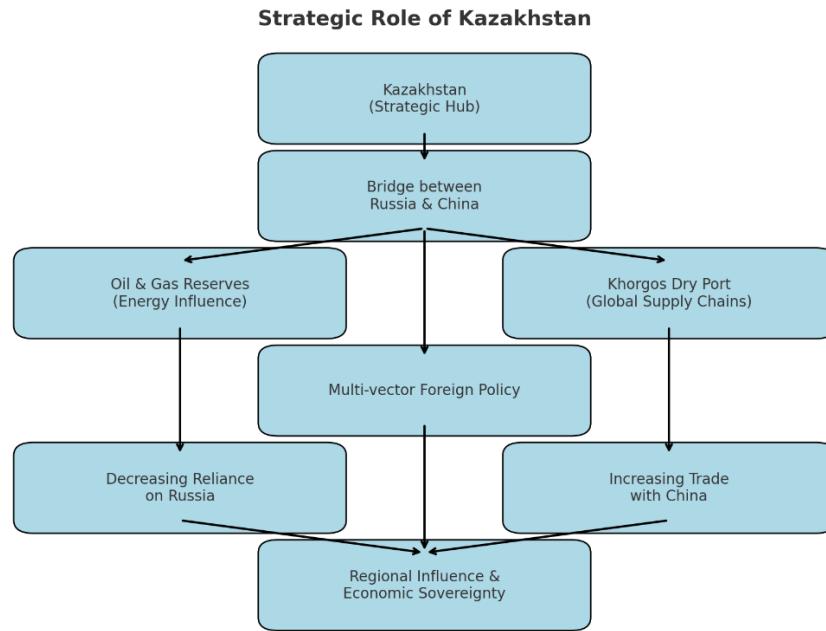
CHAPTER 2

Strategic Role of Kazakhstan in Russia and China Relations

Kazakhstan is a Central Asian and Eastern European country. Kazakhstan is on paper a secular, constitutional, democratic republic and a multicultural state. When the USSR was crumbling in December 1991, the last of the union republics to declare independence was Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan is a cultural nation and has a rich history at the heart of Eurasia. Its location, which was favourable geographically, combined with rich soil, available natural resources and a stable economy allowed it to be the most prosperous region in Central Asia. The foreign policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan can be characterized by balance and pragmatism. This strategy had been developed by the first President Nursultan Nazarbayev at the very dawn of the 90s and the 30 years have passed successfully and with the same degree of preserving the good relations with its two biggest neighbors, Russia and China as with the United States and the Western world.³⁹

The chapter explores the strategic role of Kazakhstan in Russia and China relations. It plays a strategically important role in the relationship between Russia and China, acting as a bridge between both states for cooperation and competition between the major powers. The Khorgos Dry Port, strategically positioned on the Kazakhstan–China border within the Khorgos-Eastern Gate SEZ, has quickly become an essential hub within the evolving framework of Eurasian connectivity.⁴⁰ Historically a vibrant stop on the ancient Silk Road, Khorgos has transformed into a contemporary inland port and logistics center, forging direct connections between China and Central Asian countries, Russia, and Europe. Its importance extends well beyond the trade between China and Kazakhstan. Khorgos serves a crucial function in the global aims of the BRI, functioning as a crucial element in overland freight routes that have the potential to revolutionize global supply chains by providing quicker and more efficient alternatives to sea transport.

⁴⁰ Edward Elgar, *Eurasian Economic Integration: Law, Policy and Politics*. United Kingdom: 2013, 49.



For China, Khorgos serves as a passage to Europe and a strategic asset to expand its economic influence throughout Central Asia.⁴¹ Through significant investments in infrastructure, customs integration, and special economic zones, China has transformed this previously isolated location into a prosperous logistics and manufacturing center. Meanwhile, Kazakhstan, being landlocked yet resource-rich and centrally positioned within Eurasia, utilizes Khorgos to broaden trade routes, decrease reliance on Russia, and position itself as a regional hub and policy innovator. On the other hand, for Russia, Khorgos presents both a strategic advantage and a geopolitical risk. While it can act as a key transfer point on the Northern Corridor and enhance Russian participation in Eurasian freight logistics, Khorgos also facilitates alternative pathways like the Middle Corridor that entirely evade Russian territory. This situation underscores the shifting geopolitical environment, as Kazakhstan manages to balance its relationships with both Russia and China and impose its independence.⁴²

⁴¹ Tilman Pradt, “The Prequel to China's New Silk Road: Preparing the Ground in Central Asia”. Germany: Springer Nature Singapore, 2020, 67.

⁴² Lidiya Parkhomchik and Hayal A. Simsek, "The geo-economic importance of the khorgos gateway: current developments." Eurasian Research Institute, 2015. <https://eurasian-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Weekly-e-bulletin-24-11-2015-30-11-2015-No-43-cc.pdf>.

Vast hydrocarbon resources of Kazakhstan have firmly positioned it as a major participant in the global energy system, which regulates not only its economic course of development but also its geopolitical impact. Kazakhstan, with the highest output of oil in Central Asia, and with approximately 30 billion barrels of proved oil stock, can enjoy the title of the cross-roads of the principal energy trade routes, linking the fertile inland regions to the straining markets of Europe, China, and elsewhere. In fact, oil exports were the major export of Kazakhstan via the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) that distributes crude in the Black Sea, majority of which relied on Russia. But over recent decades, Kazakhstan has diversified its export policies, lessening reliance on Russian infrastructure as it increasingly looks towards China as a key energy partner.⁴³

This is dynamic that is both necessary and strategic. In the period after independence, Kazakhstan had the twin challenge of restarting its oil sector and overcoming export bottlenecks which Russian export routes controlled.⁴⁴ As global energy firms entered Kazakhstan's upstream sector, major projects like Tengiz and Kashagan elevated the country's output. Still, the absence of diversified export infrastructure restricted Kazakhstan's full potential until the establishment of alternative pipelines, such as the Kazakhstan–China Oil Pipeline. China's rise as a major energy importer and its proximity to Kazakhstan created a compelling synergy, leading to billions in Chinese investments and strategic partnerships that bypass traditional maritime chokepoints.⁴⁵

Today, Kazakhstan's oil export architecture reflects a delicate balance between maintaining access to Russian-controlled corridors and building a resilient, eastward-looking infrastructure connected to China's rapidly growing market. This shift in export orientation signifies more than an energy pivot, it marks a strategic recalibration of foreign policy of Kazakhstan, enhancing its economic sovereignty, regional influence, and diplomatic flexibility.

⁴³ Dan Burghart, and Theresa Sabonis-Helf. 2004. “In the Tracks of Tamerlane: Central Asia’s Path to the 21st Century.” <https://doi.org/10.21236/ada524969>.

⁴⁴ Anastasia Koulouri, Nikolai Mouraviev, Kazakhstan’s Developmental Journey: Entrenched Paradigms, Achievements, and the Challenge of Global Competitiveness. Germany: Springer Nature Singapore, 2020.

⁴⁵ Sadoon Masood, Abdul Basit Khan, & Mairajul Hamid, A Review of China-Kazakhstan Economic Relationship during the 21st Century” Journal of Social Sciences Review, 2(4) 2022: 73.

Kazakhstan's Geopolitical Significance for Russia and China

Kazakhstan has geopolitical importance for both China and Russia. The geopolitical importance of Kazakhstan to both Russia and China are due to its huge energy reserves, its strategic transit location, and its buffer state status. Kazakhstan is geopolitically important to Russia because it is the country to the North and an ally in collective security, and to China as a gateway to the BRI and a key economic partner. Although historically exemplifying a multi-vector foreign policy to support a balance between these powers, as the global power struggles continue to intensify, Kazakhstan is growing more susceptible, as its location and resources can be used to support its autonomy amidst the competing interests of Russia, China, and other international powers.

Khorgos Dry Port

A Khorgos dry port situated in the Khorgos-Eastern Gate SEZ near the border of China and Kazakhstan is emerging as a significant hub for transportation and logistics.⁴⁶ The dry port covers a total of 294 hectares and lies only 15 kilometers to the Khorgos Port in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China, near the border of the two countries. Cargo trains that leave this inland port can take five days to reach Lianyungang in the eastern part of the Jiangsu Province in China and can take about nine to ten days to Europe. As a result of the varying track gauges between China and Kazakhstan, Chinese freight trains arrive at the border where their cargo is unloaded to be loaded onto the locally gauged trains to continue the journey. The process of transferring the cargo takes about 47 minutes.

In December 2012 the railways of Kazakhstan and China were connected. In 2013, there are about 65 trains with 6,000 unit containers that pass through the dry port on a monthly basis. Since ancient times of the Silk Road, Khorgos has served as a significant route both between China and the Eurasian continent. In August 1992, China and Kazakhstan signed an agreement that it should be opened to third parties. In September 2004, the two countries signed a memorandum on developing a cross-border cooperation center at Khorgos as a co-development project. China-Kazakhstan Khorgos International Border Cooperation Center opened in April 2012.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Nargis Kassenova, "China's Silk Road and Kazakhstan's Bright Path: Linking Dreams of Prosperity." *Asia Policy* 1 (1)2017: 17. <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2017.0028>.

⁴⁷ Lidiya Parkhomchik and Hayal A. Simsek, "The geo-economic importance of the khorgos gateway: current developments." Eurasian Research Institute, 2015. 34. <https://eurasian->

Khorgos is one of the major crossroads of the new Silk Road and the direct connection between 27 cities in China and 11 European cities. Goods are transported across the different inland cities in China to the port and then proceed with their route over the Eurasian continent. The statistics in Khorgos customs show that in 2016 the China-Kazakhstan Khorgos International Border Cooperation Center exported 26 million tons of goods and the total value of foreign trade increased by 10 percent during the past years. Moreover, more than 5 million individuals passed through the center and this is a growth of 36 percent over the previous year.⁴⁸

The area is quickly becoming modernized with office buildings, hotels and shops and the ease of transportation and high business potential is attracting more entrepreneurs to Khorgos. As per government decisions, a new city to house about 100,000 people will be established near the center in future. Another result of the new port development is that it will create additional jobs, with 99 percent of employees working on the dry port project being nationals of the Republic of Kazakhstan. In addition, the development of Khorgos-Eastern Gate Special Economic Zone has been estimated to offer 25,000 people local employment.⁴⁹

Khorgos Dry Port: Importance for Russia

Khorgos dry port is situated at the border of China and Kazakhstan. It is one of the essential elements of the BRI. Although it is a project of trade cooperation between China and Kazakhstan, it remains of great importance to Russia. Khorgos development is also linked to the New Eurasian Land Bridge Economic Corridor that is central to the Chinese European freight rail services. As Russia is a central player along this land bridge, it implicitly benefits from the improved connectivity and multimodal integration that Khorgos supports. The Khorgos dry port is noted for its potential to connect with international logistics centers and hubs, including those in Russia. This positions it as a multimodal interface that supports logistical integration with Russian infrastructure.⁵⁰

research.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Weekly-e-bulletin-24-11-2015-30-11-2015-No-43-cc.pdf.

⁴⁸ Infrastructure for Asian Connectivity. United Kingdom: Edward Elgar, 2012.

⁴⁹ Roza Nurgozhayeva, “Rule-Making, Rule-Taking or Rule-Rejecting under the Belt and Road Initiative: A Central Asian Perspective.” *The Chinese Journal of Comparative Law*, 2020.

⁵⁰ Igor Kabashkin, Irina Yatskiv, and Olegas Prentkovskis, “*Reliability and Statistics in Transportation and Communication*” *Selected Papers from the 19th International Conference on*

Khorgos Dry Port plays a crucial role for Russia by enabling efficient cargo transfers between the railway networks of China and Russia, as well as the broader Eurasian region, particularly for goods headed to Europe. It serves as an important node in the New Silk Road, promoting quicker and more cost-efficient transportation of products, especially containers, from China to Europe. The port functions as a significant break-of-gauge interchange where containers switch from Chinese standard gauge trains to the wider Russian gauge trains, which are utilized in Kazakhstan and further to Russia.⁵¹ By making this transfer possible, Khorgos significantly reduces the journey time of goods between China and Europe compared to sea transport, which may cut delivery times by weeks. Khorgos (China-Kazakhstan) is a strategic point on the Silk Road Economic Belt, a Chinese initiative designed to improve the trade links between Eurasia. Khorgos design supports various forms of transport, such as road and rail, allowing it to be an important part of a larger multimodal transport system.

The establishment of the dry port invites additional cargo flows and enhances the economic advantages of increased transportation. Khorgos is linked to the Kazakhstan Temir Zholy (KTZ) railway network, which connects it to the broader Russian railway system and further destinations in Europe.

Khorgos is situated at a crucial junction for trade across Eurasia, acting as a link between China and Central Asia, which then connects to Russia and Europe. For Russia, it is essential to maintain its influence over Central Asian transit paths like Khorgos to sustain its status as an important Eurasian transit center and to mitigate China's increasing dominance in the post USSR region. Khorgos facilitates transit through the EAEU member countries, particularly Kazakhstan and Russia. Russia gains advantages from customs integration and standardized transit processes under the EAEU, which enables a smoother flow of Chinese goods through Khorgos into Russia.

Challenge: Khorgos allows China and Central Asia to circumvent Russia by using the Middle Corridor leading to a decreased reliance on Russian railways and ports. Khorgos symbolizes China's growing footprint in Central Asia, historically a Russian dominant area. The port

Reliability and Statistics in Transportation and Communication, RelStat'19, 16-19 October 2019, Riga, Latvia.

⁵¹ Jakub Doński-Lesiuk, "The Importance of the 1520 Mm Gauge Rail Transport System for Trans-Eurasian International Trade in the Exchange of Goods." *Comparative Economic Research Central and Eastern Europe* 25 (1) 2022: 22. <https://doi.org/10.18778/1508-2008.25.01>.

strengthens China-Kazakhstan cooperation, reducing Kazakhstan's reliance on Russia for transit and trade.⁵² With China's BRI expanding, Russia faces a diminishing role in regional leadership and infrastructure development. As Kazakhstan increases trade with China via Khorgos and other BRI projects, it gains more economic autonomy. Russia loses influence over Kazakhstan's logistics, infrastructure decisions, and foreign policy flexibility. Kazakhstan intentionally adopts a multi-vector approach to decrease its reliance on Russia while fostering relationships with China, Western nations, and other global powers. Khorgos, serving as a logistics center between China and Kazakhstan, symbolizes this transition by facilitating direct trade with China, potentially circumventing Russian transportation routes. Kazakhstan has been proactively establishing pipeline and railway connections that avoid Russia, such as oil shipments to China through Atasu-Alashankou and links to Turkey and Iran. Likewise, Khorgos enables land-based cargo to steer clear of Russia, especially through the Middle Corridor that links China to Europe via Central Asia and the Caucasus.⁵³

Opportunity: Nevertheless, Russia can still gain advantages by being a major partner in the northern route (which goes through Kazakhstan, Russia, and into Europe), with Khorgos serving as a feeder port to the Trans-Siberian Railway and Northern Corridor. Russia holds an important role in energy export routes of Kazakhstan, even though Kazakhstan tries to diversify. Russia may seek similar roles in freight logistics through regional agreements or shared investments in dry ports or rail infrastructure. Khorgos presents Russia with an opportunity to participate in a rapidly expanding trade route, offering potential for increased trade levels, shorter transit times, and regional economic development, and also performing the maneuvers of its relations with China in the region.⁵⁴

⁵² Sadoon Masood, Abdul Basit Khan, Mairajul Hamid, "A Review of China-Kazakhstan Economic Relationship during the 21st Century". *Journal of Social Sciences Review*, 2(4)2022: 73.

⁵³ Yelena N. Zabortseva, Yelena, "Rethinking the Economic Relationship between Kazakhstan and Russia." *Europe-Asia Studies* 66, no. 2 (2014), 237.

⁵⁴ Philippe L. Corre and Kemal Kirişci, "The New Geopolitics of Central Asia: China Vies for Influence in Russia's Backyard." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2018/01/the-new-geopolitics-of-central-asia-china-vies-for-influence-in-russias-backyard?lang=en>

Khorgos Dry Port: Importance for China

Kazakhstan is the largest country in the Central Asian region that contains much oil and natural gas. It also enjoys the geopolitical advantage of being at the vantage point in between China and Europe. China and Kazakhstan are reviving the ancient trade route, the Silk Road. In 2013, China proposed a plan called the BRI to rekindle the Silk Road by connecting the land and seaports across more than sixty countries, and the highway is part of the plan. The Khorgos gateway located in the center of the Eurasian continent is the largest dry port in the world. The second largest trading partner of Kazakhstan after Russia is China. In order to improve their economic contact and trade, the two countries started working on the Khorgos project to make the transportation of their cargo between China and Europe through Kazakhstan more efficient. Silk road used to be a major route to business as well as cultural ties between Asia and the Europe way back in the ancient times.⁵⁵

In 2010, China and Kazakhstan signed the Korgos Special Economic Zone agreement and plan to establish a logistics zone and transport and logistics hub. Special Economic Zone (SEZ) Korgos is the way to the future. Transit is not the only significant area of interest among investors in Khorgos. The demand outside of SEZ also looks inviting, and it will provide an opportunity to save delivery time, particularly as the dry port is soon going to be available, and it will also contain logistics and industrial zones. As an intermediate between the Asia-Pacific and European markets, the Khorgos East Gate SEZ on the border between Kazakhstan and China is a storage and transportation hub, food production hub, textile production hub, and chemical and metal processing hub, which, in case of success, could open the way to similar projects. In the case of Khorgos, the project is called the Silk Road Economic Belt and it includes the development of infrastructure, the harmonization of the customs process and the removal of a range of bureaucracy barriers to trade.

Khorgos is a dry port on the border of Kazakhstan and will the gateway of the land route of the New Silk Road in China. As a step to forge new trade and transport relations between China, Central Asia and Europe, China hopes that Khorgos will become an important international logistic center in the Silk Road. This poses a big opportunity to Republic of Kazakhstan to enhance their transport and logistics in the region and attract an investment. Khorgos will complement the

⁵⁵ Lidiya Parkhomchik, and Hayal A. Simsek, "The Geo-economic importance of the Khorgos gateway: Current developments." Eurasian Research Institute, 2015. <https://eurasian-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Weekly-e-bulletin-24-11-2015-30-11-2015-No-43-cc.pdf>.

existing transport programs and will offer a possibility to utilize the opportunities of the landlocked countries. To the Chinese government, Khorgos is an East-West bridge and potential future success of the Silk Road Economic Belt project, to connect China with Central Asia and Europe through transportation channels, commerce, financial flow, and cultural interactions.⁵⁶ Following the introduction of the SREB program, Kazakhstan invested afresh in infrastructure, special economic zones, highways, railways and trade centers. The investments are related to transport and logistics and are concerned with a comprehensive modernization of the Kazakhstan infrastructure that alters the pattern of transport routes in Eurasia and shifts the global supply chains towards the route through Khorgos and over Kazakhstan. The Khorgos-East Gate has the following features:

- Implementation of warehousing and handling operations for shipping.
- Operation in multimodal transport, linking the port with rail and road routes.
- Provision of services for high-risk cargo that requires controlled Temperatures.

As is expected, the main cargo flow of the economic belt of the Silk Road will be East to West. Recently developed international transport corridors will provide direct rail links between the western and central Chinese provinces and EU countries via Dostyk station in Kazakhstan. It is also known that the transportation of Chinese commodities to Europe by rail is often 2-3 times faster than by sea, which is a great competitive advantage, especially in cases when the commodity must be transported very fast. The Chinese program of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the new economic policy of Kazakhstan: Nurly Zhol, mentioned in the message of President Nursultan Nazarbayev on November 11, 2014, are two sides of the same coin since they both focus on the development of the infrastructure, in particular, the transport infrastructure, as well as the communications. The purpose is to create one economic market by connecting the macro-regions of the country and implementation of a functional infrastructure based on the hub concept to promote long-term economic development in Kazakhstan and introduction of anti-crisis measures to support the economy of the country in the negative conditions on the global market. To enable the passing of over 40 million tonnes of cargo through the land corridors, Kazakhstan and China

⁵⁶ Aigul Islamjanova, Issah Iddrisu, Rathny Suy, Dinara Bekbauova, and Amran S. Suleiman, "The Impact of Silk Road Economic Belt on Economic Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan: The Case of Khorgos City." *Journal of Social Science Studies* 4, no. 2 (2017).

have developed a logistics and a railway system at the border, known as the SEZ Khorgos Eastern Gate, and a centre, Kazakhstan China International Centre of Cross-Border Cooperation (ICBC).⁵⁷

Kazakhstan holds a pivotal strategic position in the overall Russia-China relationship based on its geopolitical position, economic importance, and diplomatic standing. As one of the nine largest countries in the world, endowed with natural resources and being in the center of the Eurasia, Kazakhstan plays a significant role in the regional power relations and economic cooperation. Kazakhstan is positioned at the very heart of Eurasia, placing it at a strategic crossroads for trade and infrastructure initiatives between Russia and China. It is bordered on long sides by both countries 7,644 km by Russia (its longest boundary) and 1,783 km by China, enabling it to carry out economic and political exchanges between these two giants. Kazakhstan's capacity to remain equidistant from Russia and China provides stability in the region. Kazakhstan is the central partner for China's BRI and Russia's EAEU.⁵⁸ They acted as a common Sino-Russian point of interest in balancing the West, however, the absence of any actual cooperation demonstrates that China and Russia employ strategies against each other. Kazakhstan has skillfully balanced the competing influences by diversifying its trade, fostering economic growth, and leveraging its strategic position to safeguard its interests.

Kazakhstan plays an important role in regional organizations, for example, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The SCO offers Kazakhstan, which is well situated at the meeting point of Europe and Asia, a useful platform to improve its connections with its neighbors in terms of trade, investment, and transportation. Kazakhstan's strategic commitment to regional cooperation and development is exemplified by its strong engagement in the SCO.⁵⁹ Kazakhstan had been important in defining the SCO's goals and objectives, especially in the areas of connectivity, security, and economic cooperation. Kazakhstan's commitment to fostering a stable and cooperative geopolitical environment and strategic grasp of the organization's diverse interests sets it apart as a leader in the SCO. This is evident in its attempts to transform the SCO into a more

⁵⁷ Gabit Zhumatay, and Zh. Bainazar, "Transport and logistic opportunities of Kazakhstan within «New economic belt»." *International relations and international law series* 85, no. 1 (2019).

⁵⁸ Meruet Makhmutova, and European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), "Kazakhstan." Absorb and Conquer: An EU approach to Russian and Chinese integration in Eurasia, European Council on Foreign Relations, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21670.9>.

⁵⁹ Fatima Kemeleva, "Kazakhstan Leading SCO: A Balancing Act." The Astana Times, 2024. <https://astanatimes.com/2024/03/kazakhstan-leading-sco-a-balancing-act/>.

useful and effective forum that promotes more commercial and security cooperation among member states. Kazakhstan has shown its commitment to the organization's objectives by actively participating in initiatives like the SCO Business Council and the SCO Development Bank. These initiatives have given member nations the chance to engage in economic matters and strive toward shared regional development and prosperity goals.

After the Soviet Union's collapse, Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev was a key proponent of Eurasian integration. Kazakhstan helped establish the creation and development of regional bodies that predated the existence of the EAEU, including Eurasian Economic Community (EurEC) the Customs Union (CU), Common Economic Space. The result of these endeavors was the establishment of the EAEU in 2015 which included in its initial phases Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan and subsequently included Armenia and Kyrgyzstan. The multi-vector foreign policy of Kazakhstan allows it to develop economic cooperation without political control and balance its relations between Russia and China. Not only is Astana regarded as the political, but also the intellectual center of Eurasian integration efforts.⁶⁰

Kazakhstan supported Kyrgyzstan's accession to the EAEU, providing financial assistance and promoting economic synergy. Armenia's entry was largely seen as strategic due to its reliance on Russian security support. The EAEU is also working on linking with China's Belt and Road Initiative and creating Free Trade Zones, aiming for a shared export strategy by 2030.⁶¹

China however views Kazakhstan as its principal trading post but lack of soft policy wants like education is not wanting. The development of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been slowed down by the beginning of the Russian Ukrainian war and some sanctions, though it also gave China and several Central Asian states, including Kazakhstan, a chance to develop infrastructure in the region, taking advantage of recently available opportunities, including bypassing Russia, through the Middle Corridor (MC) path. The BRI is a connectivity policy that seeks to establish various land and maritime corridors with the intent of linking the market of China to the European markets.

⁶⁰ Ruslan Zhakupov, "The role of Kazakhstan in the Eurasian economic union." *Journal of Advanced Research in Social Sciences and Humanities* 5, page no. 2 (2020).

⁶¹ Anuar Satmurzin, "Central Asian Regional Security Complex: Kazakhstan's Role in Maintaining Regional Cooperation." Eurasian Research Institute, May 2015.

<https://www.eurasian-research.org/publication/central-asian-regional-security-complex-kazakhstans-role-in-maintaining-regional-cooperation/>.

China's economic rise has positioned it to become the greatest economy. Its foreign policy is now more proactive, notably through the BRI, launched in 2013 in Astana, Kazakhstan.⁶² The BRI involves over \$900 billion in infrastructure investments across three continents. Kazakhstan is geographically crucial for BRI as a transit hub between China and Europe. China values Kazakhstan's political stability, investment climate, and multi-vector foreign policy. Kazakhstan is expected to play a key role in building the Trans-Caspian transit corridor, mediating with Russia, and ensuring the smooth implementation of Western BRI projects.

Kazakhstan and China have very close economic relations, and BRI diverted attention to industrial relations. The program of Nurly Zhol in Kazakhstan is consistent with BRI because it aims at the development of infrastructure. One of the biggest investment programs is a transfer of Chinese production capacities into Kazakhstan worth more than 26.2 billion dollars.⁶³

BRI competes with Russia's influence through the EAEU. Although Russia initially supported BRI, it later promoted the concept of a "Great Eurasian Partnership" as a broader alternative. China and Russia maintain pragmatic but competitive relations in Central Asia. BRI is not just economic; it is a geo-economic strategy aiming to reshape Eurasia around China. For Kazakhstan, the initiative is both a great opportunity and a geopolitical balancing act.⁶⁴

Kazakhstan's Oil Exports to Russia and China

Oil is a major export of Kazakhstan, most of it to Europe and East Asia, with Russia being an important transit point and China an important destination. Kazakhstan is the energy exporter that stands at the crossroads between the transit dominance of Russia and the increasing direct demand of China. Kazakhstan is also relying on Russian pipelines to access European states. Moscow leverages this dependency occasionally limiting flows when there is a political conflict. Both paths enable Kazakhstan to stay strategically independent, but the war in Ukraine, Western sanctions on Russia, and the growing BRI by China is changing the choices of Astana.

⁶² Sandra Schorner, "China's Objectives with the Belt and Road Initiative: A Global Political Economy View of China". Germany: Bod Third Party Titles, 2021.

⁶³ Irina Heim, "Kazakhstan's Diversification from the Natural Resources Sector: Strategic and Economic Opportunities". Germany: Springer International Publishing, 2020, 31.

⁶⁴ Yerzhan Saltybayev, "BRI and Kazakhstan: Challenges and Outlooks of China's Grand Strategy in Central Asia." *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, no. 10 (2018): 85. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48573478>.

Kazakhstan's Oil Reserves

Kazakhstan is an important participant of the global energy environment because of its large deposits of oil, coal, natural gas, and uranium that vehemently alter the economic and geopolitical status of the country.

Kazakhstan has around 30 billion barrels of verified oil reserves and this is the 12 th in the world. It is Central Asia largest producer of oil and one of the greatest producers of oil in the former Soviet space. Current production (pre-COVID-19): Approximately 1.8 million barrels per day, but it would continue to expand above 2 million barrels per day. Kazakhstan's oil sector, rich in reserves, was seen as a key driver for economic recovery after independence. However, lack of export infrastructure, reliance on Russia, and the need for foreign investment and technology posed serious challenges. Despite these hurdles, the involvement of major international firms like Chevron positioned Kazakhstan as a future major oil exporter in the global market. It has over 15 billion barrels of proven and probable reserves. Major fields of oil reserves are Tengiz, Karachaganak, Korolevskoye, and Kumkol. Oil production declined in the early 1990s due to post-Soviet economic disruption, pipeline dependency on Russia, and lack of domestic refining capacity.⁶⁵ Kazakhstan relied on Russia for oil exports via pipelines and refineries (e.g., Samara, Orsk, Volgograd). Most of Kazakhstan's oil was refined outside the country, with domestic refineries often supplied by Russian crude. The lack of independent export pipelines was a critical issue. Kazakhstan attracted major foreign oil companies post-independence. The most notable partnership was the Chevron-Tengizchevroil JV, created in 1993 to develop the Tengiz field. Tengiz has over 24 billion barrels of oil in place, though only a portion is economically recoverable due to depth and high pressure.⁶⁶

Over 90% of the country's oil reserves are in 15 key fields, while approximately 70% of its proved and probable (2P) oil and gas condensate reserves are concentrated in the five largest fields: Tengiz, Kashagan, Korolevskoye, Karachaganak, and Zhanazhol.⁶⁷ Exports of oil are a major

⁶⁵ Matthew J. Sagers, and John R. Matzko, "The Oil Resources of Kazakhstan." *International Geology Review* 35 (11): 1993, 88. doi:10.1080/00206819309465576.

⁶⁶ "Tengiz Oilfield - Offshore Technology." 2002. Offshore Technology. January 15, 2002. <https://www.offshore-technology.com/projects/tengiz/>.

⁶⁷ IEA, *Kazakhstan energy profile*, IEA, Paris, 2020. <https://www.iea.org/reports/kazakhstan-energy-profile>, Licence: CC BY 4.0

feature of the Kazakhstan economy. The major conflict in oil production is the long distances involved in moving crude oil to different markets leading to high transportation costs and export routes which may be forced to pass through other countries and demand transit. Major oil export pipelines are the Atyrau-Samara, Caspian Pipeline Consortium, the Atassu-Alashankou pipeline, and the Aktau sea terminal. The Caspian Pipeline Consortium carried the largest quantity of oil transportation in 2018, transporting 54.3 million tons of oil per annum. Atyrau-Samara route supported 8.8 million tons to the Ust-Luga station located on the Baltic Sea and 6.9 million tons to the Novorossiysk station on the Black Sea.⁶⁸ Only 1.4 million tons were sent through the Kazakhstan-China pipeline in 2018, but that figure increased to over 10.9 million tons in 2019. In January 2020, Kazakhstan was required to halt oil exports to China because of poor fuel quality, which was caused by an excess of organochlorine.

Oil Exports to Russia

Kazakhstan exports a significant amount of crude oil to Russia, and most of this is transported by the Caspian Pipeline Consortium pipeline, through which Kazakh oil is conveyed via Russia to be exported via the Black Sea. Whereas this route is necessary in the export of oil to Russia which constitutes a large part of the total export of Kazakhstan, there have been hitches due to both accidental destruction and politically influenced factors. Note: officially known as the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) pipeline, it is a key international crude oil delivery project. It transfers the oil produced in Tengiz oil field, Kazakhstan to Novorossiysk-2 Marine Terminal in Russian coast of the Black Sea. This is a 1,511 kilometer length oil and gas pipeline that incorporates the collaboration of Russia, Kazakhstan, and other oil and gas corporations in the world.⁶⁹

CPC was established in 1992 through collaboration between the states of Russia, Kazakhstan, and Oman to create a dedicated pipeline for transporting oil from Kazakhstan to Black Sea export routes. Chevron Corporation was invited to participate; however, discussions collapsed due to the significant financial commitment Chevron would need to assume compared to its stake in the

⁶⁸ "Products and Export Routes - KPO ESG REPORT 2023." https://www.kpo.kz/docs/sustainability_report_2023/en/008-produkciya_i_eksportnye_marshruty.php.

⁶⁹ Vladimir Soldatkin, "Caspian Pipeline Consortium ready to increase oil supply in 2023." Reuters, June 13, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/caspian-pipeline-consortium-ready-increase-oil-supply-2023-2023-01-13/>.

pipeline. The development of the project stalled for several years until it was restructured in the year 1996 with eight production brands introduced into the project. Among such companies there were Chevron, Royal Dutch Shell and Rosneft. BP joined the consortium in 2003.⁷⁰ The eight companies and the three states had the shares equally. The production firms financed the construction of these to the extent of 2.67 billion and the Russian Federation to the extent of unutilized assets in the form of unused pipeline to the extent of 293 million. Oil was loaded into a tanker at the Novorossiysk Marine Terminal on 13 October 2001 and the first part of the pipeline on 27 November 2001. It began its normal operations in April 2003. In April 2007 the Russia government relinquished its ownership interests in the state-owned oil pipeline company Transneft. The Government of Oman sold its 7% stake in Transneft at 700 million dollars in October 2008 and pulled out of the project. December 17, 2008, an agreement was signed to expand the pipeline. The CPC moved 31.5 million tons of crude oil in 2008, which was compared to 32.6 million tons the previous year. The amount of oil the pipeline transported in the first quarter of 2009 was 8.7 million tons.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Bruce McKern, Lyn Denend, “TNK-BP (a): Russian Oil and Foreign Interests.” Stanford Graduate School of Business. <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/faculty-research/case-studies/tnk-bp-russian-oil-foreign-interests>.

⁷¹ Eugene Khartukov, “Kazakhstan’s Energy Resources: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow.” *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* 26, no. 2 (2022): 26. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48681983>.



Source: Created by self

Route of CPC Pipeline



Source: CPC Pipeline Map Uploaded by Elvira Kostromova on Jun 17, 2014,
<https://www.scribd.com/doc/230028829/CPC-Pipeline-map>

Oil Exports to China

The oil imports of China in Kazakhstan are the basic element of its energy security policy. This line of thought started when China switched its position as an oil self-sufficient country in 1993 into being a net importer, and it realized the need to diversify its energy suppliers. Central Asia and especially Kazakhstan became one of the key regions with the geographical closeness to Xinjiang.

The need to circumvent strategic chokepoints like the Malacca Strait and political motives aimed at decreasing Russian dominance over Central Asian energy exports. In 1997, CNPC acquired a

60.3% stake in AktobeMunaiGaz, securing access to the Zhanazhol Oilfield, marking China's initial oil endeavor in Kazakhstan.⁷²

The establishment of the Kazakhstan-China Pipeline set the stage for direct pipeline infrastructure. The focus during this time was on smaller or marginal oilfields, as supergiant fields were already under the control of Western and Russian companies. This era was driven primarily by corporate interests, with limited support from diplomatic channels.

China National Petroleum Corporation reinforced its upstream dominance and extended its operations into neighboring Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. In 2005, it acquired Petro Kazakhstan, positioning CNPC as the third-largest operator in Kazakhstan's oil sector.⁷³

In 2005 with the opening up of the China Kazakh Crude Oil Pipeline (962 km long) this pipeline could transport about a quarter of the oil being imported into China at the time. The Central AsiaChina Gas Pipeline was launched in 2009 as a connection of the West-East II pipeline system of China. It improved the infrastructure of China in the middle. Switched the state energy policy of China to a more proactive model, that is, through diplomatic visits and financial support.

China's Export-Import Bank and China Development Bank provided approximately \$10 billion to KazMunaiGaz, which included: \$3.3 billion aimed at acquiring MangistauMunaiGaz, owner of 35 oil fields (including Kalamkas and Zhetybai) and joint development efforts for the Urikhtau gas field, which supplies the China-Kazakhstan gas pipeline.⁷⁴

In October 2012, construction started on the West-East III pipeline, designed to connect Chinese coastal provinces with gas supplies from Central Asia. Kazakhstan emerged as CNPC's primary source of equity oil. During this period, 58% of Chinese overseas energy loans were directed towards Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Russia. The integration of pipelines connected

⁷² Cesar B. Alvarez, Martinez. "China-Kazakhstan Energy Trade Relations." *Journal of International Affairs* 69, no. 1: 2015 57. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jintearffa.69.1.57>.

⁷³ Kaster Sarkytkan, Nazym Raiymbekova, and Razia Tokhan, "Trade and Economic Cooperation of Kazakhstan with China and Russia: Geopolitical Interest and Geoeconomic Dependencies." *Kazakhstan Oriental Studies* 14, no. 2. 2025 doi:10.63051/kos.2025.2.212.

⁷⁴ Cesar B. Martinez Alvarez "China-Kazakhstan Energy Relations Between 1997 and 2012." *Journal of International Affairs*. January 2016. <https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/news/china-kazakhstan-energy-relations-between-1997-and-2012>.

Kazakhstan's energy fields directly to China's domestic energy grid, lowering reliance on maritime transportation.⁷⁵

Kazakhstan offers overland energy security, mitigating China's vulnerabilities at sea. It bolsters the development of Xinjiang through the integration of energy corridors. It weakens Russia's energy monopoly in Central Asia, fostering greater regional independence. Despite some apprehensions from Russia, China has generally adopted a cooperative stance, often through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, to align geopolitical interests.

Kazakhstan's Oil Exports to China via the Kazakhstan-China Oil Pipeline



Source: Created by self

⁷⁵ Li Xuanmin, and Xing Xiaojing, "Energy Cooperation 'cornerstone' of China, Kazakhstan Economic Relations, Vivid Example of Complementary, Win-win Results." Global Times. 2024 <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202407/1315378.shtml>.

Map of China Kazakhstan Oil Pipelines



Source: Thomas Stephan Eder, "Sino-Russian Relations: The Impact of Central Asian Energy Resources." Vienna Journal of East Asian Studies 2024. <https://doi.org/10.2478/vjeas-2014-0008>. https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Kazakhstan-China-oil-pipeline_fig1_329421388

Analysis of the Shifting Pattern of Oil Export to either China or Russia

The pattern of oil export of the republic of Kazakhstan is experiencing a significant shift that is replacing its traditional relationship with Russia and shifting towards a stronger relationship with China as an energy ally. Oil Exports through Russia (CPC) Major Flow: Over the period between 2000 and 2010, over 30million tons of the crude oils were shipped out in the Caspian Pipeline

Consortium (CPC) which became an important channel to the Russian Black Sea port of Novorossiysk.⁷⁶ This reached a high of 42 million tons circa 2015¹⁶. By 2016 throughput began to drop because of: Aging infrastructure, unexpected shutdowns, maintenance difficulties, and Geopolitical strife (including sanctions on Russia after 2014). Despite these delays, the CPC still controls a large share of Kazakh crude oil and Kazakhstan is in the situation where it is dependent on Russian logistical and political forces. Oil Exports to China first increases. China began to receive oil exports gradually after 2000 initially because CNPC bought other companies such as AktobeMunaiGaz and the creation of the Kazakhstan -China oil pipeline in 2005. Surge began between 2009 and 2012 with entry of Petro Kazakhstan, completion of the Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline, investment worth about 10 billion dollars and strategic Chinese acquisitions.⁷⁷ The pipelines are now directly connected to China's domestic network, circumventing maritime chokepoints and minimizing vulnerabilities to geopolitical issues (such as disruptions in the Strait of Malacca). By 2020, exports to China hit roughly 18.2 million tons, nearly half of what is transported to Russia. Kazakhstan is tactically readjusting its oil export strategies, while Russia continues to be crucial because of historical pipeline networks and capacity, its significance is declining. China is becoming the foundational pillar of Kazakhstan's energy diplomacy, supported by investment, infrastructure, and mechanisms for regional stability. This shifting export dynamic strengthens Kazakhstan's autonomy, promotes economic diversification, and enhances its geopolitical flexibility while managing relations with two major powers.

In conclusion, Kazakhstan occupies a strategic role in the entire Russia-China relation with regard to the geopolitical location, economic significance, and diplomatic status. As the ninth-largest state globally, abundant in natural resources and situated at the heart of Eurasia, Kazakhstan is a significant state in between Russia and China, which influences power politics in the region and regional economic cooperation. Kazakhstan stands at the center of the Eurasia, the location that puts the country in a strategic point of crossroads in terms of trade and infrastructure projects between Russia and China. The crucial position of Kazakhstan in the trilateral relations between Russia, China, and Central Asia has been determined by major location, rich resources, and variety

⁷⁶ Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States Oil and Gas Industry Report. United Kingdom: Oilfield Publications Limited, 1994.

⁷⁷ Nadege Rolland, “China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative”. United States: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017.

of foreign policy. Kazakhstan is located in the heart of Eurasia and has emerged as a transit center and also as an energy corridor, which links the vast market and logistical routes of Russia and China. The Khorgos Dry Port, involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative by China and collaborating with the Eurasian Economic Union are examples of how Kazakhstan can play the unique role in facilitating East-West connectivity and economic integration.

The progress in critical infrastructure, including pipelines, railroads, and special economic zones, has enabled Kazakhstan to expand its economic and diplomatic relationships while reducing its historical reliance on Russian routes. Kazakhstan's shift in its energy export strategy, particularly its gradual movement away from Russian-controlled pathways toward those linked to China, indicates a larger realignment in the regional power structure.

Kazakhstan's initiative to lessen its dependence on Russian infrastructure, especially regarding energy exports, has transformed the regional dynamics. While this transition bolsters Kazakhstan's economic independence and creates avenues for stronger cooperation with China, it also poses challenges to Russia's long-established influence in Central Asia.⁷⁸ This shift brings both rivalry and interconnection to the Russia-China relationship as both nations strive to establish strategic control over Kazakhstan's transit and energy routes. Consequently, Kazakhstan's balancing strategy not only shapes its foreign policy direction but also significantly influences the larger geopolitical rivalry between Moscow and Beijing in the center of Eurasia.

The following chapter will expound on how Kazakhstan relies on Russian infrastructure and the effect it has on the Russia China relations. The relationship between Russia and Kazakhstan has a long history that has been formed throughout centuries of interaction, which has included both cooperation and conflicts. These relationships have helped in their present relationship that is characterized by a combination of strategic alliance and historical struggles.⁷⁹ The historical ties with Russian energy infrastructure are also attributed to the Soviet past of Kazakhstan. This comprises vital oil and gas pipelines that are vital in exporting hydrocarbons. Practically 100 percent of energy exports by Kazakhstan was shipped by Russian pipes because of Soviet

⁷⁸ World Bank, *World Development Report 2009: Reshaping Economic Geography*. United Kingdom: World Bank Publications, 08.

⁷⁹ Russia and Asia: The Emerging Security Agenda. Argentina: Oxford University Press, 1999, 106.

integration. First, the foreign firms were not allowed to use the Russian pipelines, and this gave Russia a monopoly on the passage of energy in Eurasia. The Tengiz-Novorossiysk route remains to be an important export route. In as much as the Western companies control the Kazakh block, Transneft of Russia controls the Russian block, and this enables it to control prices and export. China has become the main energy investor, creditor, and market in Kazakhstan and therefore, it has posed a direct threat to Russian dominance. Through their cooperation China and Kazakhstan have constructed the Atasu-Alashankou oil pipeline and the Central Asia-China gas pipeline in the form of Kazakhstan-China Pipeline LLP, which allows direct export without having to transit through Russia. This network of pipelines reduces the energy export dependence of Kazakhstan on Russia as a strategic counterpoint.

CHAPTER 3

Kazakhstan's Dependence on Russian Infrastructure and its Impact on Russia China Relations

The aim of this chapter is to examines the impact of the dependency of Kazakhstan on the Russian infrastructure, especially the energy pipelines, transport corridors, and communication networks on its relationship with China. The historical interaction between Russia and Kazakhstan has a complex path of colonization, population change, and social and political strife. In the late years of the Tsarist Russian Empire, a significant number of Russian peasants were relocated to the Kazakh steppe, causing the native Kazakh people to be displaced and leading to the rise of Kazakh national awareness in response to Russian control.⁸⁰ By 1939, ethnic Russians had emerged as a plurality in Kazakhstan as the Soviet industrialization efforts and the Virgin Lands agricultural initiative brought millions of Russian settlers into the region, particularly in its northern and urban sectors. Conversely, the Kazakh population experienced a demographic decline due to famine, migration, and political oppression. After WWII, the northern part of Kazakhstan became significantly Russified both population and economy wise, reinforcing its ties to Russia more than to other areas of Kazakhstan. This situation heightened Kazakh worries about cultural marginalization and the dilution of their national identity. In the 1980s, Kazakh leaders initiated a kazakhization effort—a counter to russification, implementing language legislation, educational changes, and increasing Kazakh representation in governmental roles.⁸¹

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, they appeared on the world map. One of them was the republic of Kazakhstan. It is the largest state by land in Central Asia which shares close ties with The Russian Federation. Russia and Kazakhstan share close bilateral relations with each other with a blend of cooperation and level of independence. Kazakhstan is one of the resource rich countries in the region mainly energy resources which makes it very important for Russia. Russia

⁸⁰ Ganiy Karassayev, Aman Rakhmetullin, and Bekmurat Naimanbayev. "History of the colonization of the Kazakh steppe by the Russian Empire (XVIII-XIX)." *Investigaciones Historicas*. September 2, 2024.

⁸¹ Robert Kaiser, and Jeff Chinn, "Russian Kazakh Relations in Kazakhstan." *Post-Soviet Geography* 36 (5) 1995: 27. doi:10.1080/10605851.1995.10640992.

and Kazakhstan both heavily rely on energy exports for their economy.⁸² The study examines Russia's energy interests and Kazakhstan's dependence on Russian infrastructure for its energy exports, and its effects on relations with China. Historically, Kazakhstan's energy export routes have been heavily influenced by Russia, primarily due to Soviet-era pipeline systems like the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) and the Uzen-Atyrau-Samara line. These networks, which cross through Russian land, continue to play a vital role in transporting Kazakh crude to European and global markets. Although Kazakhstan has made efforts to diversify its routes most notably with new pipelines connecting to China. Russian infrastructure remains essential because of proximity, historical ties, and integration within regional organizations such as EAEU.⁸³

This reliance on infrastructure gives Russia significant geopolitical power, enabling it to affect not just the movement of Kazakh energy but also the wider regional energy situation. Moscow's financial investments in Kazakhstan's energy infrastructure further strengthen this mutual dependency, disguised as cooperation but fundamentally based on strategic interests. As Kazakhstan's major production projects—Tengiz, Kashagan, and Karachaganak—grow, their connections to Russian-controlled export routes highlight the lasting importance of Russian investment and control in the Caspian energy sector. Kazakhstan's key location in Central Asia has made it an essential point in the geopolitical, economic, and technological frameworks that have influenced the modern history of Eurasia. Its significance ranges from being the focal point of Soviet nuclear testing at the Semipalatinsk Test Site to its vital railway and electricity grid systems, demonstrating both the remnants of the Soviet past and the aspirations of a rapidly globalizing region. Additionally, Kazakhstan's electricity grid is closely linked to Russia's energy network. Facing recurring domestic shortages, the country has become increasingly dependent on importing electricity from Russia, a situation that provides stability while also making Kazakhstan vulnerable to geopolitical manipulation and economic implications.⁸⁴ This reliance is beneficial to Russia

⁸² Christopher A. Stevens, "Russia–Kazakhstan Relations in the Early Post-Soviet Era: Explaining the Roots of Cooperation." *Europe-Asia Studies* 72 (7) 2020: 85. doi:10.1080/09668136.2020.1719979.

⁸³ Arial Cohen, Kevin Rosner, "Kazakhstan: Energy Cooperation with Russia - Oil, Gas and Beyond". United Kingdom: GMB Pub, 2006.

⁸⁴ Sholpan Smagulova, Bakhytgul Chereyeva, Saltanat Zhakupova, Saule Intykbayeva, Bayan Abdulina, Taizhan Sarzhanov, Gulnar Abdulina, and Aigerim Abeldanova, "Assessment of the Impact of Electric Power Production on the Economic Growth of Kazakhstan." *International Journal of Energy Economics and Policy* 14 (4) 2024: 391. <https://doi.org/10.32479/ijep.16036>.

both in terms of financial benefits and strategic leverage, as Moscow is guaranteed to continue playing a role in the changing energy interactions of Central Asia. Meanwhile, the huge Belt and Road Program of China has made it pay more attention to infrastructure and energy sectors in Kazakhstan, and the stability and autonomy of electricity and transport in the country becomes the issue of increased regional significance. All these aspects are interwoven and interdependent, nuclear heritage, rail systems, and dependence on electricity, which makes Kazakhstan a unique location of convergence between past imperial motives and modern geopolitical conflicts. They emphasize the fact that infrastructures developed under the Soviet rules still influence economic development, interaction of the Kazakhstan region, and the choice of the strategy of the country in the twenty-first century.⁸⁵

Infrastructure of Russia in Kazakhstan

Historically, Russia has maintained considerable influence over Kazakhstan's energy export infrastructure. Most of the oil and gas exporters of Kazakhstan transit across Russian territory, especially when it comes to older Soviet era pipelines including those of the CPC and the Uzen-Atyrau-Samara pipeline. Even though Kazakhstan has undertaken diversification initiatives (such as pipelines to China), Russian infrastructure remains vital because of the geographical aspect, the sunk cost, and the fact that it is part of the EAEU. This reliance gives Moscow geopolitical leverage, which it utilizes in both economic and strategic contexts.⁸⁶

Kazakhstan and Russia share the longest land border globally, spanning approximately seven and a half thousand kilometers. The nature of their bilateral relations changes considering Kazakhstan's landlocked position, its lack of direct ocean access, the vast distances in the ninth largest country in the world, and the fact that Kazakhstan's primary foreign trade partners for crude oil are EU nations, requiring transit through Russia. Additionally, Kazakhstan shares a border with Russia along the Caspian Sea, which holds a considerable portion of the nation's hydrocarbon resources.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Arial Cohen, Kevin Rosner, "Kazakhstan: Energy Cooperation with Russia - Oil, Gas and Beyond". Kogan Page Business Books, 2006, 233.

⁸⁶ Pier Paolo Raimondi, "Kazakhstan" *Central Asia Oil and Gas Industry - The External Powers' Energy Interests in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan*. Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei (FEEM) 2019, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21861.10>.

⁸⁷ Mikhail S. Blinnikov, "A Geography of Russia and Its Neighbors". United Kingdom: Guilford Publications, 2021.

Three major projects are extremely used in the oil and gas production at Kazakhstan, and they are Karachaganak, Tengiz and Kashagan. The growth of production in 2019 can be attributed to stable growth at the Kashagan field (14.1 million tons), on top of the already mentioned Tengiz (29.8 million tons) and Karachaganak (11.2 million tons). All these principal projects combined constitute about 60 percent of the total production in Kazakhstan. All these projects are well connected with the cooperation with Russia. More precisely, one of the main places of interest in terms of oil and gas infrastructure, the Karachaganak field, is developed as a part of the Karachaganak Petroleum Operating (KPO) consortium, where Lukoil is an investor in 13.5 percent. However, more important is the reliance of the Kazakhstani oil exports on the transit through the Russian territory.⁸⁸

Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC)

CPC is a pipeline network that conveys crude oil in Caspian Sea to black sea. It was established by international partners including oil companies of Russia and Kazakhstan in the year 1992.⁸⁹ The CPC aims at offering the security and efficiency of transportation channel to ship oil produced in the Caspian Sea region to access the global markets. The western Kazakhstan oil fields are the location of the pipeline system that extends to the port of Novorossiysk at the Russian coast in the black sea. CPC pipeline network is made up of pipelines chain, pumping stations and storing. Its total length is 1, 511 kilometers with a capacity of 67million tons of oil/year. The oil companies participate in the co-ownership of the CPC company, which operates and manages the pipeline system. The CPC has been of critical importance in enhancing performance of oil exports in the Caspian Sea. It has created an effective and cheap transportation system, lessening the application of other transportation systems such as Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. The pipeline system has also led to the oil industry development in the Caspian Sea region and economic growth of countries of interest.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Raikhan Zhanbulatova, Miras Zhiyenbayev, Maira Dyusembekova, and Roza Nurtazina, "The energy vector of Kazakhstan-Russia relations in the context of global changes on the international energy market." *Central Asia and The Caucasus* 21, no. 2, 2020: 130. doi:10.37178/ca-c.20.2.11.

⁸⁹ The Petroleum Economist. United Kingdom: Petroleum Press Bureau, 1999.

⁹⁰ Amina Afzal, "The Caspian Region: competition for pipeline routes." *Strategic Studies* 24, no. 3 (2004): 111. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45242540>.

The Caspian Pipeline Consortium has served as a crucial infrastructure project for the transport of oil from the Caspian Sea. It has established an essential connection between the oil-producing region and global markets, bolstering energy security and economic stability. The objective was to build a pipeline stretching 1,511 km, 452 km of which lies in Kazakhstan. This pipeline links the Tengiz oil field to the Russian port of Novorossiysk on the Black Sea, from where Kazakh oil is exported to EU nations. It is important to highlight that only the consortium members (including KazMunayGas, Chevron, Lukoil, ExxonMobil, Rosneft-Shell, Eni, and others) are permitted to utilize the CPC pipeline system for oil transportation.

The CPC pipeline is very important of Kazakhstan's energy export strategy and a pivotal project for Russian transit dominance. While it offers stable transit for Kazakhstan's growing oil output, its long-term competitiveness will depend on cost, expansion, and geopolitical stability compared to Southern corridor options. The length of the CPC is 1,580 km total, including: 745 km of new pipeline (Novorossiysk–Komsomolskaya). Approximately 800 km of rehabilitated Soviet-era pipeline (Komsomolskaya–Tengiz) and a new Volga River crossing and offshore terminal at Novorossiysk.⁹¹

Kazakhstan is the primary oil producer utilizing the CPC, a pipeline that offers significant economic advantages to Russia. Firstly, the pipeline traverses Russian land, allowing Russian companies to collect transit fees for the quantities transported across their territory.⁹² Furthermore, Russian oil producers utilize the CPC network for their own exports, benefiting from its efficient passage to the Black Sea. This dual role indicates that Russia not only serves as a host but also operates as a user and a financial gain recipient of the CPC. Economically, it is through this pipeline that Russia has earned the infrastructure and energy industry a lot of income. The CPC is geopolitically significant to Russia, in addition to the economic gains. Through control over an important part of the Kazakhstan oil export route, Russia makes sure that a substantial part of the Kazakhstan oil is dependent on Russian territory to pass through. This scenario enables Moscow to have strategic control of the energy exports by Kazakhstan and, therefore, of the geopolitical

⁹¹ John Roberts, "Energy reserves, pipeline routes and the legal regime in the Caspian Sea." Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2012.

<https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/books/SIPRI01Chufrin/SIPRI01Chufrin03.pdf>.

⁹² Ariel Cohen, Kevin Rosner, Kazakhstan: Energy Cooperation with Russia - Oil, Gas and Beyond. Kogan Page Business Books. 2006, 64.

choices made by Kazakhstan. In a region that has always been sensitive to major power rivalries, controlling transit routes grants Russia leverage in diplomatic and economic discussions with its southern neighbor. Thus, the CPC is not merely a commercial resource for Russia but also a mechanism for regional power.

Although the CPC does not create a physical link to China and does not transport oil directly toward the east, it still possesses indirect strategic significance for Beijing. China has strong investment ties and trade relations with Kazakhstan, especially under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁹³ The CPC enables Kazakhstan to send oil to the west, which helps broaden its market opportunities and revenue options. A more economically stable and diversified Kazakhstan is advantageous for China, as it fosters a dependable partner in Central Asia and minimizes the risks tied to relying exclusively on pipelines leading to China. Additionally, the existence of western-oriented export routes like the CPC enhances Kazakhstan's negotiating leverage when discussing oil agreements with China, which in turn influences China's energy diplomacy. From a regional standpoint, the CPC underscores Kazakhstan's approach to balancing relationships among its influential neighbors and global allies. By channeling oil westward through the CPC, Kazakhstan avoids complete dependency on either Russia or China. This balancing maneuver enables Kazakhstan to uphold its sovereignty and pursue an autonomous foreign policy, even while it remains landlocked and dependent on its neighboring countries for export pathways. For Russia, the CPC guarantees its ongoing involvement in Central Asian energy logistics. For China, it serves as a reminder that Kazakhstan has alternatives, affecting Beijing's investment and foreign policy strategies to ensure Kazakhstan continues to be a cooperative ally.⁹⁴

⁹³ Hideo Ohashi, "The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the Context of China's Opening-up Policy." *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 7 (2) 2018: 103.
doi:10.1080/24761028.2018.1564615.

⁹⁴ Julian Lee and Yelena Kalyuzhnova, "Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor Infrastructure: Oil and Gas Pipelines," in *Unlocking Transport Connectivity in the Trans-Caspian Corridor*, ed. (Tokyo: Asian Development Bank Institute, 2021), 72.

Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC)



Source: <https://www.al-isragroup.com/caspian-pipeline-consortium/>

Uzen-Atyrau-Samara Pipeline

The Uzen-Atyrau-Samara oil pipeline is a vital pathway for exporting Kazakh crude oil to international markets through Russia. Constructed between 1968 and 1970, this pipeline stretches 1,380 kilometers, of which 1,232 kilometers are located within Kazakhstan.⁹⁵ It starts at the Uzen oil field in western Kazakhstan and Northwards to Samara in Russia where it becomes part of the Russian Transneft network. Originally constructed during the Soviet era, it is still a significant element of the oil transportation policy of Kazakhstan nowadays. It is a high-wax content crude oil heated pipeline capable of carrying 30 million tons per year with an average of about 600,000 barrels per day (bpd) flow after renovation in 2009 and it also includes new pumping and heating

⁹⁵ Shamil Midkhatovich Yenikyeff, Kazakhstan's Gas: Export Markets and Export Routes. United Kingdom: Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, 2008.

equipment. This was the primary route of export of the crude oil of Kazakhstan before the commencement of the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC). This pipeline is important as it has to ensure that at least 15 million tons of the product will be transported per year, in 2002 a pact was signed between Kazakhstan and Russia to ensure that this pipeline will be strategic in linking Kazakhstan to the world markets through the ports of the Black Sea.⁹⁶

In the year 2019, 14.3 million tons of oil were moved in the Atyrau-Samara pipeline which has a throughput capacity of 17.5 million tons of oil per year. This pipeline has a total length of 697 kilometers, 535 kilometers of which are situated in Kazakhstan, which allows reaching markets across Russia, through the Transneft pipeline system and reaching the ports of the Black and Baltic seas. In the meantime, the transportation of oil in the Caspian and Black seas has not been increasing, and its further decrease is highly likely.⁹⁷ The Atyrau-Samara pipeline is recognized as a key channel for exporting crude oil from Kazakhstan into Russia. Although Kazakhstan is increasingly relying on trans-Caspian shipping from the Aktau port, this pipeline continues to be crucial for transporting crude directly into the Russian pipeline system.⁹⁸ This pipeline effectively links Kazakhstan's oilfields near Uzen and Atyrau to the Samara hub in Russia, allowing oil to be routed to Russian refineries or export terminals, particularly merging into Russia's Urals crude streams.

The Uzen-Atyrau-Samara pipeline is an important section of the oil export infrastructure of the Kazakh state connecting Uzen oil field in western Kazakhstan with Atyrau to Samara, Russia. This route is under the management of KazTransOil JSC and is recognized as one of Kazakhstan's main export pathways, boasting a capacity of approximately 17.5 million tons each year. This pipeline acts as an essential channel for Kazakh oil exports into the Russian pipeline network, enabling Kazakhstan's crude to blend into the Urals stream for subsequent shipping to European markets.

⁹⁶ Eugene M. Khartukov, "Kazakhstan's Energy Resources: yesterday, today, and tomorrow." *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* 26, no. 2 2022: 102. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48681983>.

⁹⁷ Raikhan Zhanbulatova, Miras Zhiyenbayev, Maira Dyusembekova, and Roza Nurtazina. "The energy vector of Kazakhstan-Russia relations in the context of global changes on the international energy market." *Central Asia and The Caucasus* 21, no. 2, 2020: 121. doi:10.37178/ca-c.20.2.11.

⁹⁸ Tina Soliman Hunter, "Historical Perspectives on the Global Petroleum Economy." In *Edward Elgar Publishing eBooks*, 2023 32. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781788978224.00006>.

For Russia, this pipeline is economically and strategically valuable as it strengthens Moscow's status as a crossroad of the Central Asian energy sources. By routing Kazakh oil through Russian territory, Russia preserves a level of control over Kazakhstan's export choices and secures transit revenues, all while enhancing its geopolitical influence in the region. Regarding China, the Uzen–Atyrau–Samara pipeline is not directly significant in terms of its route, as it moves west rather than east. Nevertheless, the pipelines like this still indirectly impact China's interests. The existence of the Western export routes gives Kazakhstan an alternative to complete reliance on the eastern imports to China. Such diversification enhances the bargaining power and economic stability of Kazakhstan which are critical elements of energy security plans of China through the Belt and Road Initiative. In essence, though China is not a beneficiary of the Uzen-Atyrau-Samara pipeline, this infrastructure is one of the broader region energy landscapes, which China is actively engaged in the industry. The role of the pipeline in balancing the oil of Kazakhstan with the Russian export system reflects the interrelation of their geopolitical and economic interests of Russia and China in the practice of power over the energy sector of Kazakhstan.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Sharifa Giritlioglu, “A Comparative Analysis of the Energy Policies of China and Russia in Kazakhstan,” *bilig*, no. 112 (2025): 72, <https://doi.org/10.12995/bilig.7772>.

Uzen Atyrau Samara (UAS) Pipeline Map



Source: Richardson, Edward. 2022. “In Brief: Oil Exports via Novorossiysk”. <https://edfin.substack.com/p/in-brief-oil-exports-via-novorossiysk>

Russian Nuclear Test Site in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan also has a special relevance to Russia since it had been using this as a nuclear testing site. The location is called Semipalatinsk and located in East Kazakhstan province. Between 1949 and 1989, the Semipalatinsk Test Site was a key location of nuclear testing by both the Soviet Union, both above and underground. The Soviets conducted the first nuclear weapon test on August 29, 1949 and named it Pervaya molniya or First lightning at Semipalatinsk. Overall, 456 nuclear tests were done in Semipalatinsk Test site comprising 340 underground tests and 116 atmospheric tests. Within it were four test areas and two research reactors that the city of Kurchatov maintained (though they were closed later). With 116 atmospheric nuclear tests, 56 were by aerial drop and 60 by tower detonation conducted at the Experimental Field. Following the signing of the Limited Test Ban Treaty in 1963, the Soviet Union carried out 340 underground nuclear tests in all the four locations of the test in caves or boreholes. Or there were the nine harmless nuclear

experiments of the Soviet Union in Semipalatinsk that were oriented to the formation of artificial lakes and the possibility to practice large scale mining and construction works.

In November 1989 the last test at the Semipalatinsk Test Site was a nuclear test at Balapan.¹⁰⁰ At the fall of the Soviet Union, the site was obtained by a new independent state of Kazakhstan. Scientists and Russian security officers fled rapidly, and they left no information to the Kazakh government on the location of majority of the tunnels or boreholes. The President of Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev officially closed the Semipalatinsk Test Site on August 29, 1991. The Semipalatinsk Test Site premises are at present controlled by the National Nuclear Center of the Republic of Kazakhstan that is engaged in the civilian activity and site re-purification. Semipalatinsk Test Site is closed.

There is no security barrier that surrounds the site and until the 1990s the security troops at the Baykal-1 complex and the IGR research reactor complexes were the only dedicated security troops. Additionally, beryllium, coal and gold are mined throughout the site and table salt is mined in a lake that is adjacent to the primary testing field. Over a period of 1997 2000 181 test tunnels and 13 test shafts in Semipalatinsk were covered because of a joint venture between the US and Kazakhstan due to the Nunn-Lug Cooperative Threat Reduction Program. The US officials later on announced the site to be safe and no further act of cooperation was exhibited. In March 2012 at the Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul, President Obama, President Medvedev of Russia, and President Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan announced the previously secret Trilateral Threat Reduction Cooperation project and paid initial public attention to work in Semipalatinsk. According to the official estimates of U.S., twelve bombs of plutonium have been locked down on the location between 2005 and 2012 at a total cost of 150 million dollars. The nuclear material in the site became inaccessible to program efforts, except through the effort of large-scale mining and recovery operation.¹⁰¹

The nuclear testing had grave repercussions for the local community and the environment. Thousands of individuals were subjected to radiation exposure, and the region continues to be

¹⁰⁰ Caravanistan, “Semipalatinsk Test Site: How to Visit, History and Future”, May 22, 2025. <https://caravanistan.com/kazakhstan/north/semye/kurchatov-polygon/>.

¹⁰¹ Anna Majuri, “Russia and Kazakhstan in the Global Nuclear Sector: From Uranium Mining to Energy Diplomacy - FIIA - Finnish.” FIIA - *Finnish Institute of International Affairs*. September 19, 2024. <https://fiiia.fi/julkaisu/russia-and-kazakhstan-in-the-global-nuclear-sector>.

contaminated. According to estimates from Central Asia Guide, more than 200,000 people living nearby were impacted. The site was shut down in 1991, and since then, Kazakhstan has made efforts to remediate the area and confront the legacy of nuclear testing. An anti-nuclear initiative known as "Nevada-Semipalatinsk" significantly contributed to raising public awareness and pushing for the site's closure.¹⁰² Although the area is mostly restricted, certain sections are open for tourism, allowing guests to observe the remnants of testing facilities and the effects of the detonations. Visiting the site necessitates precautions due to persistent radiation risks, and it is advisable to go with a guide and wear suitable protective gear.

Soviet Era's Railway Infrastructure in Kazakhstan

The railroad system in Kazakhstan was predominantly built in the soviet times. Under the Soviet regime, the geopolitical factor and the centralized economy played a major role in the development of the railway network in Kazakhstan. As part of the USSR, the region primarily functioned as a provider of raw materials, which were largely transported via rail northward to Russia and Ukraine for further refinement and subsequent shipping to domestic and European markets. As a result, the Soviet railway system in Kazakhstan was mainly constructed in a north-south direction, aimed at integrating the region's economy into the larger Soviet industrial framework while discouraging autonomous economic growth that could lead to separatism. Two of the four main north-south railway routes traversed Kazakhstan: one ran from Almaty north through Aktogay to Novosibirsk on the Trans-Siberian Railway, while another connected Petropavlovsk to the south via Astana (now the capital) and linked with the east-west railway at Chu, creating vital connections to both Moscow and Siberia.¹⁰³ The railways in the region were responsible for nearly 90% of all surface freight due to the lack of adequate road infrastructure and poor road conditions, further solidifying

¹⁰² Bernd Grosche, Tamara Zhunussova, Kazbek Apsalikov, and Ausrele Kesminiene. "Studies of Health Effects from Nuclear Testing near the Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test Site, Kazakhstan." *Central Asian Journal of Global Health* 4, no. 1 (2015). doi:10.5195/cajgh.2015.127.

¹⁰³ Murat Omarbekovich, Paweł Droździel, Aisha Muratovna, and Iwona Rybicka. 2017. "Integration of Kazakhstan's Railroad in the World Transport and Logistics Space." *Autobusy: Technika, Eksplotacja, Systemy Transportowe*, January. <http://yadda.icm.edu.pl/yadda/element/bwmeta1.element.baztech-f5aa1d58-89c1-462e-8f77-509255f76642>.

the railway's primary role in transportation.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, Kazakhstan played a part in significant Soviet-era east-west railway projects. In particular, the Soviet Union and China initiated the construction in the 1950s of a railway connection meant to link China's Ürümqi with Kazakhstan's Aktogay via Druzhba at the border. Although the Druzhba–Aktogay section was finished in 1959, political strife stalled the larger project for many years, leaving the tracks unused for over three decades until relations improved in the late 1980s. The eventual reopening of this line in 1991 created a direct rail link between China and the newly independent Kazakhstan, contributing to the contemporary Silk Road railway corridor. Nevertheless, technical issues remained, particularly the disparity in railway gauge between China and Kazakhstan, which required bogie changes for trains crossing at Druzhba, demanding complex infrastructure and resulting in significant delays. Maintenance of rolling stock was another enduring challenge inherited from the Soviet system: during the USSR's existence, repair responsibilities were distributed across various republics, meaning that locomotives and carriages often needed to be sent to different countries for servicing. After independence, Kazakhstan encountered operational challenges because foreign repair facilities required payment in new currencies or hard currencies, which disrupted maintenance schedules. Additionally, a significant portion of Kazakhstan's railway equipment was from the Soviet era, including locomotives manufactured in the 1950s and high-capacity freight cars designed for long-distance travel across vast continental areas. Electric locomotives operated on a 25,000-volt AC system, while diesel locomotives ranging from 3,000 to 4,000 horsepower were used on non-electrified lines, which constituted considerable parts of Kazakhstan's network. Even after gaining independence, the railway infrastructure in Kazakhstan continued to exhibit the influence of its Soviet roots, both in its layout and operational methods, highlighting the extent to which Soviet-era planning has shaped the country's transportation framework.¹⁰⁵

Railways in Kazakhstan, particularly those constructed during the Soviet period, were essential for transporting resources, manufactured products, and military personnel, aiding in both industrial growth and defense capabilities. These railway connections played an essential role in the transport and trade of the Kazakhstan region especially with Russia during the post-dissolution era of the

¹⁰⁴ M. S. Mirski, (1954). *The Soviet Railway System: Policy and Operation*. *The Russian Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 1954 pp. 32.

¹⁰⁵ Shigeru Otsuka, "Central Asian Railways and Europe–Asia Land Bridge," *Japan Railway & Transport Review* 28 (September 2001): 42.

Soviet Union. The KTZ, the railway company of Kazakhstan, oversees the railway system of the country which manages the lines that were inherited by the Soviet Union. It was established as a joint-stock company in the year 2002 by the government. KTZ is engaged in the task of advancing, running and maintaining railway transport in Kazakhstan. It is based in Astana. The stock associated on the rail, the hauling gear, and the passenger transport division belong to the related stock firms. Repair facilities are privatized. The ownership or leasing of rolling stock that had the potential to use the rail network could be by private enterprises.¹⁰⁶ The current rail network has a history of the former Soviet Union and is of wide gauge (1,520 mm). This gauge has been used to allow easy passage at international borders with the former Soviets, but China has a standard gauge rail system of 1,435 mm, so that a conversion of gauge is required at Dostyk and Khorgos. The KTZ has absorbed the parts of the historic Trans-Aral Railway of the Trans-Caspian railway and the Turkestan-Siberia Railway which are in Kazakhstan.¹⁰⁷

The importance and the existing challenges of upgrading the railway infrastructures in Kazakhstan, a landlocked country at a prime position at a cross zone between China, the EU, and Central Asia is discussed. Despite their necessity in terms of national connectivity and regional trade, particularly the Belt and Road Initiative of China, the rail system of Kazakhstan suffers due to outdated Soviet-era infrastructure, the lack of investment, the lack of skilled labor, poor management, and technical problems such as the impossibility of connecting rail gauges. Drawing from scholarly sources and expert interviews, the author suggests possible solutions, including increased government involvement, anti-corruption initiatives, foreign investments, and improved collaboration with regional stakeholders. The article concludes that upgrading the railway network is vital for unlocking Kazakhstan's complete transport and economic potential.¹⁰⁸

Electricity Grids

Kazakhstan's electricity grid network is predominantly a legacy of the Soviet period, marked by outdated and ineffective systems. This infrastructure, established during the Soviet era,

¹⁰⁶ Toomas Hango, "Central Asia's New Railways: Russia's Pain, China's Gain." International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), 2025. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep68777>.

¹⁰⁷ UIC Communications, "Kazakhstan Temir Zholy Turns 25 – UIC Communications." January 9, 2023. <https://uic.org/com/enews/article/kazakhstan-temir-zholy-turns-25>.

¹⁰⁸ Akhmedov, Erjan. 2024. "Problems of and Prospects for the Development of Railway Infrastructure in Kazakhstan." *E3S Web of Conferences* 471 (January): 02006. <https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202447102006>.

experiences considerable deterioration, resulting in substantial transmission losses, inadequate interconnection, and challenges in incorporating new renewable energy sources. Kazakhstan's electricity sector is deeply connected to Russia's grid infrastructure due to significant physical and economic ties. While Kazakhstan operates its own grid, which is centrally overseen by the National Operator of Electric Grids of Kazakhstan, a chronic electricity shortage has emerged in recent years. To address this gap, Kazakhstan has increasingly turned to electricity imports from Russia. For instance, deficits in 2022 and early 2023 necessitated Kazakhstan to acquire Russian electricity, particularly to satisfy industrial needs and balance regional shortages in southern Kazakhstan. This reliance demonstrates that Russia's grid infrastructure acts as an essential safety net for Kazakhstan, aiding in the stabilization of its power supply and, in turn, its overall economic performance. However, this dependence brings forth both geopolitical and economic ramifications, as Kazakhstan must buy Russian electricity at prices that exceed domestic rates, impacting its budget and energy autonomy.¹⁰⁹

From Russia's perspective, this connection yields both economic advantages and geopolitical power. On the financial front, Russian energy firms gain revenue from electricity sales to Kazakhstan, which helps to optimize surplus generation capacity, especially from areas close to the border. Geopolitically, Russia's position as a principal electricity provider secures its influence over Kazakhstan's energy security. By maintaining a significant part of Kazakhstan's import composition, Russia ensures it continues to be a crucial player in Central Asia's energy scene, aligning with its wider strategic goals in the region¹¹⁰.

Being a large investor in the energy field of Kazakhstan, China will be interested in having stable partners and reliable energy corridors in the Belt and Road Initiative. The fact that Kazakhstan is required to rely on imports of Russian electricity is an indicator that the country is susceptible of its energy independence. For China, these vulnerabilities present possible risks that could complicate energy cooperation initiatives or lead to circumstances where Russian influence

¹⁰⁹ Sholpan Smagulova, Bakhytgul Chereyeva, Saltanat Zhakupova, Saule Intykbayeva, Bayan Abdulina, Taizhan Sarzhanov, Gulnar Abdulina, and Aigerim Abeldanova, "Assessment of the Impact of Electric Power Production on the Economic Growth of Kazakhstan." *International Journal of Energy Economics and Policy* 14 (4) 2024: 391. <https://doi.org/10.32479/ijep.16036>.

¹¹⁰ Timur Onzhanov, *The Role of Kazakhstan as a Global Energy Supplier in the 21st Century: Analysis of Opportunities and Risks*. Switzerland: n.p., 2013.

disrupts Kazakhstan's capability to fulfill energy commitments to Chinese partners.¹¹¹ Thus, although Russia and China are not yet linked to adjacent countries by direct electricity flows via Kazakhstan, the connection between Russia and the electricity systems of Kazakhstan turns into an important part of the Chinese thinking about the energy investments and foreign policy in Central Asia. The Russian Kazakh system of electricity grids is a two-sided sword to Kazakhstan: on the one hand side it ensures the supply security in the short term, but at the same time on the other hand, the country is exposed to external interference, externalities, and higher costs. To Russia, it has the economic advantage and a strategic base. The introduction of indirect complicities into the regional energy strategies in China highlights the interconnectivity of the energies systems in the region and the interests of geopolitics.¹¹²

Russian Investment in the Region

Kazakhstan is considered by Russia as being a crucial player in the energy market of the Central Asian region. The Russian infrastructure, such as the Caspian Pipeline Consortium and the Atyrau-Samara pipeline, is very important to the export of Kazakhstan oil and gas. This reliance enables Russia to wield influence over Kazakhstan's energy exports, bolstering its status as a transit point for Central Asian energy to Europe. Historically, Russia has been hesitant to recognize the autonomy of former Soviet republics like Kazakhstan. By investing in Kazakhstan's energy infrastructure, Russia ensures it retains an advantage, creating a dependency under the pretense of cooperation. Russia seeks to diminish the influence of Western and Chinese energy firms in Kazakhstan. As global entities increasingly pour investments into Kazakhstan's oil reserves, Russia capitalizes on its geographical closeness and historical connections to solidify its role through infrastructure dominance, avoiding direct competition while still maintaining its supremacy.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Xiao Gang, "Reforming existing credit rules for the Belt and Road Initiative." *Financing China's Belt and Road Initiative*, 2021, 31. doi:10.4324/9781003185000-5.

¹¹² Sholpan Smagulova, Bakhytgul Chereyeva, Saltanat Zhakupova, Saule Intykbayeva, Bayan Abdulina, Taizhan Sarzhanov, Gulnar Abdulina, and Aigerim Abeldanova, "Assessment of the Impact of Electric Power Production on the Economic Growth of Kazakhstan." *International Journal of Energy Economics and Policy* 14 (4) 2024: 407. <https://doi.org/10.32479/ijep.16036>.

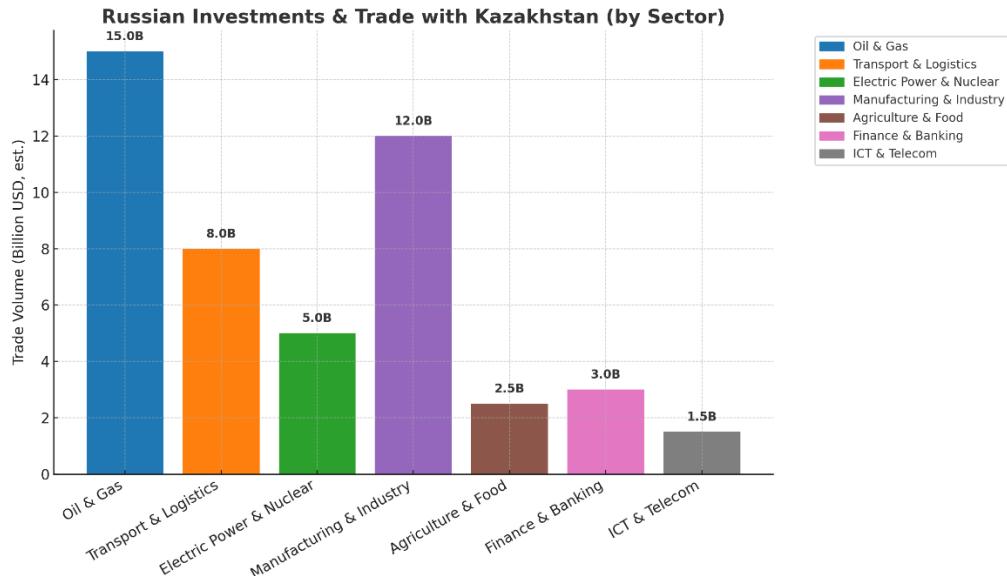
¹¹³ Tsoli Maria, "Energy policies in Russia and Kazakhstan and how they affect the global energy markets." Dione, 2025

https://dione.lib.unipi.gr/xmlui/bitstream/handle/unipi/15698/Tsoli_men21042.pdf.pdf?sequence=1.

Russia's investments in Kazakhstan's infrastructure are influenced by a multifaceted combination of economic objectives, shifts in geopolitical alignments, and interests in regional integration. As global power dynamics evolve and Western sanctions impact Russia, Kazakhstan has become an important ally, offering a degree of political stability, geographic closeness, and an abundance of resources. The decline of Kazakhstan's conventional Western foreign direct investment sources especially following the conflict in Ukraine has created opportunities for Russia to bolster its economic involvement, particularly in sectors beyond natural resources, such as logistics and manufacturing. Russia is drawn to Kazakhstan's favorable investment climate, exemplified by 13 special economic zones and 36 industrial parks providing tax advantages and support for infrastructure.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, the movement of 45 international companies to Kazakhstan due to geopolitical unrest in Russia further motivates Russia to invest domestically to maintain its regional industrial dominance. Kazakhstan's strategic position along important transit routes related to the BRI and EAEU also aligns with Russia's aim to improve overland trade pathways that circumvent Western-controlled Sea routes. Ultimately, by channeling investments into Kazakhstan's infrastructure, Russia secures strategic advantages, expands its regional influence, and gains reliable access to essential transportation and energy networks within Central Asia.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴Vlad Antonov, "Russia-Kazakhstan's Business Dialogue at SPIEF 2025." *Special Eurasia*, June 19, 2025. <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2025/06/19/russia-kazakhstan-spief-2025/>.

¹¹⁵ Berik Beisengaliyev, Assiya Turekulova, and Yerzhan Beisengaliyev, "Development of Investment Kazakhstan." E3S Web of Conferences 402 (January 2023): 08040. <https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202340208040>.



Source: Self-complied

Impacts on Relations with China

Dependence of Kazakhstan on Russian infrastructure, especially for oil exports, presents both advantages and challenges in its relations with China. Although China is a significant trade partner and investor, Kazakhstan's reliance on Russia for essential infrastructure may hinder its capacity to adopt an independent foreign policy and broaden its economic base. Such dependence can provide Russia with leverage, and that may affect the energy policies and relations of Kazakhstan with China. Although Kazakhstan became independent following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it had, over time, been dependent on Russian infrastructure in exporting its energy. Majority of its oil is carried through pipelines under Russian control one of them being the Caspian Pipeline Consortium and the Atyrau-Samara route. This dependency has allowed Russia to set the terms and maintain considerable influence over Kazakhstan's economic and political choices, which has constrained its ability to operate independently in regional matters. Nonetheless, the construction of new infrastructure by China, especially the China-Kazakhstan oil pipeline and the connections to the China-Central Asia gas pipeline, has provided Kazakhstan with opportunities to diversify its export routes and lessen its dependence on Russian systems, thereby gaining greater freedom in its foreign relations. Although these new links have reinforced the relationship between China and Kazakhstan by integrating the nation into China's economic framework, Russian influence has not

been eliminated, as Kazakhstan's pipeline and energy operations still partially depend on Russian networks. As a result, Kazakhstan's energy strategy is a balancing act between its two powerful neighbors.¹¹⁶

Russia's engagement in Kazakhstan's energy sector reflects use of energy assets to extend influence, especially in neighboring regions, as it leverages energy investments and infrastructure to solidify its regional influence. This aligns with the theory of energy diplomacy, use of energy resources as instruments of influence, where control or influence over Kazakhstani energy resources gives Russia leverage over its neighbor, strengthening its regional position. Russia and Kazakhstan relations are largely due to the supply of energy. Russia's involvement in Kazakhstan's energy sector may position it as a key regional player, affecting both Kazakhstan's autonomy and its alignment with other powers, particularly China. Russia's energy diplomacy in Kazakhstan could serve to limit China's direct access to the region.¹¹⁷

China is both influenced by and actively adapting to Kazakhstan's partial reliance on Russian infrastructure through various strategic and economic measures. China's ambitions to expand westward through the BRI are constrained by Kazakhstan's dependence on transit networks linked to Russia, which remain outside of China's complete control. This situation has driven China to invest in new corridors that do not rely on Russia, thereby mitigating its own risks of dependency. This is with the creation of Cross-border infrastructure such as the Khorgos Gateway, the China-Europe Railway Express (CERF) to partially substitute Russian routes and energy pipes that do not depend on the Russian control. The relations that Kazakhstan has with Russia are used as a geopolitical countermeasure towards greater Chinese domination. These are the dynamic effects that influence the capacity of China to dictate the terms in negotiations on infrastructure and investments to the full. However, China is contented with this balance because the advantages of increased regional interconnection and the access to the energy and resources of Kazakhstan are too significant to be plunged into risks. China's logistical and trade effectiveness is compromised when goods are required to navigate routes managed by Russia, particularly considering the

¹¹⁶ Waihong Tang and Elmira Joldybayeva, "Pipelines and Power Lines: China, Infrastructure and the Geopolitical (Re)Construction of Central Asia." *Geopolitics* 28 (4) 2022: 84. doi:10.1080/14650045.2022.2062325.

¹¹⁷ Edward L. Morse and James Richard, "The Battle for Energy Dominance." *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 2 (2002): 16. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20033081>.

implications of potential Western sanctions on Russia. For instance, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in 2022 heightened China's interest in strengthening Kazakhstan's domestic transport and logistics systems to minimize risks tied to Russian-related delays. Russian infrastructure indirectly affects the variety and amount of goods that China can export to or import from Kazakhstan. Delays and increased costs associated with older or politically sensitive Russian routes motivate China to establish new logistics parks and bonded zones. Traditionally, Kazakhstan has had its way of exporting oil through the Russian pipes, but China has concentrated in laying other pipelines, which would connect directly to Kazakhstan and thence to Xinjiang (such as the Kazakhstan China oil pipeline). Not only does this reduce China to being vulnerable to the influence of Russia but also guarantees the steady supply of energy imports, which is very important in times of geopolitical stress. China sees Russia as both ally and a possible competitor to development of the infrastructure of Central Asia. China's investments in Kazakhstan aim to challenge Russia's monopoly, but Kazakhstan's efforts to avoid excessive dependence on either nation have resulted in a delicate balance.¹¹⁸

Russia exerts considerable influence through its energy strategies, while China's influence as an economic giant is rapidly expanding, especially with its investments in infrastructure and energy sectors. The 2015 pact between Russia and China to connect the BRI with EAEU underscores their efforts to align their projects. However, the actual integration remains fragmented and is progressing slowly. Kazakhstan embraces a welcoming approach to foreign investment and multilateral collaboration, maintaining a balance in its relationships with Russia and China while carefully navigating its connections with the West. China's increasing involvement is met with some pushback. Historical grievances, anti-Chinese feelings, and concerns about becoming overly reliant on China have led to protests and public unease, particularly in Kazakhstan. Concerns surrounding environmental harm, labor migration, corruption, and China's policies in Xinjiang have amplified skepticism. Significant protests have included the Zhanaozen oil strike, disputes over land codes, and opposition to industrial initiatives funded by China.¹¹⁹ The reliance on the

¹¹⁸ Guanie Lim, Linda Yin-nor Tjia, and Nikolay Murashkin, "Opportunities and Challenges of China's Economic Ties with Kazakhstan: Looking Back to Look Forward." *The Chinese Economy* 58 (1) 2024: 127. doi:10.1080/10971475.2024.2373643.

¹¹⁹ Medvedeva A. Kazantsev, "Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia." *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 12(1), 2021 71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1879366521998242>

Russian infrastructure inhibits the strategic autonomy of Kazakhstan, but Astana is increasingly adopting a multi-vector foreign policy that seeks to equalize its relations with Russia, China, the West and neighboring powers. This plan of diversification is associated with the desire of China to have more autonomy regarding its infrastructures that are not dependent on Russian routes. However, Kazakhstan does not want to become overdependent on China, which complicates the aims of Beijing.

In a nutshell, Kazakhstan's geopolitical situation is largely influenced by its reliance on infrastructure from the Soviet era, particularly the transportation and energy systems that tightly connect it to Russia. Even though it has been formally independent since 1991, Kazakhstan is still heavily intertwined with Russia through pipelines, rail networks, and electricity systems. This entanglement is not just a remnant of history but also a current mechanism through which Russia exercises strategic influence in Central Asia. The CPC and the Uzen-Atyrau-Samara pipeline are Kazakhstan's primary conduits for energy exports, both of which pass through Russian territory and are partially managed or influenced by Russian interests. Consequently, Moscow maintains the capacity to control Kazakhstan's energy distribution, thereby gaining leverage over its economic and foreign policy choices.¹²⁰ The CPC is an oil pipeline system that transports crude oil in the Caspian region to the black sea. Russian, Kazakh and other international oil companies founded it in 1992. The aim of the CPC is to maintain a secure and efficient transport route through oil extraction in the Caspian Sea area to reach the markets in the world. The source of the pipeline system is in oil fields in Western Kazakhstan and extends to the port of Novorossiysk on the Russian shoreline of the black sea.

This dependence on infrastructure provides Russia with considerable geopolitical power, establishing it as a gatekeeper for Kazakh energy exports to international markets. Meanwhile, Kazakhstan gains from access to essential export routes and grid stability; however, these advantages come at the expense of strategic vulnerability and diminished autonomy. Russia's financial involvement in Kazakhstan's energy sector, especially in high-profile projects like Karachaganak and Tengiz, further solidifies this dependency. Additionally, the interconnected

¹²⁰ John Roberts, "Energy reserves, pipeline routes and the legal regime in the Caspian Sea." Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. 2012. <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/books/SIPRI01Chufrin/SIPRI01Chufrin03.pdf>.

electricity grid continues to bind Kazakhstan to Russia's energy supply, assisting in addressing domestic shortages but making Astana more vulnerable to pricing and supply fluctuations imposed by Moscow.

There, the growth of the Chinese interests in Kazakhstan with the BRI brings a competition element and strategic adaptation necessity. Kazakhstan is regarded by Beijing as a key partner to overland trade, acquisition of resources and connectivity in the area. Its investments in other pipelines and rail lines, like the KazakhstanChina oil pipeline and the Khorgos Gateway- are meant to avoid Russian bottlenecks and strengthen the logistical independence of China. However, these initiatives have not completely eroded Russian influence, as Kazakhstan's principal energy exports still heavily depend on Russian transit infrastructure.¹²¹

Kazakhstan's approach is thus defined by careful balancing. It aims to diversify its export channels and draw in Chinese investments while maintaining stability in its historically rooted relationships with Russia. This balancing strategy exemplifies its multi-directional foreign policy, which seeks to uphold autonomy without estranging its powerful neighbors. For China, Kazakhstan's reliance on Russian infrastructure poses both a limitation and an opportunity: a limitation due to the need to navigate Russia's established influence, yet an opportunity to invest in new routes that broaden Chinese strategic outreach¹²².

Ultimately, Kazakhstan is in the middle of two great powers and they both struggle to have their way in Central Asia. Its continued dependence on Russian infrastructure makes it difficult to fully enter into the BRI framework of China, and at the same time serves as a sort of insurance against overreliance on either side of power. Even though Astana has achieved some strides in the area of diversification to counter the vulnerability, the habit of Russian infrastructure still defines its

¹²¹ Raikhan Zhanbulatova, Miras Zhiyenbayev, Maira Dyusembekova, and Roza Nurtazina. "The energy vector of Kazakhstan-Russia relations in the context of global changes on the international energy market." *Central Asia and The Caucasus* 21, no. 2, 2020: 130. doi:10.37178/ca-c.20.2.11.

¹²² Linda Yin-Nor Tjia, "Kazakhstan's Leverage and Economic Diversification Amid Chinese Connectivity Dreams." *Third World Quarterly* 43 (4)2022: 797. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2027237>.

strategic options, thereby affecting its relationship with Russia and China in the twenty-first century.¹²³

¹²³ Medvedeva A. Kazantsev, “Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia.” *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 12(1), 2021 51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1879366521998242>

CHAPTER 4

Geopolitical Implications of Russia's Energy Diplomacy in Kazakhstan for China

Energy diplomacy involves the strategies that nations employ in their foreign policy to fulfill their energy requirements and objectives. While historically concentrated on securing oil and gas resources, it has now expanded to encompass a wider range of topics including renewable energy, essential minerals and infrastructure that crosses national borders. The significance of energy diplomacy has increased considering global issues such as energy security underscored by the conflict in Ukraine and the competition for leadership in green technology among major super powers, including the U.S., China, and the EU. For developing countries, engaging in energy diplomacy is a means to draw in investment and technology for developing sustainable energy infrastructures. This approach is executed through Negotiations (both bilateral and multilateral agreements), Economic promotion (backing domestic companies and investments), and Informal diplomacy (cultivating trust and building networks).

Russia has traditionally recognized the energy resources-foreign policy nexus. The Energy Strategies of the country (2003, 2030, and the projected 2035) are aimed at strengthening the international power of the country and, as a result, becoming the energy superpower. This goal is supported by robust presidential oversight of state energy firms and the established training of "energy diplomats" since the early 2000s.¹²⁴

This chapter investigates the geopolitical consequences of Russian energy diplomacy in Kazakhstan concerning China's interests and regional goals. Despite the rapid growth of influence in Central Asia due to large-scale investments as part of the BRI and the involvement of trans-Eurasian energy projects. Russia continues to hold a lot of influence on the energy exports of Kazakhstan, particularly through its inherited Soviet-era pipeline regimes and control over transit routes. This situation not only provides Russia with a logistical edge but is also a geopolitical instrument to make a difference in the distribution of energy and limit China in its strategic autonomy in the region. Furthermore, Russia's energy diplomacy goes beyond mere control of

¹²⁴ Aleksandra Warda, "Russian Energy Diplomacy: Instruments and Approaches." Casimir Pulaski Foundation. October 20, 2023, 54.

infrastructure. It encompasses long-term contracts, pricing strategies, and influence through regional entities such as the EAEU. Consequently, Kazakhstan frequently finds itself balancing the conflicting interests of its two powerful neighbors Russia and China.¹²⁵

This chapter intends to rigorously analyze how Russia's established energy dominance in Kazakhstan impacts China's energy security, its overall regional integration strategy, and its capability to assert influence in Kazakhstan. By investigating the mechanisms and outcomes of Russian energy diplomacy, the chapter highlights the strategic balancing acts, emerging tensions, and possible shifts that are defining the Sino-Russian relationship in Central Asia.

The energy relationship between Russia and Kazakhstan has a large influence as Russia plays an important role in the influence of China geopolitical influence in Central Asia through the power relationship of the area, energy security and other trading relationships. The energy diplomacy is what makes Russia stronger in the geopolitical sphere in Kazakhstan and, consequently, in Central Asia. This is a challenge to the SREB of China that depends on the Central Asia as an important passageway. Russian access to Kazakh energy systems might curtail the influence of China, since Moscow can use its relationship to ensure the continued support of Kazakhstan to the Russian-led EAEU. The effort of China to build closer economic relationships with Kazakhstan may be constrained in case Russia controls key areas including energy.¹²⁶

Regional Influence

Russia maintains historical influence on the Central Asian region. This is a direct rival to the strategic objective of China since it is the Chinese view of Kazakhstan as a key ally to its self-sufficiency in energy supply. Russia has always sought to reestablish a post-Soviet order since the fall of USSR both militarily, economically and politically through the creation of institutions and alliances that bolster its power in the region especially in Central Asia. In addition to military superiority, Russia has fostered a post-Soviet economic framework through both bilateral and multilateral pacts.

¹²⁵ Mariya Y. Omelicheva, and Ruoxi Du. "Kazakhstan's Multi-Vectorism and Sino-Russian Relations." *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 4 (2018): 95–110. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26542175>.

¹²⁶ Sharifa Giritlioglu, "A Comparative Analysis of the Energy Policies of China and Russia in Kazakhstan," 112 (2025): 72, <https://doi.org/10.12995/bilg.7772>.

Nursultan Nazarbayev, the former president of Kazakhstan, advocated for economic integration as early as 1994, emphasizing the need for strong institutional frameworks to govern economic collaboration. That effort resulted in bilateral customs agreements with Russia and Belarus in 1995, and the inception of post-Soviet economic regionalism under the CIS. The creation of EurEC and the Customs Union in 2010 and subsequently the development of the latter into the EAEU in 2015 achieved the desired goals by Russia.¹²⁷

The EAEU was formed as a supranational regulatory authority, highlighting the formal establishment of integration. With Armenia joining in 2014 and Kyrgyzstan in 2015, the EAEU expanded its reach and influence. Kazakhstan agreed to join the EAEU while asserting its right to political sovereignty and prioritizing economic practicality over political allegiance. Nazarbayev's multi-vector strategy was designed to strike a balance among regional partnerships while securing Access to EAEU markets and contracts, Development as a logistics center, Access to regional energy infrastructure. Despite these advantages, Russia remains the dominant force in the EAEU.¹²⁸

Putin has aimed to safeguard the extensive cultural legacy of the USSR in the contemporary Central Asian republics, particularly through the shared language that connects the members of the EAEU. For Russia, the EAEU is also viewed to fulfill its ambitions which manifest in reinforcing its regional dominance, highlighted by a renewed focus on Eurasia. Consequently, Moscow aims to obtain a prominent place at the reorganization of the international by restoring the territory which the dissolution of USSR left uncontrolled. As a matter of fact, Russia admits that the claim of its influence on the world level essentially needs the powerful presence in the regional scale.¹²⁹

China's BRI is changing the landscape of geopolitics in Eurasia. While Central Asia has welcomed Chinese investments and infrastructure, this development has inevitably weakened Russia's long-

¹²⁷ Maximilian Ohle, Richard J. Cook, and Zhaoying Han. "China's Engagement with Kazakhstan and Russia's Zugzwang: Why Is Nur-Sultan Incurring Regional Power Hedging?" *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 11 (1) 2020: 103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1879366519900996>.

¹²⁸ Maximilian Ohle, Richard J. Cook, and Zhaoying Han. "China's Engagement with Kazakhstan and Russia's Zugzwang: Why Is Nur-Sultan Incurring Regional Power Hedging?" *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 11 (1) 2020: 103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1879366519900996>.

¹²⁹ Letícia De Jesus, and Paulo Duarte, "The Geopolitics of Sino-Russian Regionalism in Central Asia: Kazakhstan in Analysis." *Uluslararası Avrasya Ekonomileri Konferansı*, September, 42. 2022 <https://doi.org/10.36880/c14.02616>.

standing influence in the area¹³⁰. As China's economic presence expands, its sway over Central Asia increases, leading to tensions, competitive dynamics, and conditional partnerships with Russia. Although the BRI improves regional connectivity and offers potential economic gains, it also raises issues of debt dependency, erosion of sovereignty, and a transfer of power from Moscow to Beijing. As an important part of the overarching BRI in China, the SREB has radically altered the geopolitical and economic structure of Central Asia and other regions. One of the most significant impacts has been the reorientation of regional connectivity, moving the conventional North-South transport routes established during the era of Russian imperialism and Soviet rule towards East-West corridors focused on China. This has put Central Asia in a higher position of being a transit center between China and Europe and it has its own repercussions to the region in regard to integration and power relation. The SREB no longer makes Russia as logically significant and strategically important in the region as regional states such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are now given more efficient and shorter trade pathways at the expense of older roads such as the Trans-Siberian Railway in Russia. Besides this, the SREB has resulted in significant infrastructural developments such as railways, roads and pipelines that are improving access and trade across the region. From an economic perspective, the initiative has enabled China to strengthen its ties with Central Asian economies by importing raw materials and exporting manufactured goods, yet this trend also reinforces resource dependency and restricts diversification. Politically, the SREB has amplified China's influence in the area, challenging Russia's historical preeminence and raising concerns about sovereignty, debt reliance, and environmental sustainability.¹³¹ In the end, the SREB is more than just a trade initiative, it serves as a transformative factor influencing the future of geopolitics in Eurasia, with Central Asia at the center of competing ambitions and evolving alliances.¹³²

¹³⁰ China's Belt and Road Initiative: Changing the Rules of Globalization. Germany: Springer International Publishing, 2018. 90.

¹³¹ Maximilian Ohle, Richard J. Cook, and Zhaoying Han. "China's Engagement with Kazakhstan and Russia's Zugzwang: Why Is Nur-Sultan Incurring Regional Power Hedging?" *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 11 (1) 2020: 103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1879366519900996>.

¹³² Ulaş Başar Gezgin, "Russian and Central Asian Views on China's Belt & Road Initiative." *Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart ÜNiversitesi Uluslararası Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, April. 2020 <https://doi.org/10.31454/usb.722094>.

The entry of Kazakhstan into the BRI of China and the EAEU of Russia indicates her multi directional foreign policy and the attempt to balance the major powers to ensure that sovereignty is not unfairly compromised to enhance development. The BRI has enhanced Kazakhstan's infrastructure and trade links, aiding in cost reductions and addressing its landlocked status. Nevertheless, Chinese investments frequently sideline local workers and generate public skepticism, driven by fears regarding sovereignty, Chinese dominance, and human rights violations in Xinjiang. Likewise, although the EAEU has promised economic collaboration, Kazakhstan has encountered negative economic impacts such as currency depreciation due to Western sanctions on Russia, increased tariffs, and reduced foreign investment from EAEU countries.¹³³ Despite officially endorsing both initiatives, Kazakhstan remains cautious, cautious about becoming overly reliant on either Russia or China and consistently navigates a careful diplomatic course to maintain its autonomy and foster economic development.

Despite the increasing economic investment of China in Kazakhstan, the public perception of China is predominantly negative. A significant source of anxiety stems from the belief that China may attempt to seize Kazakh land. For instance, in 2016, a government plan to auction off farmland led to widespread protests fueled by fears that Chinese investors would acquire it, even after legal assurances and bans against foreign ownership were issued. Public skepticism towards China has been further exacerbated by rumors such as suggestions of relocating Chinese factories to Kazakhstan and frustration over the treatment of ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang. Ongoing protests against Chinese initiatives reflect a belief that local communities lack sufficient information and are unable to hold their government accountable. These apprehensions persist despite increasing cooperation between the two nations. China has emerged as Kazakhstan's foremost trading ally, and both nations have entered agreements to enhance trade and collaboration. Consequently, there is a rising demand for workers proficient in Chinese.¹³⁴

¹³³ Letícia De Jesus, and Paulo Duarte, “The Geopolitics of Sino-Russian Regionalism in Central Asia: Kazakhstan in Analysis.” *Uluslararası Avrasya Ekonomileri Konferansı*, September, 42. 2022 <https://doi.org/10.36880/c14.02616>.

¹³⁴ Berikbol Dukeyev, “How Local Realities Compelled China to Adapt Its Soft-Power Strategy in Kazakhstan.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 2024. <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2024/09/kazakhstan-china-soft-power-adaptation?lang=en>.

To enhance its reputation, China is leveraging media to showcase its culture and its good relations with Kazakhstan. Chinese news and cultural programs are now accessible in the Kazakh language, while local Kazakh television networks broadcast content on engaging with China. Documentaries, shows, and even films are being translated into Kazakh, with some made in partnership between the two countries. These initiatives aim to highlight China's modernization and foster cross-cultural understanding. A prominent instance of cultural collaboration is through the popular Kazakh artist Dimash Kudaibergen, who gained fame in China and now acts as a cultural link between the two nations. His success has sparked tourism initiatives and cultural events that unite Chinese and Kazakh audiences.¹³⁵ At the same time, Kazakhstan is working to communicate its own narrative. It emphasizes its historical significance in the Silk Road and positions itself as a cultural nexus linking Europe and Asia. The government supports this narrative through a state television channel, Silk Way, which shows Kazakh culture to both regional and global viewers.¹³⁶

The rapid economic development and participation of China in Central Asia has posed a strategic threat to Russia that has enjoyed a long-term control over the region. Whereas Russia and China are publicly emphasizing collaboration in institutions like the SCO whilst a more profound rivalry in the form of influence is being manifested. China has become a leading investor and trade ally to the Central Asian countries, especially Kazakhstan and it has surpassed Russia in various areas. It has the capability of bypassing Russian territory in its investments in infrastructure, energy, and mining, as well as the creation of direct oil and gas pipelines, which directly challenge the Russian traditional dominance over the Eurasian energy lines. Russia, concerned about potentially becoming just a supplier of raw materials to China, is apprehensive about being overshadowed economically. It perceives China's expanding role in Central Asia as a challenge to its sphere of influence.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Min Rui, "How China and Kazakhstan Fall in Sync Through Reel Connections." *CGTN*, June 11, 2025. <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2025-06-11/How-China-and-Kazakhstan-fall-in-sync-through-reel-connections-1E7iaXW711S/p.html>.

¹³⁶ Dante Schulz, "Anti-China Protests Held in Several Kazakhstani Cities." n.d. Caspian Policy Center. 2021 <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/energy-and-economy-program-eep/anti-china-protests-held-in-several-kazakhstani-cities>.

¹³⁷ Rouben Azizian, and Elnara Bainazarova, "Eurasian Response to China's Rise: Russia and Kazakhstan in Search of Optimal China Policy." *Asian Politics & Policy* 4 (3) 2012: 79. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1943-0787.2012.01348.x>.

Russia established EAEU partly as a geopolitical measure to counterbalance China's increasing regional presence. Although this is publicly denied, fears regarding Beijing's growing influence likely inspired this initiative. China's "soft" strategy focused on economic, cultural, and diplomatic engagement has resonated more favorably with many Central Asian nations compared to Russia's more securitized and controlling approach.¹³⁸

Control Over Transit Routes

The regional influence of Russia has focused on its control of the transit routes by blocking the access of trade routes to China. The transit route domination affects the access of China to the Kazakhstan resources. During the past decades, Russia and China have tried to increase their influence in Kazakhstan, which has different strategic motives. Russia is interested in preserving its hegemonic control developed since the time of the post-Soviet period, whereas China considers Kazakhstan a key point of entry to its BRI. This has made the objective of China more complex due to the availability of Russian domination over key transit infrastructure in Kazakhstan including railways, pipelines and customs systems. The modern infrastructure in Kazakhstan is largely designed after the Soviets and this creates a high level of integration of transit routes, primarily railways and pipelines, with the infrastructure of Russia. The examples of the CPC and the Transneft network show that Russia can have significant leverage in determining the export of the Kazakhstan energy to the rest of the world and especially to Europe. Being a founding member of the EAEU, Kazakhstan can enable Russia to exercise its influence by organizing tariffs and border control. Although the EAEU was designed to streamline the trading, Russia often uses it as a geoeconomic tool and postpones the delivery of cargo or adjusts tariffs according to the country-level interests.

Economic factors are also critical whenever speaking about the weakening influence of Russia. Historically reliant on Russia to provide them with trade and energy resources, Kazakhstan is currently in need of other trade routes and partnerships to expand the relations with the economic partner. The rising economic presence of China through the BRI comes with enormous investments and infrastructure developments that are attractive to the Central Asian countries. Initiatives of

¹³⁸ Rouben Azizian, and Elnara Bainazarova, "Eurasian Response to China's Rise: Russia and Kazakhstan in Search of Optimal China Policy." *Asian Politics & Policy* 4 (3) 2012: 82. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1943-0787.2012.01348.x>.

energy pipelines improve connectivity and stimulate economic development, thereby lessening reliance on Russian routes. Strengthened commerce with China introduces new markets for Central Asian products, thereby diversifying their economic affiliations.¹³⁹

Russia leverages its inherited pipeline system to maintain Kazakhstan's dependency. China is developing alternative pathways such as eastern pipelines to Xinjiang and the Caspian/Southern BRI corridors but geography, expenses, and the influence of Russia complicate this effort. Consequently, energy exports from Kazakhstan are still predominantly routed northwest through channels controlled by Russia.

This situation establishes a strategic chokehold for Russia. Russia can impact or delay Kazakhstan's energy exports. It indirectly regulates the volume of energy that reaches China. Such dependency restricts China's capacity to obtain stable and cost-effective supplies of Kazakh resources. China has made significant investments in direct pipelines running eastward from Kazakhstan to Xinjiang. For instance, the China–Kazakhstan oil pipeline (funded by CNPC investments) transports millions of tons of oil directly into China.¹⁴⁰ The Khorgos Dry Port represents another crucial BRI initiative that facilitates rail and road trade without the need to transit through Russia. Additionally, China is supportive of routes that navigate through the Caspian Sea and southern corridors (via Turkmenistan and Iran) as part of the BRI. These alternatives offer China new supply routes that completely avoid Russian control. Nevertheless, they come with high costs and complexity, as they require extensive distances and international collaboration. Despite advancements, a significant portion of Kazakhstan's energy exports is still managed by Russia, restricting China's complete access. China's imports from Kazakhstan continue to be relatively minor in comparison to its vast demand only about 4% of China's overall oil imports in recent years.¹⁴¹ This dependence on infrastructure controlled by Russia indicates that

¹³⁹ Eldaniz Gusseinov, Sardor Allayarov, "Beyond Western Narratives: Unpacking Russia's Strategic Role in Central Asia." *Geopolitical Monitor*. January 15, 2025. <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/beyond-western-narratives-unpacking-russias-strategic-role-in-central-asia>.

¹⁴⁰ Sadoon Masood Khan, Abdul Basit & Mairajul Hamid, A Review of China-Kazakhstan Economic Relationship during the 21st Century. *Journal of Social Sciences Review*, 2022 2(4) 68.

¹⁴¹ Binghan Du, Jappar Juman, Aiymzhan T. Makulova, Assel V. Khamzayeva, and Xuan Zhai. "Analysis of the Competitiveness, Complementarity, and Trade Combination of Kazakhstan and

China has not yet fully capitalized on Kazakhstan's potential as a key energy supplier. Consequently, Beijing is advocating for increased infrastructure investment and diversification through the BRI to lessen Russian influence.

Economic and infrastructural development in the area is causing China to gain much power in Kazakhstan. China and Russia both are conscious of these dynamics. As a Chinese specialist articulated it bluntly: 'Russia is becoming weaker and can no longer prevent Central Asia from gravitating towards us. Moscow is unable to provide the region with what it requires the most: infrastructure and investments.¹⁴² Therefore, Russia will have to accept China's presence in the region since it lacks the strength to challenge it.' However, this is a stance that Russia is reluctant to embrace. Due to growing impact of China in the region, Russia has tried to restore the Soviet era integration strategy. By introducing external levies, the Customs Union has already diverted trade away not only out of Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan and towards China but also to Russian goods which would not otherwise be competitive.¹⁴³

China's Energy Security

Russia's influence in Kazakhstan poses a potential threat to China's energy security. China may face strategic risks if its energy supply from Kazakhstan becomes subject to Russian influence or control.¹⁴⁴ Energy security is the capacity to develop an efficient, sustainable and cost-effective energy system that meets daily needs and activities of people. International Energy Agency (IEA) defines energy security as having two main aspects of energy security. The long-term aspect deals with energy supply investments and their connection with the timely developments of the economy and environmental issues. Conversely, the short-term dimension focuses mainly on the way the energy system can respond fast to sudden changes in the energy supply and demand. Energy security is not only about ensuring ongoing access to energy but also security of supplies of energy at an affordable price.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Mahir Ibrahimov, Gustav Otto, Lee Gentile, "Cultural Perspectives, Geopolitics and Energy Security of Eurasia" CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017.

¹⁴³ Michal Makocki, and Nicu Popescu. "Russia and China in Central Asia." *China and Russia: An Eastern Partnership in the Making?* European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06942.8>.

¹⁴⁴ Sreemati Ganguli "Strategising Energy: An Asian Perspective". India: KW Publishers, 2014.

¹⁴⁵ International Energy Agency, World Energy Outlook 2022, IEA, Paris <https://www.iea.org/reports/world-energy-outlook-2022>.

Energy security serves as a vital foundation for both the economic and national security of every nation. Interruptions to the consistent supply of power can trigger a series of negative effects across various sectors and wider society. There has been a mix of weaknesses and strengths in China in the energy security scene. Being the largest energy-consuming nation globally, it puts much pressure on decision-makers in order to support the large manufacturing industry in the country. Additionally, China's heavy dependence on imported fossil fuels leaves it vulnerable to disruptions caused by geopolitical tensions and instability. Conversely, China possesses significant advantages regarding energy security. The country is swiftly advancing its renewable energy infrastructure to lessen its dependence on oil and gas. Furthermore, China is the leading global producer of essential minerals crucial for energy security, and substantial investments in its energy grid are preparing it for a renewable-powered future. Lastly, China's plentiful coal reserves provide policymakers with a backup option in cases of major disruptions to other energy supplies. The fast pace of economic development in the decades has elevated the energy demands of China drastically. At the onset of the China reform and opening era, in 1980, the energy consumption was only under 25 percent of the United States. By 2008, China had surpassed US to be the largest consumer of energy in the world and by 2024, it was consuming more energy as a bloc than the United States, the EU and Japan combined.¹⁴⁶

Historically, Kazakhstan has relied significantly on Russia for the routes used to export oil and gas. Approximately 85% of Kazakhstan's oil exports, amounting to about 80 million tons yearly, are conveyed through pipelines that run across Russian land. Russia leverages its pipeline dominance, primarily through Gazprom, as a strategic mechanism to influence energy distribution in Central Asia and to restrict alternative export options. Through initiatives such as EAEU and various bilateral agreements, Russia has reinforced its grip on energy production, sales, and transportation infrastructure throughout the region. Russia perceives Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan, as a geo-strategic buffer and aims to prevent external powers, including China, from asserting predominant influence in the region. When Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan entered into agreements with China to construct oil and gas pipelines, Russia retaliated by launching parallel initiatives to uphold its control over energy distribution. Furthermore, Russia has employed pricing

¹⁴⁶ Manfred Hafner, Simone Tagliapietra, "The Geopolitics of the Global Energy Transition". Germany: Springer International Publishing, 2020, 178.

tactics, proposing to purchase gas from Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan at “European prices” to limit Chinese access to those resources. To further mitigate China’s influence, Russia has advocated for the involvement of other players, such as India, in Central Asia’s energy market.¹⁴⁷

China, now the largest global energy importer, regards Central Asia especially Kazakhstan as essential for minimizing its dependence on the Middle East and the perilous maritime passage through the Strait of Malacca. Pipelines originating from Kazakhstan offer land-based, secure, and shorter supply routes, which are crucial for the long-term energy strategy of China. However, the domineering presence of Russia in Kazakhstan poses risks to the Chinese process of diversifying its energy sources since Moscow may use the pipeline to impose political pressure or cut its supply during the geopolitical crises. The BRI reinforces the Chinese intentions to build its own infrastructure and improve relations with Kazakhstan to balance the Russian influence.

The geopolitical leverage gained by Russia in the control of the pipeline in Kazakhstan is because of the strong influence on the energy industry of the country. Moscow has the capacity to pressure the Chinese by restricting energy transit in the event of bad relations between the Sino-Russian relations, which would compromise the efforts of Beijing to diversify its energy sources. China wants to reduce its reliance on the Middle East especially the vulnerable Strait of Malacca. Overland pipelines originating from Kazakhstan are crucial alternatives. However, Russia actively undermines China’s independent initiatives by constructing rival pipelines and purchasing Central Asian gas at elevated prices, which presents significant challenges to China’s diversification strategy. Russia has also been urging other countries to participate in the Central Asian energy sector to undermine that of China. This plan increases the cost of the oil and gas fields and the costs incurred by China in resource acquisition and makes the process of energy diplomacy more difficult. Russia enlists the groups like EAEU and SCO to maintain its influence in the region. Although China uses the BRI to expand pipeline networks and infrastructure, such plans often undermine the interests of Russia, limiting the flexibility of China in its operations.

¹⁴⁷ Qiang Zhou, Ze He, & Yang Yu, “Energy geopolitics in Central Asia: China’s involvement and responses”. *J. Geogr. Sci.* 30, 2020, 895. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11442-020-1816-6>

China's dependence on imports has grown to roughly 70% of its oil consumption¹⁴⁸. Kazakhstan presents land-based and relatively stable supply routes, which lessen reliance on maritime shipping lanes. However, because a large share of the export infrastructure in Kazakhstan is controlled by Russia, Beijing cannot guarantee that the region will provide entirely continuous and politically uninhibited energy supplies out of Central Asia. The energy policy by Russia in Kazakhstan poses opportunities and threats to China. While Kazakhstan provides a vital overland energy resource that bolsters Beijing's security against maritime threats, Russia's dominance over pipelines and export routes means China's access is not entirely assured. This compels China to extend the Belt and Road Initiative, seek new pipeline projects, and explore wider multilateral energy frameworks to diminish Russian influence.¹⁴⁹

China's balance between Russia and Kazakhstan

Russia leverages Kazakhstan as a buffer for energy and security, while keeping significant control over its oil and gas exports. Conversely, To China, Kazakhstan is not only a key participant in its Belt and Road Initiative, but it is also a key energy provider, which offers Beijing an overland alternative to reduce the risk posed by the maritime routes. To counteract Moscow's influence, China refrains from direct military confrontation and instead enhances economic and infrastructure connections, backing Kazakhstan's multi-vector approach while cautiously operating within Russia's boundaries.

Over 80 percent of the oil imports in Kazakhstan are still shipped via the Russian pipes including the Caspian Pipeline Consortium and the Druzhba network. Transit and production revenues are favorable to Russia and have been occasionally taking advantage of pipeline closures. In 2023, bilateral trade reached \$28 billion, partly due to re-exports that bypassed sanctions. Kazakhstan ranks as Russia's second-largest trading partner, with around \$13 billion invested in its economy. Kazakhstan partners with Moscow in the CSTO. Between 2019 and 2023, Russia provided the

¹⁴⁸ Tian Chunrong, "Oil Import and Export in China." (January) 2016: 42.
<http://www.cqvip.com/QK/85620X/201601/668563690.html>.

¹⁴⁹ Ghodratollah Behboudi Nejad "Geopolitics of Energy in Kazakhstan: Implications for China." *International Journal of New Political Economy* 2 (2) 2021.
https://jep.sbu.ac.ir/article_101178.html.

majority (94%) of Kazakhstan's arms imports.¹⁵⁰ Russian influence pervades language, education, and media, with Russian designated as an official state language. Moscow considers Kazakhstan a buffer state that safeguards Russia's southern border and acts as a transit route to Europe and Asia.

Since 2005, China and Kazakhstan have established major pipelines heading east. Currently, Kazakhstan directs 80% of its natural gas exports (approximately 4 bcm annually) and up to 20 million tons of oil towards China. Chinese firms are investing in renewable energy initiatives, such as the Zhanatas wind farm and Turgusun hydropower station¹⁵¹. Kazakhstan is a pivotal part of the BRI, with significant projects like the Khorgos International Border Cooperation Center and the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Middle Corridor), which avoids Russian territory. Bilateral trade hit \$41 billion in 2023, with Kazakhstan constituting almost half of China's trade in Central Asia. Beijing emphasizes border stability, particularly considering Xinjiang, and collaborates on counterterrorism intelligence. China provides some dual-use technology (like drones and surveillance) while refraining from significant arms sales to avoid upsetting Russia.

China engages in security cooperation through multilateral platforms like the SCO rather than direct defense agreements to avoid alarming Moscow. In contrast to Russia, China has not pursued establishing military bases in Kazakhstan. Although there is competition for energy resources, China and Russia are increasingly collaborating on infrastructure developments in Kazakhstan, including logistics centers connecting Xi'an (China) to Moscow via Kazakhstan. In 2024, they coordinated energy exports, which included shipments of Russian crude to China using Kazakh pipelines. Kazakhstan adopts a multi-vector diplomatic approach, balancing its security collaboration with Russia and economic partnership with China.¹⁵² China acknowledges Kazakhstan's independence and avoids actions that could imply a desire to replace Russian dominance. While Russia holds security supremacy, China exerts significant economic influence.

¹⁵⁰ Adilbek Yermekbayev, Meiram Sarybayev, and Chen Suriguga, "China-Kazakhstan Strategic Partnership and Bilateral Economic Cooperation." *Central Asia S Affairs* 85 (1) 2022: 19. <https://doi.org/10.52536/2788-5909.2022-1.02>.

¹⁵¹ Ariel Cohen, Kevin Rosner, *Kazakhstan: Energy Cooperation with Russia - Oil, Gas and Beyond*. Kogan Page Business Books 2006.

¹⁵² Janet Xuanli Liao, "China's Energy Diplomacy Towards Central Asia and the Implications on Its 'Belt and Road Initiative.'" *The Pacific Review* 34 (3) 2019: 502. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2019.1705882>.

Kazakhstan leverages this dual engagement to maintain independence from both powers while enhancing its negotiating strength.

China has successfully broadened its energy presence in Kazakhstan while skillfully maintaining good relations with Russia. By concentrating on economic investments, enhancing infrastructure, and engaging in pipeline diplomacy, Beijing has gained access to Kazakh resources without explicitly challenging Moscow's security superiority. Kazakhstan, on its side, embraces Chinese investment to offset Russian influence while continuing to uphold strong connections with Moscow for security purposes.¹⁵³

China has the problem of strengthening its energy imprint in Kazakhstan without the risk of offending Russia, which considers Central Asia as its region of interest. While making economic investments, China steers clear of contesting Russia in the realms of military or security. It depends on Russian-led CSTO structures to handle regional security issues while concentrating on trade and infrastructure development. China highlights initiatives that seem advantageous to all parties involved, including those under the SCO, presenting them as cooperative efforts rather than a threat to Russian interests. In contrast to Western approaches, China does not push Kazakhstan regarding governance or democratic matters. This strategy would allow Russia to maintain the political and cultural influence, whereas China would become more powerful economically. Russia remains to be an important oil and gas exporter to China. Thus, Beijing postures its energy imports to China not as a replacement but complementary to Russian supplies thereby alleviating the risk of rivalry.¹⁵⁴

The complex relationship between Russian and Chinese energy diplomacy in Kazakhstan highlights not only a competition for resources but also an ongoing battle for geopolitical power in Kazakhstan. As discussed in this section, Kazakhstan exists at the intersection of these rival ambitions, acting as both an essential energy provider and a strategic transit route. Historically, Russia, due to its strong historical connections, security influence, and legacy of Soviet

¹⁵³ Bakri Mat, and Amna Khalid, "China's Energy Security Strategy in Central Asia: A BRI and Green Energy Perspective (2019-2024)." *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, October, 1–31 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1142/s2377740024500076>.

¹⁵⁴ Muhammad Nadeem Mirza, Shaukat Ayub. Sino-Russian Competitive Collaboration for the Central Asian Sphere of Influence. *Trames. Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2021, 25 (4), pp.437-50. ff10.3176/tr.2021.4.04ff. ffhalshs-03452696f

infrastructure, has been the primary external actor that has shaped Kazakhstan's energy landscape. Nevertheless, The BRI and the fast rate of economic development of China have introduced an important challenger to the game, slowly changing the balance in the region. Recognizing this interplay is crucial for understanding the changing dynamics of power, dependency, and sovereignty in Central Asia.

Russia's energy diplomacy in Kazakhstan significantly impacts China's geopolitical position in Central Asia by shaping regional power dynamics, influencing energy security, and affecting trade relationships. Russia's energy diplomacy strengthens its geopolitical influence in Kazakhstan, and by extension, Central Asia. This challenges China's Silk Road Economic Belt which relies on Central Asia as a critical transit route. Russian control over Kazakh energy infrastructure could limit China's influence, as Moscow may leverage its ties to maintain Kazakhstan's alignment with the Russian-led EAEU. China's attempts to foster deeper economic ties with Kazakhstan might face limitations if Russia holds over critical sectors, including energy.¹⁵⁵

Russia's approach to energy diplomacy is fundamentally linked to its capacity to govern Kazakhstan's transit pathways and energy infrastructure. Through systems such as the Caspian Pipeline Consortium and the Transneft network, Moscow maintains substantial control over Kazakhstan's energy exports, especially to Europe. By managing overland pipelines and incorporating Kazakhstan into the EAEU, Russia guarantees that Astana's economic decisions remain aligned with Moscow's geopolitical aims. In addition to infrastructure control, Russia influences Kazakhstan through security arrangements like CSTO, cultural and linguistic connections, and trade policies that favor Russian economic priorities. This comprehensive influence enables Moscow to apply pressure on Kazakhstan as needed, reinforcing its role as a regional leader, even with the increased involvement from China. Simultaneously, China's energy diplomacy has grown swiftly, transforming Kazakhstan's economic environment and providing alternatives to Russian predominance¹⁵⁶. In addition to fossil fuels, China has also invested in renewable energy projects including wind and hydropower stations which demonstrate its interest

¹⁵⁵ Sharifa Giritlioglu, "A Comparative Analysis of the Energy Policies of China and Russia in Kazakhstan." *Bilig Journal of Social Sciences in Turkish World*, no. 112 (January 2025): 51. <https://doi.org/10.12995/bilig.7772>.

¹⁵⁶ Alexandros Petersen, Katinka Barysch, "Russia, China and the Geopolitics of Energy in Central Asia". United Kingdom: Centre for European Reform, 2011.

in diversified and long-term participation in the energy industry of Kazakhstan. Other infrastructure initiatives such as the Khorgos Dry Port and the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route are also initiatives that strengthen China as a transformative economic partner and increase the connectivity of Kazakhstan and reduce its dependence on Russian-controlled routes. Nevertheless, there is no solitary occurrence of this growing Chinese influence. Russia views Kazakhstan as part of its traditional zone of influence and the increasing influence of China has been bound to cause such competition.¹⁵⁷ Nevertheless, Beijing has skillfully navigated this rivalry to prevent direct conflict. Instead of directly contesting Russia's security authority, China has concentrated mainly on economic and infrastructural cooperation. It engages through multilateral platforms like SCO, presenting its initiatives as supportive rather than adversarial. By steering clear of direct military involvement in Kazakhstan and avoiding political meddling in Astana's internal matters, China mitigates the risk of provoking Moscow. This strategy enables China to expand its energy influence while reducing the chances of geopolitical repercussions.

Kazakhstan has adeptly straddled between its two influential neighbors by employing its long-established “multi-vector” foreign policy. By interacting with both Russia and China, as well as seeking engagement with Western entities. Kazakhstan aims to preserve its independence and maximize the advantages of external collaborations. On one hand, Russia continues to be a crucial security ally, supplying arms, training, and a cultural safety net through shared history and language. On the other hand, China presents extraordinary economic prospects, with substantial investments entering infrastructure, energy, and trade. By balancing these relationships, Kazakhstan enhances its negotiating leverage, making it challenging for either Russia or China to fully assert control over its policies.

From a wider viewpoint, the energy diplomacy employed by Russia and China in Kazakhstan highlights that energy has transcended mere economic need and has become a crucial instrument of statecraft.¹⁵⁸ To Russia, dominating energy exports of Kazakhstan is a way of restating its

¹⁵⁷ Medvedeva A Kazantsev, Safranchuk, Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 2021 12(1), 67. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1879366521998242>

¹⁵⁸ Michel Gueldry, and Wei Liang, “China’s Global Energy Diplomacy: Behavior Normalization Through Economic Interdependence or Resource Neo-mercantilism and Power Politics?” *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 21 (2) 2016: 40. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-016-9405-3>.

position as a great power and enhancing its influence in Europe and Asia. For China, obtaining Kazakh energy is essential for decreasing its reliance on the uncertain Middle East and maritime shipping routes, thereby enhancing its long-term energy security and economic robustness. Both nations acknowledge Kazakhstan's strategic position at the core of Eurasia, rendering it vital not only as an energy provider but also as a transit hub for broader regional integration. This rivalry affects not only Kazakhstan's internal development but also the future direction of geopolitical dynamics in Eurasia.

Even with China's noteworthy progress, its energy security in Kazakhstan is still limited by Russia's control over infrastructure. Although pipelines have been constructed to connect Kazakhstan directly to China, a significant portion of Kazakh oil exports continues to flow through Russian networks. Russia can leverage this dependency as a strategic threat, manipulating tariffs, delaying deliveries, or even stopping transit during times of political strain. For China, this constitutes a significant weakness.¹⁵⁹ While Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative projects strive to diversify supply routes via the Caspian Sea, the Middle Corridor, or southern pathways through Turkmenistan and Iran these alternatives remain expensive and complex to fully realize. Therefore, while China has diminished its dependence on Russia to some degree, it has not overcome the fundamental limitations that Moscow enforces.

Looking into the future, Kazakhstan will remain a crucial entity in the evolving relationship between China and Russia in Central Asia. The viability of its multi-vector approach will hinge on its capacity to balance Moscow's demands for allegiance with Beijing's investment proposals. The conflict in Ukraine has further complicated this equilibrium, diminished Russia's economic strength while simultaneously increasing its dependency on China. For Astana, this situation presents both risks and opportunities: the potential for greater diplomatic flexibility, but also the challenge of ensuring that closer ties with China do not infringe on its sovereignty or provoke domestic dissent.

¹⁵⁹ Bakri Mat, and Amna Khalid, "China's Energy Security Strategy in Central Asia: A BRI and Green Energy Perspective (2019-24)." *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, October 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1142/s2377740024500076>.

In summary, the situation in Kazakhstan demonstrates that energy diplomacy in Central Asia extends beyond pipelines and agreements; it involves the reconfiguration of regional power dynamics. Russia continues to be a dominant player, especially concerning security and infrastructure, while China progressively solidifies its position as a crucial economic ally. Kazakhstan's astute diplomacy ensures that it is more than just a passive participant in great-power competition; it is actively engaged in shaping its own future.¹⁶⁰ Nevertheless, this balance remains delicate. Any major change in Russia's capabilities, China's energy demands, or Kazakhstan's internal politics could alter the equilibrium, reshaping the strategic landscape of Central Asia for the foreseeable future.

¹⁶⁰ Nurbolat Nyshambayev, Kairat Bekov, Zhulduz Baizakova, and Alipbayev Amangeldy. 2024. "The Republic of Kazakhstan's Multi-vector Foreign Policy." *New Perspectives*, December. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2336825x241308432>.

CHAPTER 5

Strategic Challenges for China amid Russia's Energy Diplomacy in Kazakhstan

This chapter investigates the strategic obstacles China encounters as Russia reintegrates and solidifies its position in energy sector of Kazakhstan. The first section, Russia's Re-entry in Kazakhstan's Oil and Gas Sector, assesses how Moscow has regained its foothold through ownership stakes, control over transit, and political influence, restricting Beijing's operational flexibility. When Vladimir Putin became the president, Russia wanted to re-establish its role in the area through the reinforcement of political, economic, and energy ties. Kazakhstan's energy infrastructure, primarily consisting of pipelines and refineries, was predominantly developed during the Soviet era and was designed to serve Russian markets.¹⁶¹ Consequently, for a significant period, Kazakh oil and gas exports were required to traverse Russian territory, leading to a reliance on Moscow and giving Russia a strategic advantage.

Kazakhstan historically has considered China an important component of its continental energy policy, where the security and diversity of overland oil and gas sources could be used to reduce dependence on maritime paths to the world, which are vulnerable to external shocks.¹⁶² In the past two decades, Beijing has penetrated the energy industry of Kazakhstan through investment, pipeline development and long term supply contracts, and has proven itself as a large external force in the energy industry of this country. Nevertheless, the re-entry of the Russian energy diplomacy in Kazakhstan has complicated the goals of China. Moscow, taking advantage of a deep-rooted infrastructure, business relations, and political relations, has restored its presence in the oil and gas sector in Kazakhstan, thus shifting the balance of influence in the region in terms of energy.¹⁶³ China encounters strategic challenges in Kazakhstan as a result of energy diplomacy of Russia,

¹⁶¹ Sartaj, Uzma Siraj, and Uroosa Ishfaq, "The Growing Strategic Imbalance Between China and Russia in Central Asia: Challenges and Opportunities." *Global Political Review* 3 (1) 2018: 43. [https://doi.org/10.31703/gpr.2018\(iii-i\).04](https://doi.org/10.31703/gpr.2018(iii-i).04).

¹⁶² Erica Strecker Downs, Richard Mesic, Charles T. Kelley. *China's Quest for Energy Security*. Ukraine: RAND Corporation, 2000.

¹⁶³ Pier Paolo Raimondi, *Central Asia Oil and Gas Industry - The External Powers' Energy Interests in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan*. Italy: Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei (FEEM), (n.d.) 2019.

which is largely driven by the competition for resources and influence. Although China's economic footprint in Kazakhstan is expanding, Russia continues to hold considerable security and political power via organizations such as the CSTO and its longstanding connections. This leads to a complicated geopolitical situation in which China must align its economic goals while steering clear of direct conflicts with Russia, all while managing Kazakhstan's multi-directional foreign policy.¹⁶⁴

Despite the significant investments made by China in the energy industry of Kazakhstan since 2005 amounting to more than 22 billion dollars of the total Chinese investment of 27.5 billion dollars in Kazakhstan, Russia continues to assert its power by gaining control over the major transit routes and pipeline systems.¹⁶⁵ The second section, Erosion of Energy Dominance of China, examines how previously expanding grasp of China on Kazakhstan's energy sector is being undermined by Russia's initiatives and Kazakhstan's inclination for a multi-faceted foreign policy. Lastly, the third section, Overlapping Pipeline Routes of China and Russia in Kazakhstan, underscores the infrastructural and geopolitical rivalry inherent in Kazakhstan's dual pipeline orientation eastward towards China and northward through Russia illustrating how these overlapping routes both limit China's independence and reinforce Russia's negotiating leverage. Collectively, these factors illustrate that while Kazakhstan continues to be crucial to China's overland energy diversification efforts, Russia's established and renewed energy diplomacy presents structural challenges to Beijing's long-term supremacy. Kazakhstan is multi-vectoral in its own policy, and balances Russia and China. This undermines the likelihood that China can gain monopoly of energy as Astana does not lean on a single power.¹⁶⁶

Russia's Re-entry in Oil and Gas Sector of Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is a land-locked country between China and Russia. Kazakhstan is endowed with a lot of oil and gas reserves as well as rich mineral deposits that include petroleum, natural gas and

¹⁶⁴Clara Fong, and Lindsay Maizland. "China and Russia: Exploring Ties Between Two Authoritarian Powers." Council on Foreign Relations, 2022.

<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-russia-relationship-xi-putin-taiwan-ukraine>.

¹⁶⁵ Bruce Pannier, "Debt and Development: The Next Chapter of Chinese Investments in Central Asia." Foreign policy research institute, 2025. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/08/debt-and-development-the-next-chapter-of-chinese-investments-in-central-asia>.

¹⁶⁶ (Sartaj, Siraj, and Ishfaq 2018)

uranium. Presently the oil and gas reserves which have been proven are 39.6 billion barrels and 105.9 trillion cubic feet equivalent to about 3.3 and 1.7 percent of the global proved reserves respectively. Kazakhstan is one of the top 10 countries regarding the oil and gas reserves.¹⁶⁷ While estimates regarding the remaining hydrocarbon potential of the country are largely speculative, current evaluations are more grounded compared to the exaggerated and unverified claims from the 1990s. In the state of Kazakhstan, the oil business plays a vital role in the well-being of the state economy and is rapidly developing. The oil industry makes the contribution of close to 30 percent to the gross domestic product and 57 percent of the total yearly exports. Countries have extensive collection of tax and non-tax system to raise revenue in the oil and gas industry.¹⁶⁸

The oil and gas sector of Kazakhstan is known to be an important and critical source of economic growth in the country and the government has made the sector its priority up to 2030.¹⁶⁹ This sector not only supports the country's GDP and investment appeal but is also crucial in influencing its long-term economic and industrial evolution. From 2015 to 2018, there was a consistent increase in the gross regional product (growing from 7.6 to 12.5 trillion tenge), oil and condensate output (rising from 52.2 to 75.2 million tons), and foreign investment in oil and gas (increasing from 1.9 to 5.4 trillion tenge).¹⁷⁰ The use of innovative technologies has become more prevalent in exploration, production, and processing to lower expenses, boost efficiency, and appeal to global investors. Concurrently, Kazakhstan has been working on enhancing and diversifying its oil and gas transportation system, with significant initiatives like the CPC pipeline system, Atasu–Alashankou, and Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipelines that connect to both Western and Eastern markets. Central to the country as a transit point in Central Asia is the development of gas pipelines, including the Kazakhstan routes to China. The novelty of the industry is technical improvement, better processing, human resource management and penetration of foreign markets. Furthermore, the strategic use of associated gas and improved subsoil regulations exemplify

¹⁶⁷ Ariel Cohen, Kevin Rosner, Kazakhstan: Energy Cooperation with Russia - Oil, Gas and Beyond. Kogan Page Business Books 2006.

¹⁶⁸ Mark J. Kaiser, and Allan G. Pulsipher. "A review of the oil and gas sector in Kazakhstan." *Energy Policy* 35, no. 2 (2007), 114. doi: 10.1016/j.enpol.2006.03.020.

¹⁶⁹ "Overview." n.d. World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/kazakhstan/overview>.

¹⁷⁰ Sayabek Ziyadin, Khakimzhan Malayev, Gulmira Yessenova, and Anar Beyzhanova, "Oil and Gas Companies in the Innovation Conditions of Economic Development in Kazakhstan." *E3S Web of Conferences* 135 (January) 2019: 04025. <https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/201913504025>. ed

Kazakhstan's commitment to ensuring energy security, environmental stewardship, and socio-economic advantages, including local job creation and industrial diversification.¹⁷¹

The re-entry of Russia in the oil and gas sector of Kazakhstan is a strategic challenge to China since these two countries are in competition to influence the energy resources and energy routes in the region. This competition is influenced by both countries growing energy needs. Russia, possessing significant energy resources of its own, is making efforts to enhance its involvement in Kazakhstan's energy industry, possibly through investments, building infrastructure, and developing pipeline initiatives such as the CPC and Atyrau Samara Pipeline¹⁷². Russia's heightened engagement may restrict China's ability to access energy resources in Kazakhstan, resulting in a competitive relationship between the two nations for dominance and authority over these essential supplies. The re-entry of Russia in the energy industry can be regarded as the effort to check the increasing influence of China, keeping its own strategic position within the region.

Since the withdrawal period of the 1990s and early 2000s, Russia has re-entered the Kazakhstan oil and gas sector using joint venture and by exerting influence on critical infrastructures.¹⁷³ Russian companies like Lukoil, Rosneft, and Gazprom have reinvested in offshore Caspian oilfields, pipeline interests, and refining partnerships. This resurgence undermines the phase when Chinese national oil companies (CNPC, Sinopec) secured significant stakes in essential fields such as Aktobe and Kashagan. The presence of Moscow ensures that Kazakhstan does not become overly reliant on China, thereby diminishing Beijing's influence. The strategic importance of export routes plays a crucial role in this dynamic. The primary route of conveying the Kazakh crude to the foreign markets is the CPC which is controlled by Russia and passes through Novorossiysk on the Black Sea.¹⁷⁴ In response, China has constructed pipelines heading east from Kazakhstan to Xinjiang (including the Kazakhstan–China oil pipeline and the Central Asia–China

¹⁷¹ Kazakhstan Energy Policy, Laws and Regulations Handbook Volume 1 Strategic Information and Basic Laws. Kazakhstan: Lulu Press, Incorporated, 2015.

¹⁷² Tatiana Mitrova, "Russia's Expanding Energy Ties in Central Asia." Center on Global Energy policy. February 2024. <https://www.energypolicy.columbia.edu/russias-expanding-energy-ties-in-central-asia>.

¹⁷³ Yelena Nikolayevna Zabortsev, Russia's Relations with Kazakhstan: Rethinking Ex-Soviet Transitions in the Emerging World System. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2016.

¹⁷⁴ Vaclav Lidl, "Russia's Energy Policy in Central Asia." In *The Natural Gas Conundrum: Transformation of the Central Asian Energy Security Complex after 1991*, 67. Karolinum Press, 2022. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.949055.6>.

gas pipeline) to reduce Russian oversight. Russia's renewed involvement reestablishes the CPC's primary role and hampers the growth of China-controlled routes. Strategically, China's ambitions for an independent land-based supply chain are hindered by Russia's control over westward routes, giving Moscow significant leverage. Kazakhstan navigates a delicate balance: it requires both Russia and China but aims to avoid reliance on just one. With Russia's return, Kazakhstan can use Moscow as a counterbalance to China, which diminishes Beijing's negotiating power regarding pricing, investment conditions, and transit costs.¹⁷⁵ For example, when Chinese companies sought favorable arrangements, Astana utilized Russia's presence to secure improved terms. This complicates China's strategy of entrenching Kazakhstan into an energy-dependent relationship within the BRI framework. Moscow's sway ensures that China cannot single-handedly dictate the energy landscape of Central Asia. By managing pipelines and transport routes, Russia maintains its role as the regional gatekeeper, obstructing Beijing from sidelining Moscow in its Eurasian energy security strategies. This situation undermines China's wider SREB goals, where energy infrastructure was envisioned as a cornerstone of China-led integration.¹⁷⁶

In essence, Russia leverages its energy influence to contain China's geopolitical expansion into Central Asia. In the 2000s, Chinese national oil companies secured direct access upstream, with CNPC acquiring interests in projects like Aktobe, Mangistau, and Kashagan¹⁷⁷. Russia's renewed presence limits this exclusive access: Kazakhstan now increasingly demands collaborative projects with Russian partners or a careful balance of foreign investments. This restricts Beijing's potential to dominate upstream operations and ensures that Chinese companies cannot monopolize the industry. From a strategic perspective, this prevents China from transforming Kazakhstan into a "secure backyard" energy reserve, as Russia insists on shared control.

¹⁷⁵ Maximilian Ohle, Richard J. Cook, and Zhaoying Han. 2020a. "China's Engagement with Kazakhstan and Russia's Zugzwang: Why Is Nur-Sultan Incurring Regional Power Hedging?" *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 11 (1): 97. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1879366519900996>.

¹⁷⁶ Dina R Spechler, and Martin C Spechler. "China And Russia: Alliance or Alignment?" *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* 26, no. 1 (2022): 43. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48674365>.

¹⁷⁷ Keun-Wook Paik, Sino-Russian Oil and Gas Cooperation: The Reality and Implications. United Kingdom: Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, 2012.

Erosion of Energy Dominance of China

The Chinese involvement in the energy sector in Kazakhstan started soon after the collapse of USSR in 1991 when Kazakhstan became an independent country and was endowed with vast oil and gas reserves, but in underdeveloped state. In the early years following the Soviet era, Kazakhstan sought to draw in foreign investment to develop its energy industry, which had been hampered by outdated Soviet-era infrastructure and a scarcity of funds.¹⁷⁸ Meanwhile, China was seeking new ways of guaranteeing that its western border is secure and that it can gain economic and political influence in Central Asia. In this respect, the CNPC made a major move in 1997 upon acquiring the right over the Uzen oilfield in western Kazakhstan and setting out to construct a cross-border oil pipeline to Xinjiang. This was a turning point, not only the first major investment in foreign energy that China had ever made but also it laid the groundwork to the Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline which was the first direct pipeline into China through Central Asia.¹⁷⁹ Although Kazakhstan's oil output was relatively small at the time and China's energy imports from the nation were limited, Beijing perceived energy diplomacy as a crucial means to cultivate political relationships and maintain a long-term foothold in the region. In the 2000s, China progressively strengthened its presence in Kazakhstan through significant acquisitions and infrastructure initiatives. A pivotal moment occurred in 2005 when CNPC successfully acquired PetroKazakhstan, one of the largest oil companies in the nation, for \$4.18 billion.¹⁸⁰ This transaction provided China with control over twelve oil fields containing nearly 400 million tons of proven reserves, in addition to the Shymkent oil refinery. The purchase greatly enhanced CNPC's production capacity in Kazakhstan and enabled Beijing to combine upstream resources with refining capabilities. During this period, CNPC also augmented its interests in

¹⁷⁸ Jürgen Wandel, and Botagoz Kozbagarova, “Kazakhstan: Economic Transformation and Autocratic Power.” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, January 2019 <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1434522>.

¹⁷⁹ Cesar B. Martinez Alvarez, “China-Kazakhstan Energy Relations Between 1997 and 2012.” *Journal of International Affairs* 69 (1) 2015: 57. <https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-442454321/china-kazakhstan-energy-relations-between-1997-and>.

¹⁸⁰ Al Jazeera, “China Battles to Buy PetroKazakhstan.” *Al Jazeera*, August 22, 2005. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2005/8/22/china-battles-to-buy-petrokazakhstan>.

AktobeMunaiGas and took part of MangistauMunaiGas, further solidifying its position as a leading energy investor in Kazakhstan.¹⁸¹

China's influence over energy in Kazakhstan intensified during the 2008 global financial crisis when Kazakhstan encountered significant liquidity issues. In response, Beijing provided considerable financial assistance, most notably through a \$10 billion loan-for-oil arrangement established in 2009, involving CNPC, the China Development Bank, and Kazakhstan's state energy firm KazMunayGas.¹⁸² In return for these loans, Chinese companies gained long-term access to oil supplies and additional stakes in Kazakhstan's energy industry. These financial bailouts served not only as crucial support for Astana but also as means to strengthen Kazakhstan's ties to China's economic sphere. The timing of these actions bolstered the belief that Beijing was a dependable ally, while also enlarging China's ownership and control over key assets. As of the 2010s, China had established itself as one of the major energy allies of Kazakhstan, which has exercised dominion over large portions of the national oil production in some years estimated to constitute up to a quarter of the total national production. The relationship between the two powers extended to energy other than oil. Started in 2009 and expanded over several lines during the mid-2010s, the Central AsiaChina gas pipeline system made Kazakhstan an important transit route to Turkmen gas traveling to China. These pipelines underscored the dual role of Kazakhstan as a major supplier of oil as well as being a major transit point of exporting gas in the region to China. The intensification of energy relations coincided with the launch of China in 2013 of its BRI. Kazakhstan became one of the key countries of such initiative, and in the same year, President Xi Jinping presented the SREB in Astana. Consequently, energy collaboration became integrated into a larger geopolitical context of infrastructure, trade, and investment, enhancing its strategic significance even further. The development and upgrading of refineries, contributions to renewable energy initiatives, and the enhancement of transport infrastructure intensified China's involvement in Kazakhstan's economic landscape. For China, Kazakhstan has become a fundamental part of its

¹⁸¹ Sharifa Giritlioglu, "A Comparative Analysis of the Energy Policies of China and Russia in Kazakhstan." *Bilig Journal of Social Sciences in Turkish World*, no. 112 (January 2025): 71. <https://doi.org/10.12995/bilig.7772>.

¹⁸² Republic of Kazakhstan: Financial Sector Assessment Program-Technical Note on Climate-Related Risks and Financial Stability. International Monetary Fund, 2024.

energy security strategy and serves as a gateway to Central Asia through the BRI.¹⁸³ However, this prominence has also involved Beijing in the region's geopolitical "great games," as its increasing involvement threatened Russia's traditional influence and attracted attention from Western nations. By the late 2010s, China's blend of ownership in Kazakh oil companies, control over essential pipelines, and significant financial influence made it clear that Beijing had established itself as the preeminent external force within Kazakhstan's energy sector.¹⁸⁴

In the past, Russia has dominated in the energy industry of Kazakhstan because of the Soviet era legacy of infrastructure and the control of most pipeline routes. Despite Chinese construction of the Kazakhstan China electric oil pipeline and Central Asia China gas pipeline, Moscow retained leverage because it could regulate transit to Europe through the CPC, and solidified energy relationships with Kazakhstan via joint venture and integration into the EAEU and engage in energy diplomacy to cement its hegemony in Central Asia, particularly in the post-mid-2010s.¹⁸⁵

China's ascent in Kazakhstan was founded on ownership interests, direct pipeline constructions, and financial clout. By the 2010s, Chinese firms held a significant portion of Kazakhstan's oil output, and China emerged as one of its largest purchasers. However, the document emphasizes that China's strength was met with limitations. Russian energy diplomacy curtailed China's monopoly. Although China established routes to the east, Russia made sure Kazakhstan remained connected to western routes through infrastructure it controlled. Moscow's approach was less about blocking China and more about balancing its influence ensuring Astana did not completely align itself with Beijing. Kazakhstan has leveraged the competition between China and Russia in the energy sector to its advantage. Astana strategically navigates between the two nations, drawing in Chinese capital for diversification while preserving its Russian alliance to avoid becoming overly reliant on Beijing. China primarily leads in direct investments and the eastbound export

¹⁸³ Janet Xuanli Liao "China's Energy Diplomacy Towards Central Asia and the Implications on Its 'Belt and Road Initiative.'" *The Pacific Review* 34 (3) 2019: 490.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2019.1705882>.

¹⁸⁴ Philip Andrews-Speed, "China's Oil and Gas Industry: Stranded Between the Plan and the Market." In *Palgrave Macmillan UK eBooks*, 2015, 49.
https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137434074_11.

¹⁸⁵ Amir Mohammad Moghani, and Abbas Maleki, "China's Energy Diplomacy in the Caspian Basin and Its Impact on the Energy Security of Europe." *Energy Reports* 11 (February): 94. 2024
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejgr.2024.01.070>.

routes. Russia continues to dominate the westward export routes and the frameworks of energy diplomacy (such as the EAEU and SCO energy cooperation).¹⁸⁶ During the 1990s, Russia clearly held the upper hand. From the 2000s to the 2010s, however, China advanced significantly in ownership and infrastructure, emerging as the primary external investor. Nevertheless, Russia adapted by reinforcing its energy diplomacy and institutional connections, limiting China's ability to gain exclusive dominance. China has made huge steps in the energy development of Kazakhstan via its systems of pipelines, acquisitions and loans, but the energy diplomacy of Russia has hindered Beijing to achieve complete domination.¹⁸⁷ Consequently, a dual framework has emerged. China leads in eastward flows and investments, while Russia retains its influence over westward exports and diplomatic initiatives. Kazakhstan, therefore, benefits from maintaining a balance between these two powers.

Overlapping Pipeline routes of China and Russia in Kazakhstan

China and Russia do not manage shared pipelines in Kazakhstan; however, their energy infrastructures pass through the same key corridors, leading to competition instead of direct similarities. Kazakhstan's pipeline network is split between routes that transport oil and gas eastwards to China and those that send resources northwards into Russia. The oil pipeline in Kazakhstan to China and the Central Asia to China gas pipelines establish an important energy corridor on the Chinese end, between the Kazakh resources and Xinjiang. Russia in its turn is linked to Kazakhstan via the Caspian Pipeline Consortium to Novorossiysk, Atyrau-Samara oil pipeline, and the Central Asia-Center gas system.¹⁸⁸ Although these systems do not physically share pipelines, they frequently start from the same western Kazakh oil fields and move along parallel routes across central Kazakhstan, making the country a vital hub. This geographic overlap enables Kazakhstan to navigate relationships with its two influential neighbors, leveraging its location to diversify export channels and lessen reliance on any one partner. In this manner, the

¹⁸⁷ Giulia C Romano, Jean-Francois Meglio, *China's Energy Security: A Multidimensional Perspective*. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2016, 36.

¹⁸⁸ Justyna Misiągiewicz, *Geopolitics and Energy Security Policies in the Caspian Region*. Germany: Brill, 2024, 77.

overlap is more about competing transit routes within the same region, illustrating both Kazakhstan's strategic significance and the geopolitical tension between Russia and China.¹⁸⁹

The Russia–Kazakhstan–China Gas Pipeline is a proposed extension of the regional energy infrastructure designed to link Russian gas supplies to China via Kazakh territory.¹⁹⁰ The concept originated in the late 2000s but gained significance after 2019, when discussions around Gazprom's long-term ambitions for increasing exports to Asia intensified. In contrast to the present Power of Siberia pipeline which takes the direct route of Russia to China across Siberia, this project would use Kazakhstan as the transit route, linking the Russian gas fields (primarily in Western Siberia) to the Central Asia China Gas Pipeline system, which already supplies Turkmen and Kazakh gas to Xinjiang. According to official reports, the project was actively on the agenda of trilateral meetings between Russia, Kazakhstan, and China in 2022 and 2023.¹⁹¹ In October 2023, agreements to enhance gas cooperation were signed by Kazakh President Tokayev and Chinese President Xi Jinping, with Kazakhstan committing to increase gas transit to China, an action seen as paving the way for Russia's involvement. Although no official date for construction has been shared, Kazakh and Russian officials stated in 2023 that the pipeline represents a "strategic priority" for the next phase of regional energy integration. Industry experts speculate that if confirmed, construction might commence in the late 2020s, coinciding with Russia's efforts on Power of Siberia 2 through Mongolia.

For Russia, the pipeline would give Moscow an additional pathway to the rapidly expanding Chinese gas market, allowing it to reduce dependence on Europe, where demand has significantly declined since 2022. For Kazakhstan, this would act as the transit point enhances its geopolitical

¹⁸⁹ Mengyang Chen, Nan Li, and Hailin Mu. "Assessment of a Low-carbon Natural Gas Storage Network Using the FLP Model: A Case Study Within China–Russia Natural Gas Pipeline East Line's Coverage." *Journal of Natural Gas Science and Engineering* 96 (September 2021): 146. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jngse.2021.104246>.

¹⁹⁰ Russia's Pivot to Asia, "Russia Examining New China Gas Pipeline Route Via Kazakhstan." Russia's Pivot to Asia, 2024. <https://russiaspivottoasia.com/russia-examining-new-china-gas-pipeline-route-via-kazakhstan>.

¹⁹¹ Vladimir Afanasiev. "Russia advancing plans for building strategic gas export pipeline to China and Kazakhstan." Upstream. December 2024. https://www.upstreamonline.com/energy-security/russia-advancing-plans-for-building-strategic-gas-export-pipeline-to-china-and-kazakhstan/2-1-1758350?zephr_sso_ott=mGyHUA.

influence and enables it to capitalize on unused capacity within the Central Asia–China pipeline network. It also ensures funding for domestic gasification initiatives. Finally, for China the pipeline would bolster supply security by incorporating Russian gas alongside imports from Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, thereby creating a more varied overland supply chain and minimizing dependence on Liquified Natural Gas and maritime choke points. In summary, the Russia–Kazakhstan–China Gas Pipeline is still in the developmental and negotiation phase, with no confirmed start date yet, but it symbolizes a strategically important initiative that has the potential to alter energy dynamics in Eurasia by more closely aligning Russia with energy framework of China.

Energy sector of Kazakhstan is not only the foundation of its economy but also a crucial space where the geopolitical interests of Russia and China converge.¹⁹² Over the last twenty years, China has strategically positioned Kazakhstan as a key component of its continental energy security approach, making substantial investments in oilfields, pipelines, and long-term supply agreements to lessen its dependence on vulnerable sea routes. However, entry of Russia in the oil and gas sector in Kazakhstan has made this journey difficult. By regaining control over essential infrastructure, capitalizing on its historical pipeline supremacy, and enhancing joint ventures with its energy corporations, Russia has reestablished itself as a crucial player in managing Kazakh exports, especially toward Europe. This structural leverage enables Russia to counteract China's infrastructure focus towards the east, preventing Beijing from achieving uncontested dominance in the region.¹⁹³ The new appearance of Russia in the oil and gas industry of Kazakhstan depicts that energy ambitions of China in Central Asia are facing a structural and strategic bottleneck. Despite Kazakhstan playing a crucial role in the process of diversification strategy of China, the multi-vector foreign policy of Astana and the deep-rooted influence of Moscow guarantee that the Chinese hegemony will be restricted. In this triangular scenario, Kazakhstan cleverly transforms its status as a landlocked country into a position of geopolitical influence, turning the rivalry

¹⁹² Timur Onzhanov, *The Role of Kazakhstan as a Global Energy Supplier in the 21st Century: Analysis of Opportunities and Risks*. Switzerland, 2013.

¹⁹³ Tatiana Mitrova, "Russia's Expanding Energy Ties in Central Asia." Center on Global Energy policy. February 2024. <https://www.energypolicy.columbia.edu/russias-expanding-energy-ties-in-central-asia>.

between major powers into an asset for resilience, economic growth, and strategic autonomy.¹⁹⁴ The rapid rise of China in the energy sector of Kazakhstan, through its initial investments in the late 1990s and subsequent acquisitions and the construction of eastbound bound pipelines have cemented China as a key external player in the reconstruction of the energy sector in the country. Crisis assistance, as well as building infrastructure connected with the BRI, has particularly enhanced the influence of Beijing, as sometimes it becomes possible to regulate a large part of the oil production of Kazakhstan and make the country a valuable transit system of Central Asian gas.¹⁹⁵ However, this control has not been absolute or without challenges. Russia, relying on its historical edge stemming from Soviet-era infrastructure, the EAEU and CSTO institutional frameworks, and its dominance over westward export channels, has effectively recalibrated the energy balance.

Consequently, China guides through investment, ownership, and movement toward the east, while Russia maintains control over westward transit and employs energy diplomacy as a geopolitical instrument. Kazakhstan, instead of being a passive participant, has skillfully navigated this competition to bolster its multi-vector foreign policy, leveraging investments and favorable conditions while avoiding excessive reliance on either power. The proposed Russia -Kazakhstan-China Gas Pipeline underscores this growing triangular relationship: the proposed pipeline would not only strengthen the role of Kazakhstan as a transit state, but also increase China access to overland supply security, and would grant Russia greater access to Asian markets.¹⁹⁶

In the end, the diminishing of China's exclusive energy influence in Kazakhstan highlights the structural realities of Central Asia's geopolitical landscape: no single nation can monopolize authority. Rather, Kazakhstan flourishes by balancing the interests of Moscow and Beijing, utilizing its geographical advantages and resource wealth to negotiate for investment, infrastructure, and political sovereignty. Looking ahead, Kazakhstan's energy sector will continue

¹⁹⁴ Robert Legvold, *Thinking Strategically: The Major Powers, Kazakhstan, and the Central Asian Nexus*. United Kingdom: MIT Press, 2003.

¹⁹⁵ Dina R Spechler, and Martin C Spechler. "China And Russia: Alliance or Alignment?" *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* 26, no. 1 (2022): 53.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/48674365>.

¹⁹⁶ Nuray Alekberli-Museyibova. "Kazakhstan Proposes Gas Pipeline Project Connecting Russia and China." April 2023. <https://jamestown.org/program/kazakhstan-proposes-gas-pipeline-project-connecting-russia-and-china/>.

to be a space marked by both competition and collaboration, where Russia and China must find a way to coexist, a dynamic that, paradoxically, enhances Astana's independence and significance in the region.

CONCLUSION

In this final chapter, the key findings of the research on energy diplomacy of Russia in Kazakhstan and its geopolitical implications on China will be discussed considering energy diplomacy. Moreover, recommendations concerning policy implications as well as potentially viable strategies for China amid Russia's energy diplomacy will also be provided.

Russian energy diplomacy in Kazakhstan serves as an effective instrument of geopolitical control, making Russia an energy gateway corridor in the region. The strong energy cooperation between Russia and Kazakhstan does not only serve to reinforce Russian presence in the region, but it also poses a new potential strategic challenge to Chinese regional interests. Russia is also playing its energy politics all over again to restrain influence in the region by the Chinese by holding sway on potential relationship between Kazakhstan and China related to export of energy resources and force imprisoning Kazakhstan to develop its energy relations with other countries, which in turn increases dependence on Russia in the matters related to exporting energy resources. The role of energy diplomacy, especially in the geographical areas which natural resources are located, becomes a vital point of a global international relationship, and defines the geopolitical approaches, channels and contradictions. The region of Central Asia possesses tremendous oil and gas deposits and coincidentally it also happens to be a crossroads of global energy markets and the relationship between Kazakhstan-Russia is the key to the ongoing evolutions of energy diplomacy in this region. The thesis examined the multifaceted connection between energy diplomacy amid Russia and Kazakhstan and its geopolitical implication on China which is economically active in Central Asia by means of Silk Road Economic Belt. As one of the world leaders of energy production, in the past, Russia used its energy as the means of influence in the regions bordering it, including Central Asia. Kazakhstan possesses a great supply of oil and gas, which is essential in the energy security and geopolitical ambitions of Russia. Nevertheless, the partnership is associated with financial advantages and arouses the doubt whether Kazakhstan can retain its independent foreign policy and guarantee the security in the region. Kazakhstan finds itself in a precarious balancing act of economic cooperation and political independence due to the energy dominance of Russia, which is something Russia is potentially using to its leverage.

Energy diplomacy is a style of foreign policy. The purpose of energy diplomacy is safeguarding the economic and security welfare of the state through economic methods and trade relations with the other states or organizations. Energy diplomacy is the key element of the Russian foreign policy. The policies put in place by the leadership of Vladimir Putin since his leadership in 1999 are to stress energy relations with nations, including the neighboring nations through agreements and joint ventures. Through the systems, Russia and Kazakhstan designed unified energy transport infrastructure between the two countries.

The key findings of this thesis are summarized as follows.

- Russia uses the fact that Kazakhstan relies on its export pipelines (i.e., CPC, Uzen Atyrau Samara) to keep Central Asia under geopolitical control, making it a gatekeeper to the energy flows of the country, restricting China in its autonomy. The exports of oil and gas by the Republic of Kazakhstan heavily depend on the pipelines which pass across Russia such as the CPC and Uzen-Atyrau-Samara. This reliance gives Russia an immense amount of leverage. Moscow can regulate the flows, introduce tariffs, or create bottlenecks within moments of confrontation. These are the paths that are controlled by Russia, and it implies that besides playing the role of a transit partner of Kazakhstan, it also happens to be the entrance to the energy supply chain of Central Asia. This provides Russia with the chance to assert its geopolitical control far beyond the economic level pushing directly on Kazakhstan to make its own choices about whether it wants to align itself with China or to align itself with the west. Energy diplomacy turns infrastructure into geopolitical power. Transit chokepoints are not, according to theory, neutral economic channels, but power-projection tools. Muscovy can control the flows by monopolizing the export routes to the west or introducing tariffs or bottlenecks whenever Kazakhstan criticizes its dominance. This is in line with the coercive aspect of energy diplomacy where energy is used as a weapon to bully neighbors and demand concessions. Russia is not merely a transit partner but the so-called gatekeeper of the sovereignty of Kazakhstan, indicating that the leverage of control over pipelines as a strategic instrument is long beyond the point of economics.
- Even though direct pipelines are built orienting to the east (e.g., China-Kazakhstan pipeline), Chinese energy security is restricted by the fact that most of the Kazakh oil passes the Russian pipeline system, meaning that Moscow will continue exerting pressure on

Beijing. China has also invested billions of dollars in the energy infrastructure of Kazakhstan creating the Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline, the Central Asia-China gas pipeline. By such projects, Beijing can avoid maritime chokepoint (such as the Strait of Malacca) and avoid relying on Middle Eastern energy. Nevertheless, Russia still does control the western transit routes to Europe. Consequently, Chinese benefits are partial at best, since China can enjoy the benefits of eastern sources but cannot extend its influence in every direction without that Russian strategic stranglehold on the larger energy cluster in Kazakhstan. Theoretically, energy diversification increases independence and minimizes the vulnerability to pressure. However, the inability of Russian domination of the westward flows shows an organizational limitation: infrastructure will never completely disorient the balance of energy diplomacy.

- Kazakhstan balances very well its relations with Russia and China. It is not overdependent on any of the powers through its landlocked position and rich energy reserves and so great-power rivalry is becoming an opportunity to invest and gain strategic independence. Kazakhstan maintains what the leaders refer to as multi-vector diplomacy: maintaining relationships with Russia, China, the West, and the region. Astana does not want to become the satellite of a single power; thus, it spreads partnerships to as much as possible. An example of that is its openness to Russian military assistance (through CSTO), Chinese investments (through BRI), and Western oil deals (Chevron, ExxonMobil). This is a balancing game that enables Kazakhstan to enjoy sovereignty whilst attracting investment. It is a delicate strategy, however, and one that must be negotiated incessantly, since excessive tiltage in favor of one actor is an invitation to the others to respond.
- With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the oil sector of the Kazakhstan became controlled by western companies. Russia however since the 2000s has gradually regained its lost grounds. Moscow has re-established influence through Gazprom, Lukoil and Transneft by acquiring stakes, bargaining joint ventures and gaining control of transit routes. This re-entry restricts the space of China. To illustrate, when Russia re-established CPC dominance, the oil produced in Kazakhstan could not reach any outlet other than those controlled by Russia. Therefore, Russia has evolved into a receding force in the energy industry of Kazakhstan to a reappearing force. Energy diplomacy does not remain the same; it transforms over ownership rights, alliances, and control of infrastructure. This in theory

is the capacity of the states to regain control by re-establishing chokepoints and installing themselves within energy networks. The example of Russia returning proves that energy diplomacy can become a versatile weapon of influence: losing the advantage in a certain position does not mean that a state cannot use energy instruments to reappear on the geopolitical scene. This redemand weakened not only Western supremacy, but also the possible growth of China and it exemplifies a cyclical and competitive nature of energy diplomacy.

- The increased influence of Beijing achieved via the BRI and energy investments is systemically constrained: Russian domination of the routes to the West, Soviet remnants, and the conservative multi-vector policy of Kazakhstan deny China the ability to monopolize power. Despite China being the biggest investor in the infrastructural development of Kazakhstan on the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing is restricted by structure in its control. The old Soviet pipeline systems go north-south, but not east. Russian firms remain shareholders of the oil fields in Kazakhstan. And the foreign policy of Astana does not grant China excess control, lest there be domestic reaction against Chinese leasing of land and China labor force. This is because the ascent of Beijing is contained not only by Moscow but also the discerning diplomacy of Kazakhstan and its dependence on Western oil technology. The theory of energy diplomacy has acknowledged that even great powers have structural constraints dictated by the legacies of infrastructure and domestic politics. The efforts of China to extend its influence in Kazakhstan are limited by the north-south pipeline axis of the Soviet era, Russian control over oil fields as stockholders and domestic opposition in Kazakhstan to Chinese lease of its lands and labor practices. These limitations indicate that energy politics cannot exist in the vacuum; it is confined within the historical and social constructions.
- Kazakhstan sits in the center position of a 3-way contest: dependent on Russian routes, which link to the Chinese markets and which are subject to global oil prices variability. This renders it a highly important geopolitical buffer and a zone of rivalry and collaboration. Kazakhstan is caught in the middle of a threefold conflict. Russia is the owner of infrastructure and considers Kazakhstan as its sphere of influence. China wants safe overland energy to power its rising economy. Kazakhstan attempts to diversify exports to enhance sovereignty, but it is exposed to world oil fluctuations. This three-sided

investment forms opportunities and threats. Kazakhstan can use Russia and China as bargaining chips, yet there is also the risk of being caught between the two, as well as when Moscow and Beijing align or when world markets become volatile.

- Direct competition is caused by the overlap of pipeline routes (east to China, north to Russia). Proposals such as the Russia, Kazakhstan, China Gas Pipeline may improve the cooperation but also increase the influence of Moscow on Astana, depriving Beijing of the monopoly. The overlapping of pipeline routes indicate competition: Kazakhstan-China pipelines are in competition with the Russian routes. The problem with China is that as it invests in east-infrastructure, Russia is still controlling westward flows to Europe. Further, any subsequent pipeline that will unite Russia and Kazakhstan and China will tie Beijing to Moscow, watering down its sovereignty. Accordingly, China cannot just go out to purchase dominance in Central Asia- it will have to work through Russian domination and Kazakh multi-vectorism, which restrict its capacity to entirely acquire energy.
- Considering the case of Energy Diplomacy as Geopolitical Power, energy is not only about economics, but also about diplomacy as well. Russia relies on energy as a means to build alliances, shape foreign policy in Kazakhstan, and limit the growth of China in Central Asia as a way to maintain dominance in the region. This thesis underlines that energy is not simply an economic issue--it is a weapon of diplomacy and coercion. Russia employs energy to build regional partnerships (the EAEU, SCO, CSTO), coerce Kazakhstan (by relying on the pipeline), and inhibit the growth of China (by blocking or slowing other paths). China, in its turn, employs investment and infrastructure as instruments of power within the framework of BRI. By being the conduit of both, Kazakhstan transforms its resources and land into an asset. Energy emerges, in a nutshell, as the currency of power that defines the geopolitics of Central Asia. Lastly, the energy diplomacy theory holds that energy is not only an economic commodity but it is also a political weapon. This is well illustrated in the Kazakhstan case. Russia employs energy to threaten Kazakhstan with pipeline power, to establish allies in the CSTO, EAEU, and SCO and to restrain the emergence of China in the region. Conversely, China utilizes investment and infrastructure as some of the positive tools of influence in the BRI framework. As the passage, Kazakhstan converts its geography and resources into diplomatic resource. What comes out is a triangular dynamic of energy as a source of coercion, cooperation, and bargaining

at the same time. This confirms the theoretical assertion that energy acts like a currency of power in international affairs particularly in conflict-ridden areas such as Central Asia.

Taking the above-mentioned findings into account, several key recommendations are as follows:

1. Kazakhstan must also work hard to minimize reliance on Russian pipelines such as the CPC, Uzen Atyrau Samara pipeline. Others like the Middle Corridor (Kazakhstan–Caspian–Azerbaijan–Turkey/ Europe) or greater development of direct pipelines to China will provide more strategic flexibility to Astana. Diversification can not only protect Kazakhstan against Russian political influence but also provide the country with balancing options between Moscow, Beijing, and Western markets.
2. Kazakhstan will need to invest in refinery, storage facilities and electricity grids to minimize foreign reliance. Now a significant part of the crude in Kazakhstan is carried out beyond the country, particularly in Russia, which poses a weakness. Kazakhstan can access more economic value, enhance energy security, and reduce the political risk associated with Russian or Chinese infrastructure by refining its own capacity and improving its electricity capacity.
3. Astana should persist and build its multi-vector policy and involve not only Russia and China but also the EU, U.S., Turkey, and the regional powers. This will make sure that Kazakhstan does not become over-dependent on either Moscow or Beijing. To illustrate, the partnership with European markets, as a means of countering Russian centrality in transit, and collaboration with Western companies as a means of advanced technology and investment were energy alternatives.
4. Russia must not be heavy-handed (e.g., using pipelines as political power instruments) to bring Kazakhstan either to China or to the West. Rather, Moscow might encourage joint venture in oil and gas, provide special prices, and contribute to cooperative infrastructure. Russia would retain its presence in Central Asia in the long-term by encouraging collaboration, instead of coercion, thereby mitigating Kazakhstan opposition.
5. China must enhance its activities in Kazakhstan beyond oil and gas industry. Beijing can reinvent its image of being viewed as an energy-hungry power by investing in renewable energy, technology parks, education, and digital infrastructure to be viewed as a

development partner. Such diversification will also render China less dependent on energy chokeholds imposed by Russia and more acceptable by the citizens of Kazakhstan.

6. Beijing is to move faster on eastward pipelines (e.g. Atasu Alashankou pipeline, Central Asia China gas pipeline) and invest greater in the Middle Corridor to bypass Russia. This lowers the Russian leverage that China has on westward routes. At the same time, China will be able to present them as enhancing the sovereignty of Kazakhstan, something that will suit the idea of Astana to lessen dependence on Moscow.
7. The three powers would stand to benefit, as opposed to playing a zero sum game and Central Asia as one with, facilitating a Central Asian Energy Forum or trilateral dialogue. A mechanism like this might coordinate pipeline projects, stabilize pricing policies, and provide safe transportation. Collaboration would help minimize disruption threats, alleviate tensions, and give Kazakhstan a better role in conciliating Moscow and Beijing.
8. Kazakhstan has tremendous potential in solar and wind energy, given that the country has vast stretches of the steppe. Russia and China may also endorse renewable energy developments as a local diplomacy. This would lower the excessive reliance on fossil fuels in Kazakhstan, attract sustainable investment and integrate the country to global green energy markets. To China, this is in line with its climate leadership story; to Russia, it provides a non-oil and non-gas diversification.

In conclusion, Energy diplomacy by Russia in Kazakhstan has strengthened the position of Moscow as a gatekeeper to energy flows in Central Asia, and with consequences to the geopolitical system of the area. Russia reaffirms its control over the sovereignty of Kazakhstan by closing the major pipelines and infrastructure and suppressing the increasing energy ambitions of China. At the same time, Chinese Belt and Road investments provide Astana with alternatives but cannot fully neutralize the Russia domination, and Kazakhstan must use a weak strategy of multi-vector policy. This three-dimensional movement demonstrates that energy is not an economic asset but a powerful tool of diplomacy that determines influence, alliances and security in Eurasia. Last, Kazakhstan is both a treasure and a center of interest, as it learns to strike a balance between the Russian pressure and the Chinese troops in the reaction on the shifts in international energy.

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